



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**

WEDNESDAY, 11 NOVEMBER 2009

MELBOURNE

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE



## **INTERNET**

Hansard transcripts of public hearings are made available on the internet when authorised by the committee.

The internet address is:

**<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard>**

To search the parliamentary database, go to:

**<http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au>**

## SENATE RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT

### REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 11 November 2009

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

**Substitute members:** Senator Hanson-Young to replace Senator Milne for the committee's inquiry into rural and regional access to secondary and tertiary education opportunities

Senator Adams to replace Senator Heffernan for the committee's inquiry into rural and regional access to secondary and tertiary education opportunities

**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 Back, McGauran, Nash, O'Brien and Sterle

#### **Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

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

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

## **WITNESSES**

<b>AUCIELLO, Ms Julia, Immediate Past President, Monash University Gippsland Student Union .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>BAIKIE, Ms Jessica, Student, Launceston College.....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>BARNETT, Mr Paul, Executive Director, Planning and Development, University of Tasmania .....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>BOYER, Ms Kim, Board Chair, Tasmanian Academy .....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>BROWN, Mr Phil, Council Member, Rural Education Forum Australia, Executive Officer, Country Education Project, Victoria .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>EDWARDS, Ms Michaela (Cayla), President, Deakin University Student Association .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>IRELAND, Mr John Charles, School Focused Youth Service Coordinator, Gippsland Lakes Community Health.....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>KIRK, Professor Joyce, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Students, RMIT University .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>McHARDY, Mrs Gail Elizabeth, Executive Officer, Parents Victoria Inc.....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>NIX, Miss Katherine Therese, President, Bendigo Student Association Inc. ....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>PETERSON, Mr Hunter, Student, Launceston College.....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>STEELE, Professor Phillip, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Campus Coordination, Campus Director Berwick and Peninsula, Monash University .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>STUBBS, Ms Bronwyn, President, Australasian Association of Distance Education Schools .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>WELLER, Dr Stephen Adrian, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Students, Victoria University .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>WILKINSON, Ms Rachael, Student, Launceston College .....</b>	<b>48</b>



**Committee met at 8.36 am**

**CHAIR (Senator Nash)**—Good morning. I declare open this public hearing of the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee. The committee is hearing evidence on the inquiry into rural and regional access to secondary and tertiary education opportunities and I welcome you all here today.

This is a public hearing and a *Hansard* transcript of the proceedings is being made. Before the committee starts taking evidence I remind all witnesses that in giving evidence to the committee they are protected by parliamentary privilege. It is unlawful for anyone to threaten or disadvantage a witness on account of evidence given to a committee and such action may be treated by the Senate as a contempt. It is also a contempt to give false or misleading evidence to a committee. The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, but under the Senate's resolutions witnesses have the right to request to be heard in private session. It is important that witnesses give the committee notice if they intend to ask to give evidence in camera. If a witness objects to answering a question, the witness should state the ground upon which the objection is taken and the committee will determine whether it will insist on an answer having regard to the ground which is claimed. If the committee determines to insist on an answer a witness may request that the answer be given in camera. Such a request may of course also be made at any other time. On behalf of the committee I thank all those who have made submissions and sent representatives here today for their cooperation in this inquiry.

[8.37 am]

**STEELE, Professor Phillip, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Campus Coordination, Campus Director Berwick and Peninsula, Monash University**

**WELLER, Dr Stephen Adrian, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Students, Victoria University**

**KIRK, Professor Joyce, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Students, RMIT University**

**CHAIR**—You have lodged submission No. 546. Did you want to make any amendments or alterations to that?

**Prof. Kirk**—No

**CHAIR**—Would you like to make some opening statements before we move to questions?

**Prof. Kirk**—I welcome the opportunity to appear before the committee and to contribute to the discussion, which I think will be a very fruitful one given that we have a generous period of time for that discussion. There are a number of issues. I would like to focus on regional and rural students. We tend to think of our students in two broad groups—one is international students, the other is domestic students. That way of thinking is not sufficiently nuanced to take into account the sorts of considerations that we need to make when we come to understanding the lives of students and what it is that attracts students to universities, what it is that retains students in universities and so on.

At RMIT we are, of course, a dual sector university, rather like Victoria University, but we also have within our TAFE component quite a significant VET and VCAL group of students, about 500 students—so we have the equivalent, if you like, of a reasonably large high school among our university population. It would seem to me that initiatives like that are perhaps one way of bringing to students' attention the transformative nature of education if that is in fact something with which they wish to engage. That of course applies not only to regional and rural students but also to metropolitan, urban, students. Given that we are a dual sector university, we do have in place pathways for students from VET courses into higher education courses. That, I imagine, is the same for Victoria University, but Stephen can certainly comment on that, and Phil will no doubt comment on some of the arrangements that they have with TAFE providers within their areas.

RMIT is a city based university. We have no regional campuses. We do have a study centre at Hamilton but, unlike Monash, we do not have a rural campus. We have two campuses in Vietnam but, again, they are in cities. The urban orientation of our university is one of our hallmarks, but that does not mean to suggest that we do not attract students from regional Victoria who are looking to engage with the city and all that the city has to offer, with a view perhaps of returning to their country areas and reinvigorating and contributing to the social and cultural capital of the places from which they have come. They are my few opening remarks. Thank you.



**Prof. Steele**—Monash University has about 57,000 students and operates eight campuses, two of which are overseas—one in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia and the other in Johannesburg in South Africa. Within Victoria we have six campuses. One is the Gippsland campus, located in Churchill, Victoria. So we have a rural campus and two major metropolitan campuses, one in Clayton and one at Caulfield, and then two outer urban campuses, one at Frankston and one at Berwick. So it is fair to say that we have significant exposure to many of the issues that are faced by rural and regional students.

I think the overarching issue, if you look at the On Track survey, which tracks the destinations of year 12 school leavers and which in Victoria we are lucky to have, is that there are enormous variations between the year 12 to university transition rates of rural students and those of metropolitan students. That reflects issues about access, cost and equity and the additional challenges that are faced by rural students. I think they face many disadvantages in comparison to their metropolitan peers in terms of access to university.

In recognition of that, Monash has a number of scholarships available in the access and equity category, and living in a rural location is one of the criteria that we use for access to those scholarships. But they are really a very small number—125 in total for 2010—so are really only the tip of the iceberg in meeting the needs of students. We also have residential services on campus that are available for both international and regional and rural students, but they are relatively expensive; there is a significant cost there. When one compares the disruption faced by a metropolitan student in attending a university campus to that faced by a rural student—the rural student needs to leave family, friends and often a job to attend a university in a metropolitan location—the upheaval and disruption is much, much larger. I think this is also reflected in the higher deferral rates that occur in the rural regions compared to metropolitan regions.

The latest changes of the government in relation to the extension of the qualification of time for youth allowance is, I think, a step in the wrong direction. It is actually making it more difficult for rural students to attend metropolitan campuses because of the cost involved. I think there are certainly issues and I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the resolution of those issues. They are very important to rural students.

**Dr Weller**—I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear this morning. By way of background, Victoria University is a multisector university, as Joyce indicated. We have about 10,000 international students, 20,000 higher ed and 20,000 vocational and further education students. We have small numbers of so-called remote students, but regional numbers are about nine per cent of our higher education enrolment. We are a multicampus university with campuses in the city, the inner west, in Footscray and then in the outer west of Melbourne. Like MRIT, we also have secondary students undertaking VCAL, VET in Schools and also a partnership with a technical college.

I guess there are three key issues when I think about our students who are from rural and regional. The first of those begins at the secondary level and the committee's focus on secondary and tertiary. If I think about it in a metropolitan Melbourne context we have very different levels of completion of secondary education, depending on whether it is in the inner or the outer suburbs of Melbourne. I think that perpetuates into rural and regional. If a local government area

or a geographic region has low levels of secondary participation at the outset then it is very difficult to move beyond that into tertiary levels of participation.

One thing that is also common for our students in terms of not only metropolitan but also our regional students—and it is a phrase I do not necessarily like but one that is used—is the notion of multiple disadvantage. Not only are they then coming from areas such as rural and regional but also they are low socio-economic students. Often they will be first in family and they will have high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity. I think there is a tendency to see those students in different groups—they are either one or the other. Our regional students in particular are often in those three categories. They are regional and they are having to relocate to Melbourne, as was indicated by Phil, but they are also low socio-economic students, so there is not that financial environment to support them. They are often first in family so that there is not that sense of a prior role model or an understanding or an experience.

That takes me to the third issue for us in that, once those students begin, there is that issue of access but for us it is also an issue of success. It is about getting the students into our institution from rural and regional but then it is about ensuring that they succeed once they have begun. Knowing the regional students that attend our university, the three key areas for them are access to accommodation, because they have relocated in the first instance, and around many of our campuses there are not the same opportunities for student accommodation that there are in the rest of Melbourne. There is then the opportunity for financial support—whether it is access to youth allowance or work while they are undertaking study.

We know from a number of reports that the more students work, the greater the impact on their study as they go above 15 hours. There is also the level of support services for students. To give you one example, we provide a parents information program for new students, given that we have a very large number of students who are first in family. For those students who come from our outer western suburbs of Melbourne, almost 80 per cent of their parents come. So students come for an orientation and their parents come to a separate orientation. Whilst the number of students who come from regional areas is lower, less than 10 per cent of their parents come. Again, it is all well for us to say to somebody who is living at the other side of Geelong, ‘Why don’t you come?’ but it often is not the case. Those are the key issues I would make in terms of access to support, the issue of secondary participation and just that notion of multiple disadvantage.

**CHAIR**—Thank you.

**Senator BACK**—Professor Kirk, could you tell me what the ENTER—you refer to non-ENTER based admissions.

**Prof. Kirk**—The ENTER score is a score that is calculated on the basis of the examinations and assessments at the end of secondary school. With students commencing in 2010, there are roughly 75 schools involved in the SNAP program in the north-west of Melbourne and some in Gippsland. We admit students to RMIT on the basis of teacher recommendation, not on their ENTER score. It is an alternative entry into university which does not rely solely on the ENTER score.

**Senator BACK**—A personal interview would be part of that process for those people?

**Prof. Kirk**—Not necessarily. It is paper based and the student writes a personal statement and the teachers write a supporting statement. That is ranked in various ways. In all of our equity admission schemes there are additional points, if you like, allocated to students from rural and regional areas. We have tracked the students in that SNAP program. We are now up to about 3½ thousand students who have come in from non-ENTER based schools. The students perform as well as students who come through the usual ENTER pathway, if they are school leavers. We have quite a high proportion of students who do not come through VCE but who are mature age and provide other sorts of evidence about their capacities to succeed in university or VET.

**Senator BACK**—Prior to our hearing starting this morning we were just chatting outside about the performance at university or tertiary level of rural or regional students who went to schools in, in this case, Melbourne as opposed to those who stayed home in their country areas and went to school locally. Do you have any evidence of the performance of those students, respectively, at universities—whether they went to school in Melbourne, boarding school or stayed at home in their country towns and went to high schools?

**Dr Weller**—I do not have any evidence in relation to Victoria University. The only data I have, which does not go to that level is, as Phil indicated, the On Track study. I guess the only way I can answer that is if I go back to my comment about the performance from secondary into tertiary. There are differences, as is clear, in terms of the level of access to tertiary education from private secondary through to public secondary. I know that is not necessarily directly answering your question but, in that sense, if you have attended a private secondary in the city in which you are going to study my expectation is that there would be that greater level of performance. I do not have that data for Victoria University.

**Prof. Steele**—I do not have that data, either, for Monash University but, anecdotally, my sense would be that students in that situation would have experienced the formation of study groups and the life that one experiences, say, in halls of residence. And that can provide a supportive environment for academic endeavour and so, in being able to transfer that to the university environment, I think they would probably be better equipped to do that. But I do not have evidence to actually assert that. The other point I would make is that the connection, the break, between the home situation and the social situation has already been made. That is a hurdle that has already been addressed by the students. So, anecdotally, my view would be that it would probably be easier for those students, but I cannot base that on evidence of which I am aware.

**Senator BACK**—One of the important facets of this inquiry is to look at the opportunities for tertiary or postsecondary study by people in the lower socioeconomic areas. Do you know of any studies over time that indicate that there has been a change in the socio-economic status of students going into our universities and graduating from them? I think back to the time when education cost and then it was free, and then there were various means of financial support. Do we have a handle on whether or not participation of people from the lower socio-economic areas in Australia has changed over time? Has it gone up, has it gone down, has it remained unchanged?

**Prof. Kirk**—That data has been collected by the Commonwealth department for years and the data does show that, overall, in the past decade there has been no marked improvement across the sector and that the participation access rates of people from low SES backgrounds hovers around 14 per cent, 15 per cent. That is sector wide and does not reflect the SES composition of

individual universities. There may be variations; there is in our case—things have gone upwards. I guess the issues appear to be intractable at the moment, which presumably is the reason for the government's commitment to funding initiatives that will attract low SES students to higher education and postsecondary education. My colleagues may want to add to that.

**Prof. Steele**—I am not aware of studies that have reflected the shift but, as my colleague says, that information is available within the department. There is a significant individual variation across universities in terms of their percentage of low SES students. For Monash, it is a little under 12 per cent at present, but we working to address that. It varies by campus—for instance, our Gippsland campus has the highest low SES percentage of all the Monash campuses and that is a rural campus. The other issue is that we have established programs, including Schools Access Monash, where we deal directly with underrepresented schools in an effort to lift aspiration. It is a very complex issue, a social issue, a school issue and it is an access and transport issue. A whole range of factors are involved. But we do establish special relationships with underrepresented schools in an effort to lift aspiration. We face a challenge. As an example, I was connected with a particular school, Cranbourne Secondary College, and I was talking to a year 12 student. I asked that student, 'What about you? Are you interested in attending Monash University?' And her response was, 'Give it a go, Sir; I'm only a Cranbourne kid. I couldn't attend Monash University.' It shows the extent of the issue that we are dealing with. It is a very complex issue, and it is an issue that will not be easily resolved.

Another factor that I think contributes to the difficulty is that secondary school funding, state funding, university funding is federal and what we really need is collaboration between universities and schools and communities to shift that perception. In terms of government programs we need to support both schools and universities to work together to lift that aspiration in low SES. I think that makes it more difficult than it would otherwise be.

**Dr Weller**—I will briefly make three comments. Victoria University is one of the universities above the government's target of 20 per cent. We have had modest growth over the last few years. I support the review that is underway. The current measure to assess low SES is a blunt instrument. It is done at the level of postcode. We know that within not only metropolitan but particularly rural and regional that postcode can either be a town, a suburb—

**Senator BACK**—A district.

**Dr Weller**—A huge district, and within that you can have three schools which have very different levels of socio-economic status. Victoria University is strongly supportive of reviewing that measure because it is a blunt instrument. Whether that is down to the level of census collection district or whether it is down to the level of CEFA index we are very supportive of that because we think that, whilst Victoria University have been above that target because of our catchment, it does not tell the full picture.

We have been undertaking a study, with Commonwealth funding, of people's aspirations for tertiary education. Again, whilst it is predominantly within our catchment, it does include the Western District of Melbourne. Regardless of the socioeconomic status and the pattern of tertiary education in the family—whether the student is first in the family to undertake tertiary study or whether there is a history of the parents studying—the aspiration is consistent. There is an aspiration for tertiary study whether that is into a technical college, Victoria University or any

other university. We are finding that, regardless of where the students come from geographically and socioeconomically and regardless of their family background, the aspiration is still high. Again, I think the sector and the government have had the sense that aspiration differs depending on what a person wants to do, and that is a dangerous assumption. Whilst our study does not cover national data—it focuses on our catchment—it is showing very strongly that the level of aspiration is high for tertiary study.

**Senator BACK**—Just staying with that notion of aspiration, I go back to a comment that I think you made, Dr Weller, before the hearing started. You observed that, in terms of the goals that have been set, Victoria is already meeting those for female students, but that suggests they are not being met for male students. Would you care to expand on that? Would any one of the three of you care to make a comment on whether we need to have some slightly different objectives for young men and women? Have we been putting them all into the one barrel in terms of studying this issue?

**Dr Weller**—I did make the comment beforehand that the government's target of 25 per cent of 25- to 34-year-olds with a degree qualification moving from 32 per cent up to 40 per cent. In Victoria that figure has been met for women but not for men, and so there is a differential. Across the country that is different. Going back to my earlier comment, statistics can give us a rich sense but they can also cause blind spots for us. As I said, one of my concerns, particularly in terms of this inquiry, is that we are focusing on rural and regional students and then we are focusing separately on low-socioeconomic students. As I said, for Victoria University, whilst we do not have many rural students, almost all of our regional students are low-socioeconomic students. We can drill that down and say that, as we have moved closer to almost 60 per cent of our commencing higher education students being female, we will then find differences by gender within that. At the end of the day, we have to try and take some measures to at least move the general population. As Joyce indicated in answer to your earlier question, the low SES target has not moved much over 20 years in the sector. My concern is that we almost then say, 'There's not much we can do.' I think we need to drill down into that. It is different in rural; it is different in metropolitan; it is different for men; it is different for women. It is as different for Anglo-Celtic background students as it is for high cultural and linguistically diverse students.

**Senator BACK**—Chair, I have one more question and then I would like to come back afterwards, if I may, when others have finished their questions. Professor Kirk, you made the comment that RMIT has moved that number up from 12 per cent to 15 per cent. Can you tell us how you have done that and what your goals are?

**Prof. Kirk**—Our goal is certainly to contribute to the government's overall 20 per cent target. With the compact discussions still underway, we are not yet certain what our target will be. Whether the target will be state based is still up for discussion, and whether it will be university based is still up for discussion. That has not yet resolved itself. We are mindful, though, that the population reference figure is 25 per cent, not 20 per cent. That is a stretch target, if you like.

Some of the factors in the success go back to some of the elements that Stephen mentioned in his opening remarks. We do provide equity scholarships. The university has invested considerable sums of its own in scholarships that complement those provided by the government. We are entering into agreements with a number of accommodation providers, and we are currently in discussion with some accommodation developers to see what might be

possible around arrangements for providing student housing. We have a range of support services, of course, as every university has. We have been extremely fortunate in that the bulk of our services were fully funded by the university prior to the VSU legislation, and so we have lost none of our counselling services and health services and so on. Those services have been maintained. It is the student life component that we have not been able to maintain to the same level. But we have certainly been able to maintain those body and soul support services. SNAP and alternative pathway programs into university, including non-ENTER based through VET programs and through VET in schools, are all in place. Over time, they have begun to have an effect—but it is long and slow and it takes focused effort.

**Senator BACK**—Thanks, Chair. I will come back when the other senators have finished their questions.

**Prof. Steele**—There is a comment that I should have made before in relation to those targets. Monash is in the midst of compact negotiations at present. We have made a decision on our Berwick and Peninsula campuses. The plan is to expand those campuses in a very significant way. The Berwick campus currently has less than 2,000 students and the Gippsland campus has about 3,000 on-campus students. They are both located in areas of significant economic disadvantage, and so they are prime candidates for us to do something significant to help the university to address those government agendas. We are planning major expansions of those two campuses in relation to targeting low SES students. At Gippsland, and at Berwick to some extent, we will certainly be targeting rural and regional students as well. I should have mentioned that earlier. Thank you.

**Senator STERLE**—Professor Steele, I congratulate Monash on its efforts in Kuala Lumpur. I have had the privilege of meeting 30 or 40 young Australian men and women up there and they have nothing but praise for Monash's efforts in Kuala Lumpur.

**Prof. Steele**—Thank you.

**Senator STERLE**—To the two professors and the doctor: are the changes contained in the government's draft reforms following the Bradley report positive steps in terms of improvements for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds?

**Prof. Steele**—I think the general targets are a good thing to put pressure on institutions to address this issue. Monash would welcome that. There are some challenges. The entry score basis of selection is one of those challenges particularly for institutions like Monash, which has a high bar for entry to the university in terms of scores. Changing the rules for qualification for Austudy is a negative. It is a step in the wrong direction for rural students. The higher deferral rates that exist in rural regions and the low year 12 to university transition rates are symptoms of something that is a real issue that the country needs to face, which is that these students are disadvantaged in relation to their metropolitan counterparts. We do not have the total solution to that. Distance education or off-campus learning is part of that. Rural campuses are also part of the solution. I also think greater support for rural students and their families to attend metropolitan universities is called for, and I think more needs to be done, honestly, in that direction.

**Senator STERLE**—Is that because the teaching standards are not as high in the country as they are in metropolitan?

**Prof. Steele**—Not at all. I think teaching standards is another issue, and I think that our teaching standards in general are pretty good. It is issues around access, transport, expense, upheaval and transformation of lives. To leave your family, to leave your friends and to leave your job to go and study in metropolitan Melbourne is a big ask, a much bigger ask than of a student who is living in Caulfield to attend the Monash—

**Senator STERLE**—I certainly understand that, Professor, but I take it that you are saying that in rural and regional Australia students are not up to the level of metropolitan students.

**Prof. Steele**—Not at all. It is about aspiration. The air is not thicker in the country or the city. We have, presumably, the same levels of capacity and so on. It is about aspiration and about seeing university study as a realistic option, and I think that is where the challenge is. Costs and difficulties in access are contributing to a lack of aspiration to attend university.

**Senator STERLE**—Thanks, Professor, that did clear that up for me.

**Dr Weller**—I support the targets that we have talked about, but to respond to that comment then: I think that it is the issue of access. We have got a wide geographic spread in the western suburbs of Melbourne and the issues are around relocation from your home or the access to transport. I do not think that there is any sense about the level of educational provision at the secondary level being below standard. We find that the aspiration is high but then building on that aspiration and turning it into access comes with extra challenge. Most of our regional students come from the Western District and the first question that they ask us is about access to student accommodation. They ask, ‘Where can I get student accommodation? I do not know anybody in Melbourne? Where will I live? What does that mean? Do I then have to catch a tram or a bus? I do not have a car.’ It is all of those things. So whilst they have had more resilience around those access issues where they have lived, because there will not be public transport necessarily, it is compounded by having to move out of home and having to find that support network and having that access to services.

Again, and I do not want to keep reinforcing it, for us that key point is that those students are also then traditionally from a lower socioeconomic status. There is not that level of family income support let alone personal income support to do that. That is an issue for students undertaking tertiary study regardless of where they come from.

**Prof. Kirk**—I do not want to get sidetracked into an ideological argument of any kind, but it seems to me that for a long time we have thought in terms of equity and what is equitable, which has I think encouraged us to look at what is missing somewhere and what it is that is not quite right. It seems to me that with a focus on inclusion what we are then looking to think about it are solutions to problems in terms of everybody having a right to this, whatever ‘this’ might be—and it could be to a university education or to an education to the level of a person’s natural abilities—and what we need to do to ensure that that is realised. It seems that the shift from equity to inclusion puts us in a different frame of mind and so the discussion might be not so much about aspirations—and I am not quite sure but I think it could be seen that aspiration

means lifting everybody to a certain unidentified level but probably unspoken as ‘middle-class’. So how we lift aspirations is one argument.

On the other side, we could talk about creating opportunities for all, and it seems to me that that is a different framework. You tend to come up, not thinking about problems but thinking about solutions. It is very subtle. I do not want to get sidetracked but I do want to inject it into our discussion.

**Senator STERLE**—You talked about on-campus accommodation. James Cook University, in Townsville, do it very well. We were told yesterday that there are some 1,200 beds. It is on the *Hansard* record that that is at a cost of \$1 million per year to the university. There are lots of challenges around that. If the rollout of high-speed broadband gets going and achieves what the government wants it to achieve, will that mean rural and remote students will not have to live in the cities? Will they be able to move home and do their courses online?

**Prof. Kirk**—In my view it will create different patterns for learning. I do not see it as replacing face-to-face, and I do not see it necessarily as discounting the need to attend the campus. For some students it is the attraction of the campus and of peer learning that brings them to the campus, and I do not think that will disappear, even with broadband. It may very well be that the patterns of attendance on campus might change. It might mean that the students do not need to come to the city for a year. It might mean that they come for a period of three months, one month or whatever, in different combinations and permutations of blended learning opportunities. That is how I would see it.

**Prof. Steele**—I think the on-campus student experience is an enriching one. While social networking is important, the whole university experience is important. Students and young people are using media like that—Facebook et cetera—to establish social networking, and the university on campus is moving more towards a blended learning model. But I think that experience of mixing in an environment with your peers nearby is an important element of the total university experience. Monash has established student experience networks at each of its campuses. We look at the total student experience and try to enrich it in many ways. I think there are problems with a model where students stay in their home and workplace and only learn and experience university in that way. For some, that is the only option they have, but I do not think we should see that as a solution. The enriching experience of the full university experience is important.

**Dr Weller**—I agree with the comments about the student experience. I do think the broadband rollout does have the capacity, though, to create greater collaboration particularly between regional TAFE colleges and university campuses. We see that between our campuses. I do not think that would change a student who might have come from a regional area and studied their first year or two at a regional TAFE and still wants a pathway through, but, rather than having that second shock of moving from TAFE to university two years later, I think you will find more collaboration right from the outset—they might have already interacted with some of their colleagues studying at a metropolitan university campus. Again, whilst technology is not an offset to coming together personally, I think it will enhance that collaboration—in the same way it did for the metropolitan university campuses and research institutes. I think we are starting to seek that now with regional TAFE colleges and campuses.



**Senator STERLE**—I have no argument with the importance of the whole learning experience—that is not through my own experience, but from what we have taken as evidence. I do ponder the question of what are the necessary outcomes rather than the desired outcomes. But if it achieves the same thing at the end of the day, we cannot discount it, can we.

**Prof. Steele**—It can certainly help.

**Prof. Kirk**—Both Monash and RMIT are shareholders in Open Universities Australia, which is primarily online delivery. So that opportunity is already available for people anywhere who wish to take that up at the moment. It is not necessarily dependent on the broadband rollout. There are some opportunities in place for people who want to engage in solely online learning—from undergraduate degrees through to postgraduate programs.

**Senator STERLE**—Is that in the infant stage?

**Prof. Kirk**—No, no, no, Open Universities Australia has been established for—what?—10 or 15 years. But that might be something you wish to explore.

**Prof. Steele**—If I could just add to that, one possibility is to expand that and make CSP places—Commonwealth supported places—available through OUA for pathway programs. That may well assist low-SES students to transition into university either through an on-campus experience or a blended learning approach. At the moment I am not certain of the fee for OUA, but it is substantial. If there were CSP places available, that could well be helpful.

**Senator STERLE**—Thank you, Doctor and professors. I could sneak another one in while the chair is talking.

**CHAIR**—Very quickly.

**Senator STERLE**—No, no, no—I will pass to my colleague. Senator McGauran is patiently waiting.

**Senator McGAURAN**—As we know, the greatest disadvantage for rural students is the accommodation factor. If you could take that out, the students could live on a shoestring. In fact, as you say, the full experience is to be bohemian. So it is the accommodation factor; it is the real market they have to face. I think it was one of the factors that motivated the government to change Youth Allowance in so much as where the rural student relies on it properly to find accommodation, the city student was grabbing it and going home. I would like to get from you all, but particularly from Monash, the real-time market situation facing country students. The first port of call at Monash—having been an old Monash boy—

**CHAIR**—You are not that old, Julian.

**Senator STERLE**—It is not Monash's fault!

**Senator McGAURAN**—I passed—eventually. The first port of call for country students was the halls of residence. Has there been an increase in the stocks of the halls of residence at all or have they simply outpriced themselves, even for country students? I know a whole industry has

grown up around RMIT—all the student apartments all around RMIT down in the city. Are they affordable now or have they begun to outprice themselves? That is basically my question. Let us talk real time, market affordability and stock for students. Is it out there?

**Prof. Steele**—It so happens that I have come prepared on that basis. The prices for Monash accommodation vary from \$17.25 per day for a single-bedroom unit at Gippsland to \$29 per day for a two-bedroom unit at Clayton. Each of our campuses, except Parkville, has a number of different levels of accommodation. At the Berwick campus we have 150; at the Peninsula campus, 110; at Clayton the numbers are much larger. There is certainly demand. They are fully subscribed. One of the challenges is finding the capital to increase the level of accommodation. The rental assistance scheme is one program that does have some potential to enable universities to expand their capacity for residential accommodation.

The other point I would make is that it is not only the accommodation; it is the services and support mechanisms. We have a group called Monash Residential Services—I am sure our colleagues do too in the other universities—where we have student mentors, student wardens and a range of programs to provide social support and academic support for rural students. I think that is an important element. It is not only about the room and the facility. But certainly they are fully subscribed. One of the challenges is how we find the capital to increase the level of accommodation.

**Senator McGAURAN**—Would you, if you could? Is there room at Monash campus?

**Prof. Steele**—Certainly on most of our campuses there is space: the South East Flats and others at Clayton; at Berwick we have 55 hectares. The land is not an issue; the issue really is the capital to develop the accommodation. That is the challenge. The current environment is fairly constrained. There is a lot of pressure on teaching and research capital. Of course, residential is something that has to compete with our major teaching and research activities.

**Dr Weller**—I would agree with those comments. Victoria University has about 600 beds of student accommodation, which is always at capacity. Five hundred of those are in an old facility that is ageing and is in need of substantial upgrade. The positive to that is it means we can set a lower level of rent. About 150 of those students are from institutions other than Victoria University—so Melbourne, Monash and RMIT—because we set it at a below-market level. We have worked recently on a small development—very small, only 47 beds—to bring on a new facility funded from the private capital development. Those beds filled before we had opened the facility, but they all went to international students who were prepared to pay a premium.

**Senator McGAURAN**—Is that the same at Monash?

**Prof. Steele**—There are a large number of international students. I am not aware of the figures. There are some rural students as well. Certainly demand outstrips supply, absolutely.

**Dr Weller**—We would be able to fill 500 beds again, but if we set that accommodation at the market rate it would be problematic. The Commonwealth accommodation scholarship has helped in that regard. The targeting of particular scholarships to support accommodation costs has been positive. In the recent package of reforms, the relocation scholarship has been important as well. We have found that students are saying, ‘I might get \$4,000 to relocate and

that might buy me a computer or whatever, but actually if I divide it by 50 weeks it is going to give me, in effect, my own rental subsidy.' There is that notion of a subsidised rental. Prior to the current financial crisis, the private sector was willing to develop student accommodation, but then obviously it wanted a market based return. Students who are coming face that difficulty.

**Senator McGAURAN**—So stock is down. We want to hear from RMIT, because that is where the whole student accommodation industry blossomed. So stock is short—

**Dr Weller**—Certainly at our university.

**Senator McGAURAN**—and affordability, market wise, is beyond the average country student?

**Prof. Steele**—I think it probably varies. It is hard to generalise there. I think a percentage of students struggle with the cost of on-campus accommodation. One pattern is that often they spend the first semester or first year in on-campus accommodation and then move to a shared house arrangement where it is a cheaper proposition. I think it is fair to say that all universities could benefit from increasing the level of on-campus accommodation, but it is difficult to find the capital to do that, given the demands that are on our capital budgets.

**Prof. Kirk**—I would agree very much with my colleagues. We have only one named residential provider, which is RMIT Village Old Melbourne, on Flemington Road. We have 350 beds there. We do not own it. We do not operate it. But we work very closely with the owner and operator. There are similar schemes to the schemes mentioned by Professor Steele, with student mentors, advisers and so on. Those beds will all be taken up. Some of our students are actually living in the colleges of Melbourne university and in the sorts of accommodation that Dr Weller mentioned. The demand is there. If there were more capital to come to the sorts of arrangements that we want to come to with people who are developing accommodation in the city, that would be extremely helpful. On the relocation scholarship, I would say that I do not fully understand the rationale for \$4,000 in the first year and \$1,000 each year thereafter.

**CHAIR**—Less money for more students.

**Prof. Kirk**—The assumption is that students do not move around, when in fact students do. They have every right, of course, to change their accommodation as their needs change and as they move through their university programs and they grow and develop and so on. So I do not understand the rationale. We would of course prefer that it was \$4,000 each year and probably higher in the beginning.

**Senator McGAURAN**—You mentioned VSU and of course my antennae went up.

**Prof. Kirk**—Yes. I did not mean to cause your antennae to go up. It was an objective comment.

**Senator McGAURAN**—You did. I have never met a vice-chancellor who supports voluntary student unionism as a principle. I would love to know why you do not. You said that you have continued on with many of the counselling and advisory services that you said were lost because of the VSU legislation.

**Prof. Kirk**—Not lost by us, but the experience of some other universities has been that those services have not been able to be maintained at the same level as pre the VSU legislation.

**Senator McGAURAN**—I am not allowed to go on, but can you explain how you all sleep at night not supporting VSU? Tell me later.

**Dr Weller**—One of the issues for us in terms of rural and regional students—one of the key supports that they use for us—is the access to sport. It is the area that they have come out of.

**Senator McGAURAN**—Oh, that hairy old chestnut.

**Dr Weller**—I am just making the comment. I do not think anyone disagrees.

**Senator McGAURAN**—The rugby fields of Eton, is it?

**CHAIR**—Senator McGauran, we have been having a very pleasant committee when travelling around this week, and now you have joined us in Melbourne. I apologise for Senator McGauran. We are not here to discuss VSU today. Just before we finish up, there are a couple of questions I have. The longer we do this inquiry, the more it becomes very apparent that this is a significant and very complex issue about the access and the broader ramifications. It is not just about students' access to secondary and, particularly, tertiary education; it is about the flow-on effects into regional communities, which are enormous and are becoming more and more obvious. I was particularly interested in your comment, Professor Kirk, about the view of it moving to inclusion rather than aspiration. I think that is really interesting and important. Up in Townsville yesterday we had some evidence that there were some students up there who had applied for scholarships. They had not even told their parents that they wanted to go to university because they knew their parents simply could not afford it. So, if the scholarship fell through, they just would not go to university and their family would never know that they had wanted to. I thought that was particularly sad. I suppose it is an example of the things we are trying to address through this inquiry—how we address that for students so that there is this inclusion and everyone has the opportunity, if they so desire, to go on to that tertiary education.

I think, Professor Steele, that you referred very clearly early on to the issues of the barriers to entry, those being access, cost, accommodation and a whole range of things. You referred primarily to how that relates to rural and regional. In terms of access, one of the ideas that have come forward from a number of witnesses is having a separate tertiary access allowance that would provide funding for rural and regional students because of the disparity in cost for them in having to relocate. Is that something that any of you have considered or would see as a possible way forward to try and address the access issue for rural and regional students?

**Dr Weller**—The only thing I would say, further to what Joyce indicated before on the notion of the relocation scholarship, is that when the government initially introduced the Commonwealth Learning Scholarships we introduced a series of close to a thousand complementary scholarships of \$1,000 each. So it was a million-dollar investment. That was to top them up. What we did when the government changed the scholarships into the accommodation and the learning was to change our allocation criteria to give preferential allocation to students who were coming from either an outer metropolitan area, in our case, or a regional one—whether it was a separate scheme per se or whether it was criteria that were

recognised in that funding. Again—I know I keep going back to it—there is the notion of multiple disadvantage. The recent changes will see additional funding for students from low-SES backgrounds. Look at it from that notion of inclusion, which is about taking away the barriers. If you are living next door to a campus, come from a high socioeconomic family or are in ‘first in family’ then access is there. That does not mean that success necessarily follows. If there are factors that stop that access then the issue is to try and compensate for those, whether that is through a relocation scholarship, a scholarship to support accommodation or a scholarship or funding for the student place to compensate for the fact that there is not parental income to support them. I think the notion of the way the funding is changing generally at the moment is to support that notion of funding the sources of disadvantage to overcome that notion of inclusion. We absolutely support that broader sense of funding for inclusion or funding to stop the barriers.

**CHAIR**—As you say, there is that multiple disadvantage. I think rural and regional is probably a good example. The lower SES is a social welfare disadvantage issue, and then the geographical distance and all those barriers become an access issue. So you have a couple of very distinct things within that one cohort of students. Professor Steele and Professor Kirk, do you want to add anything?

**Prof. Steele**—On any additional support for rural and regional students, there are real barriers; they exist and they are felt by those students and their families, and I think that anything we can do to reduce the economic disadvantage would be valuable. The main thing is that it goes to the students and their families. In a sense, it does not matter how—giving it to the universities to give it to the students is fine. They exist; they are real and there is a need there. It is a disadvantage and that should be addressed if possible by government support in whatever form, whether it is a special fund for rural and regional students or not. I guess the SES factor is important. If we have a wealthy rural and regional family, one might argue they could support the transition themselves and I would not argue with that. Where funds are short, we need to identify those students where there is not the capacity to pay and the families do not have the capacity to pay and give them support.

**CHAIR**—The difficulty there of course is the bracket in the middle. Where do you have the line to distinguish those you think can afford it, assuming that the parents want to help the students, which is not always the case. It becomes very complex.

**Prof. Kirk**—I agree with what my colleagues have said, but I would also make a plea for some flexibility in the ways in which any allowance or funding can be used. For some students accommodation is certainly important. For other students it could very well be computers or expensive art materials or whatever that is needed to support their education. If there could be an element of flexibility for those sorts of things above the sheer costs of living then I think that would be extremely useful.

**CHAIR**—I have one final question because I know we are getting rather short of time. This is going to sound like a very simple question for a complex set of issues, but is it possible to make the changes necessary to improve the level of inclusion without more funding being distributed by governments? I am not saying that the funding is what is going to fix all the problems, but is it possible to fix the problems and improve the situation without greater funding?

**Prof. Kirk**—RMIT is involved at the moment in a project with the University of Melbourne, La Trobe and Victoria University and we are looking at ways of working with schools and communities in a collaborative way in the north-west of Melbourne to address some of these issues. Funding will be needed, but I think that what is also required is greater collaboration among the universities and among schools and universities, universities and communities, universities and TAFEs, and so on. I think that if we can work together rather than compete then we are on the way, and the funding that is destined to come forward will allow us to develop the sorts of programs that I believe we need to develop. Some of the programs involve building the social and cultural capital of regional areas so that students have a diversity of role models and they are aware of the opportunities that are available to them in terms of their work and the ways in which they want to lead their lives, rather than being blinkered by what is currently the case and feeling that this needs to be perpetuated.

**CHAIR**—A very brief final comment, Professor Steele and Dr Weller, because we are going over time.

**Prof. Steele**—Yes. More funding is needed.

**CHAIR**—Thank you!

**Prof. Steele**—But maybe leveraging that by encouraging co-funding, encouraging collaboration and those sorts of activities would be useful as well to make that funding go as far as it possibly can.

**Dr Weller**—I would support the collaboration across the sector both at university and at a tertiary level, but also back into the secondary schools. But I guess the key thing I would say is that it is that message about aspiration. Whilst there might be issues that you need to fund—the barriers to access—we should say as a society, as a government and as a parliament that it does not matter whether you live next to Melbourne University or you live on the South Australia-Victoria border, you should aspire to complete secondary and go to tertiary. We recognise there are barriers to that but my concern is that we all of a sudden say, ‘Well you live in the west of Melbourne or you live in the western districts,’ and that mindset can challenge those aspirations.

**CHAIR**—I thank you all very much for being here today. I think we would like to have you here all day, but I do realise that you have actually accommodated us by being here when you have other things on. I just wanted to let you know that we do appreciate you doing that for us and that it has been extremely useful. Thank you for being here with us this morning.

[9.40 am]

**STUBBS, Ms Bronwyn, President, Australasian Association of Distance Education Schools**

**CHAIR**—Good morning and welcome. Would you like to make an opening and statement before we move to questions?

**Ms Stubbs**—It is not all that coherent and it is a whole range of ideas that I think need to be taken into account. Can I preface it by saying that we need to look at solutions that require us to make a paradigm shift. The students with whom we are dealing today have already started moving in that paradigm and we, as controllers of education, funding and all those sorts of things, are still working in an older paradigm. I think the resolution for issues for rural and regional students—and in fact for increased outcomes even for metropolitan students—is in us making that shift to incorporating what the online environment can provide and not residualising our attitudes by going back to what we know, which is about the face-to-face world. It is the world in which we were brought up, taught, did our university studies and all those sorts of things, but the technology enables us to question why it is that we would want the face-to-face contact and what it is that we use the technology for. We are in a position to ask different questions to those we have asked in the past.

That is really the preface to where I am coming from. Prior to being involved in distance education I was in a low SES school in Broadmeadows, and a lot of the issues I have seen there are very much the same as those for rural and regional areas; however, you then add isolation. There is a lack of role modelling for low SES; there is a lack of role modelling for rural and regional. Particularly, if we strip our students out to go to university then the rural and regional communities lose those young people as an asset. I think the research would also suggest that frequently they stay within the metropolitan area rather than going back to rural areas, and I think that, whatever we do, we should be trying to build those communities rather than stripping out those assets.

Also, we know that the world of work for many students now and in the future will increasingly utilise the technology and not require the face-to-face presence. Again, I think they are questions that we need to ask in education at all levels.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I am very interested in the future technologies and I have discussed with a number of witnesses how access to a better broadband network will have seriously positive educational implications for many isolated children. Depending on satellite or other similar technologies, the spread will be extremely wide. What do you envisage will occur in the dispersed student population that your organisation serves, and what are the barriers to them participating in education using that method?

**Ms Stubbs**—It is a can of worms. I do not believe that there is a single thing that you could put your finger on. Access to the internet is key. Access to the internet provides you with both social networking opportunities—and there is another issue about what that actually looks like—and content. It then raises the question: if the content is there, what is the role of the teacher? That is another one of the questions we ask, because I think there is very much a changing role

for teachers about motivating students and providing them with the independent learning skills to be able to access and utilise what they can get online. It is about teaching them organisational skills. It is about all of those issues that enable students to access education full stop. That is the underpinning issue for low SES students, because frequently they are not bringing those skills to their education at the start. They are behind the eight ball in the skills required for learning. Even being able to sit and engage with a topic can be problematic for a child who has not been brought up to read a book or whatever. So it is about developing what I suppose you would call 21st century skills. They are skills that we have gained because we are in a different world. We did not have the technology in the past. We were forced to sit. We could not just skip backwards and forwards between things. There are a whole range of issues around parenting that gave many middle-class and upper-class students the skills to be able to access education, whereas it has consistently been an issue for low SES students. I think it is the internet access but also the ability to access education because of those underpinning skills.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—We have spoken to other witnesses about a mixture of delivery systems emerging, particularly in regional universities, involving online podcasts, blogs and a whole range of different media methods, also with face-to-face engagement intermixed. Is that going to work for the typical distance education student in a university education context?

**Ms Stubbs**—Yes. The feedback we get from secondary students going into tertiary education is that distance education actually provides them with the skills to be successful at university. If you can successfully engage in distance education you can successfully engage in university education, whether it is in real time or through the online environment. The issues for distance education students again revolve around the role of teachers. One of the things that I am struggling with, and I know other principals are struggling with, is that we have teachers who come out of teacher training as content experts at a secondary and territory level but their skills are not necessarily around 'How do I motivate?' or 'How do I enable students to become independent learners?' So there are a whole range of skills that teachers are not provided with and they do not even ask the question 'How do I go about doing that?' As I say, if you have a recipe and you have the capacity to read and comprehend you can do that recipe. You do not actually need somebody there to do it. I can pull apart a slave cylinder in a car because when my car broke down the garage bloke showed me what the problem was and then I was able to follow a manual to solve that problem. With that content online, I do not need a teacher, but what I did need was somebody way back to provide me with those skills so that I was confident to access it, so that I could read and comprehend it, so that I had organisational skills, both intellectual and physical, to organise my time, so that I could self-regulate and all of those other aspects. I think there is a real hole in the development of those 21st century skills in developing students for university.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—You said on the one hand the distance education student who succeeded up to the end of secondary level would be well placed to succeed at university and on the other hand you are saying that there is a real problem there, so a lot of people are not succeeding. Are you saying that they are not getting success at the secondary level?

**Ms Stubbs**—Not as many as should. Some of this is about the enterprise bargaining arrangements and what teachers' work is described as and, again, the paradigm shift that is required within teachers to be able to do that. But at the moment the teachers coming out do not have those skills as part of their skill set. Some people have them or have developed them and



are therefore able to well service those students. I would say that the least successful category are the students who come to distance education as a result of being at-risk in mainstream schooling—they have already got issues around failure within schooling and inherent attitudes there. I would suggest that distance education schools have actually got a very good record by comparison in terms of re-engaging those students with education, but they would be the least successful group.

**Senator BACK**—I am trying to get a handle on your context of distance education. Would there be a significant proportion of secondary students in Victoria who participate in education through distance education? Would it be higher for primary, lower for secondary?

**Ms Stubbs**—In Victoria on average we have just over 200 primary school students doing distance education. About 80 per cent of those would be travellers.

**Senator BACK**—What do you mean by 80 per cent would be ‘travellers’?

**Ms Stubbs**—Eighty per cent of that 200-plus would be travelling—either itinerant families, or families who travel around Australia for a wide range of reasons or people who travel for work and take their student children, while they are young, with them overseas. So we have got a lot of missionary families, families of diplomats who go to areas where there are not effective international schools, people who are in business and who have to work in another office for a period of time. So 80 per cent of 200, about 160, would be travellers.

**Senator BACK**—And secondary students?

**Ms Stubbs**—It is very different. We would have a much higher physical, medical or social/emotional medical component.

**Senator BACK**—There are roughly 200 in primary. How many students would there be in secondary?

**Ms Stubbs**—In terms of bodies in seven to 10: about 500-plus. There is a significant component of medical—either physical or social/emotional. Chronic fatigue tends to be an issue. They tend not to be coming to us for disability but for acquired issues—medical conditions that they acquire as they go along. There is a small travelling component—very small—at the higher end to seven to 10 of elite performers who start to come to us because whatever they are doing does not actually enable them to engage with a mainstream school timetable. And there are the referrals from the schools, who tend to be at-risk students who have been expelled. Or, if there is an issue within rural communities that spills over from school then, frequently, one person from a family involved in that clash will end up coming to us.

**CHAIR**—What do you mean about the rural school and could you give an example?

**Ms Stubbs**—If you are in a one-secondary-school town and there is an issue between families or a bullying issue within the school where it is felt one student cannot attend or there is a behavioural issue that means that they are expelled from that school, moving to another town is frequently not an option, so they will come to distance education. That will come in under the referral category.

**CHAIR**—Does that happen a lot or is it one of those things—

**Ms Stubbs**—Bullying?

**CHAIR**—Not the bullying.

**Ms Stubbs**—The bullying in rural towns would be a key issue, yes, if I were to pick one factor within that category—

**CHAIR**—that is causing a student to go into distance ed.

**Ms Stubbs**—It will generally be the bullied student as opposed to the bully.

**Senator BACK**—Are there many at tertiary or do tertiary students not come under your umbrella of responsibility?

**Ms Stubbs**—I would not know any figures there. It becomes difficult because we have about 1,000 students but, of those, about half will be in mainstream schools, accessing one subject; the other half will be students who come to us because they cannot attend mainstream school, often for medical issues at 11 and 12. Elite performers are also an increasing issue. If they are an elite golfer or tennis player and they are travelling then they will come to us. Students in the arts—actors, singers and all that sort of thing—are an increasing proportion there.

**Senator BACK**—So in Victoria you would not have the issue that, for example, we would have in Western Australia with remote students—kids on stations et cetera. It would not be a feature of Victorian distance education.

**Ms Stubbs**—There are remote students. They are not as remote as in WA, but some of the remoteness in WA enables you to access internet services, whereas in Victoria very few actually fall within the range of ‘remote enough to get access’ to those things. We still have a lot of daily flake up in Victoria because Gippsland is hilly but not remote enough to get the remote allowances for access.

**Senator BACK**—Finally, is it an objective of the distance education organisation to identify those who are likely to want to go on to post-secondary, be it TAFE or university, and in some way prepare them for that transition? Is that something that you do?

**Ms Stubbs**—Certainly in Victoria transition is one of the goals of every secondary school. You have to have planning around how you are going to transition students to the next level. The goal of every distance education school is to have every student achieve their potential and go on to whatever they choose to go on to. If that choice happens to be university then we aim to provide them with the skills and outcomes that enable their access—thus the interschool et cetera.

**Senator BACK**—Do you have any statistics that you could make available, if not now then on notice, of, for example, the proportion of students who go through to year 12 in distance education in Victoria who start and subsequently graduate from post-secondary education?

**Ms Stubbs**—The structural issues about enrolling in distance education mean that there are very few students who start their education and go through to the end. Each student has to re-enrol each year, establishing the criteria for undertaking distance education. You cannot undertake distance education as a choice; you have to meet the enrolment criteria and in Victoria and the other states—I do not believe there is an exception—you have to establish your criteria each year to make sure that you still fit there.

**Senator BACK**—That is at the secondary level.

**Ms Stubbs**—That is right through—primary through to secondary.

**Senator BACK**—I do not think I asked the question correctly. What I was interested in knowing was the success rate of students who finish year 12 at distance education and then go on to post-secondary studies.

**Ms Stubbs**—We could give you data about the students who do year 12 and then go to tertiary, but we could not give you longitudinal data about whether, if they started with distance education, they went through—

**Senator BACK**—No, I understand. It is more about what the outcomes are for those who actually nominate to go to university, TAFE or whatever post secondary. I am interested in knowing what percentage or proportion of them start that process and then whether or not you might have any figures on the success rate of those who actually complete those qualifications at tertiary level.

**Ms Stubbs**—Our data also will only come about those students who use distance education for their home schooling. In Victoria if you are accessing one subject then the data will belong to the other school. So you will not get the full picture. But there certainly is—

**Senator BACK**—If you could take that on notice and provide it for us then I would be very appreciative.

**Ms Stubbs**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—This may not be data or experience that you have, but, just following on from Senator Back, for those students who do go from year 12 on to a tertiary experience have you had any feedback at all about the assimilation of those students, given that up until that time their education might have been of a distance education nature, and how they socially adjust to being in a tertiary environment?

**Ms Stubbs**—Again, we would not have data but we have not had any feedback to say that they cannot do it or that it has been an issue for them. On Radio National there was an interview with one of our students about two weeks ago and she talked about the distance education experience. I have not actually heard the full audio of what she said.

**CHAIR**—When was that?

**Ms Stubbs**—It was about two weeks ago on Monday. It was part of *Bush Telegraph* on Monday at 11 o'clock.

**CHAIR**—And who was speaking?

**Ms Stubbs**—They had one of our students who is now a journalist in Mildura.

**CHAIR**—Okay, we might follow that up; it sounds quite interesting. On the issue of broadband, you were talking about Gippsland. Obviously it is hilly and has access issues but does not qualify for remote. Is that something that has been brought to the attention of government—that that region is a bit of an anomaly?

**Ms Stubbs**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—What sort of response did you get?

**Ms Stubbs**—A political 'thank you for your letter'.

**CHAIR**—Perhaps my colleagues here might be able to take up the issue for you in terms of that access.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Do you mean mobile coverage?

**CHAIR**—We are talking about the broadband issues from Gippsland, because apparently it is quite hilly there and the distance education students have some issues around access but they do not qualify for remote like some of the more remote areas. It may be something that it would be worth while us following up actually.

**Ms Stubbs**—As I understand the broadband rollout, it should resolve the issue.

**CHAIR**—I was just thinking about in the meantime though, because that will take some time. I just wonder if there is not some sort of satellite capacity in the meantime that those students could utilise. Perhaps you could forward us a copy of the letter that you sent off.

**Ms Stubbs**—The Northern Territory satellites will reach down here so I would suggest that if they could access it through the federal government then that certainly would be an option.

**CHAIR**—There might be a satellite or wireless component. Would you like to perhaps provide the committee just the correspondence you have had with the government and we can have a look at that for you? Finally, do you have any indication, on a comparative basis of the students who go through year 12, of the year 12 results for distance education students compared to say a state average for year 12 students? Obviously it would vary from year to year quite significantly but I am just wondering about on average. Is there any sort of work on that?

**Ms Stubbs**—It is about average. I would suggest that a lot of our online previously has been very much flat documents, which has been a lot of the world of education. We have now got subjects that are moving into a much more dynamic area using the web 3.0 tools of virtual worlds and those cutting edge technologies of nings, which are social networking type sites.

They are not quite Facebook but they enable collaboration and the sharing of documents and a whole range of those sort of things. One of our subjects, biology, has had a sudden jump in improved outcomes this year based on that. We do not have some of the longitudinal data yet because, again, we are still playing with the technologies. Some of the issues are about teachers getting their heads around how we can use the technologies to get better outcomes.

**CHAIR**—Where is your central point that all of this information, learning and classes disseminate from?

**Ms Stubbs**—We are in Victoria in Thornbury, but it really does not matter where you are. That is the beauty. One issue that the Australasian Association of Distance Education Schools is grappling with is, with the advent of the national curriculum, how we go about doing our delivery, because there are opportunities there to enhance the delivery. We are currently working collaboratively on the development of projects. There is a project using ActiveWorlds, which is a virtual world. Brisbane and Victoria—and a couple of other distance education schools are thinking about it now—are going into a project to develop materials for use in ActiveWorlds with primary students. We are working with La Trobe University at the moment about a fire unit, which is developed through Second Life. Our conference in New Zealand next year will also be run parallel in Second Life so people in Victoria or anywhere in Australia will still be able to participate in the conference. Things will be streamed and workshops will be held in the virtual world.

There are a whole range of opportunities to still have socialisation even though it is not in real time. That is where my comments were previously about having to make paradigm shifts utilising what is there and asking what it is that actually requires us to spend the dollars to bring students out of rural areas in order to get a better education. There are significant questions about our practice as opposed to moving students. I think there are a whole range of issues for students with moving out of the social context. Yes, going to university is terrific but there are a whole range of other issues, particularly for low-socioeconomic students, including confidence in travelling and moving into other areas. You tend to stay where all your supports are. You have to have very strong drivers to move outside those social networks.

For rural students who do not actually have that level of confidence and particularly for low SES in rural and regional areas I think there are significant emotional and intellectual barriers to even thinking about moving, regardless of whether their intellectual capacity or desire is there. They do not necessarily have the family supports to move them there—let alone the considerations about dollars.

The question of sport was raised about the voluntary union fees. The question is: if it is not actually required for an education purpose, should our systems be stripping these kids out of regional sport? I think there are some underpinning questions about why it is we are actually requiring students to move. We can now with technology ask these questions. If there is a really good reason then we should do it, but if there is not a really good reason then let us look at what is available to enable us to do it.

**CHAIR**—Thanks, Ms Stubbs. That was very interesting.

**Senator McGAURAN**—The professors were talking about the holistic experience of university—moving to the city, living a bohemian life—

**Senator BACK**—No; you mentioned that.

**Senator McGAURAN**—and the fullness of it all. Are you saying that is not necessarily so?

**Ms Stubbs**—I am saying that we can question it. I think we all need to ask: is it a good experience for every student who goes to university? I suggest that a lot of the evidence around rural students, particularly the low-socioeconomic students, is that they actually spend a lot of time working to fund their attendance at university and their participation in the bohemian lifestyle is very limited now.

**Senator McGAURAN**—I am not questioning you; I am asking. Wouldn't you say that, if you do not do that, you are just reinforcing their isolation?

**Ms Stubbs**—There is a lot of research that has happened around social networking and how students are working now. Some of the evidence now is that students are actually choosing to go into social networking as opposed to choosing face to face—the preference is to utilise the online environment for their socialisation rather than the face to face. I have also seen a lot of evidence around students who have never met each other except in the online environment. When they come together it is as though they have known each other for 30 years. Physically they had not seen each other, but they knew each other as people and they actually had an engagement with the ideas. In the online world you see the development of the individual.

We have, as I said, a lot of students in distance education who have social emotional issues. There are students who will start out with an avatar that is not them and then move to something that perhaps has a hood over it. At the end you will see their whole face and them walking around and meeting people. That is the social networking developing through the online environment. That is again where we have to be careful. We have a preferred paradigm that is about face to face and I am not sure that we should be saying that today's students necessarily have that as their preferred mode. That is not to say that they should not have to engage in that world either. I am just saying that we need to ask the questions.

**CHAIR**—Ms Stubbs, thank you very much for giving us your time today.

**Proceedings suspended from 10.12 am to 10.32 am**

---

**BROWN, Mr Phil, Council Member, Rural Education Forum Australia, Executive Officer, Country Education Project, Victoria**

**CHAIR**—Good morning and welcome, Mr Brown. You lodged a submission, No. 724, with committee. Did you want to make any amendments or alterations to that?

**Mr Brown**—No.

**CHAIR**—Would you like to make some opening remarks before we move to questions?

**Mr Brown**—I guess I just have an introductory comment about the concern that we are picking up nationally around rural communities. While there is an acknowledgement that the current youth allowance and the support mechanisms for young people to take secondary education into tertiary or further ed are philosophically good in terms of trying to address sorting and all those sorts of things, the impact on rural communities is that they have often used some of those mechanisms as a way to transit themselves from their location to a location where they get further education. So I guess, in a sense, it is the unintended ramifications that have come as a result of that shift to try to tighten the rules or to make them fairer. Our view would be that that is a worthwhile process to follow but we need to look at the unintended ramifications and what we do to support those young people so that we do not end up with disadvantage again

**CHAIR**—One of the things, Mr Brown, that has been raised by a number of witnesses now is the equity of access issue for rural and regional students, which is separate from the social welfare issue of youth allowance. There has been a quite strong suggestion that there should be a separate tertiary access allowance to deal with that inequity and the further costs that sit on rural and regional students because of the relocation. I note in your submission that you say that you strongly urge the development of a rural and remote allowance to support students from these communities. Is that what you mean in your submission, or is there something else that you are referring to?

**Mr Brown**—In essence, it is the issue of relocation and the costs that come as a result of that. In terms of the ongoing support and all those sorts of things, there is probably little difference for a student who lives at the back of Bourke and the student who lives in inner suburban Sydney. But for them to have similar access there is a relocation issue and a relocation cost with that. One issue is the initial movement but, secondly, there is the ongoing support of keeping them in that relocation.

I guess that if you want to go further down that path, there is the potential for the reverse to happen. If a metropolitan based kid wanted to study in a regional centre, there is a relocation issue in that process as well. I think that if we talk about it from the perspective of sustaining rural and remote Australia, then we need to actually start thinking about building the capacity of those communities outside our population-centred locations, and the concept of asset-plus relocation might be a way to look at it. If I am based in the centre of Melbourne and I want to study at Wagga at CSU, for instance, then there is a relocation cost for me as well in that process.

**CHAIR**—Okay. That is very interesting. There are almost two issues there. One is for the rural and regional person who does not have access to a course where they are so they do have to travel away. The metropolitan student going to a regional university may have access to a course in a metropolitan area—

**Mr Brown**—True.

**CHAIR**—but what you are saying in terms of the overall benefits for the regional universities and those regional communities with all the flow-on benefits is that that should also be something we look at assisting.

**Mr Brown**—If you look purely at the process of pathways through formal education into choice education or further education, then the first component of that is probably the key issue, because most of the further education facilities are located in major cities or major population centres. If you broaden that out and start talking about sustaining rural and remote Australia, then there is an additional component of that in terms of an asset that we can offer population centres.

**CHAIR**—And it is much broader than just getting a student to tertiary. It is something that is recurring, which is why I asked the question.

**Mr Brown**—What we are now starting to find in our state based organisation is that the economic and community development components of rural communities are directly linked to the education capacity and capabilities of those communities, and they cannot do without one another.

**CHAIR**—That is a really interesting point and something that is starting to develop quite strongly through the inquiry.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Tongue in cheek you could say that regional Australians ought to pay some sort of penalty for a better quality of life in living out of the city. But when you come down to the issue of the way that youth allowance has been approached by successive governments, it has been on the basis that the state has a responsibility to assist people to a certain income level to access education, but beyond that it is the responsibility of the parents. What we have seen with the system as it exists now, subject to the bill before the parliament, is a big hole in the fence that has been created around parental income thresholds, which is the part-time earning of \$19½ thousand, as it is now—an amount that has grown over time—and as long as you can jump through that hole, whatever your circumstance, the legislation deems you independent and you get youth allowance. That is the circumstance. The Bradley report has revealed that the outcomes are not equitable because access is actually facilitated for people whom it should have never been intended to assist and in trying to change it, of course, you have got a group of people who sit above what are now significantly increased thresholds but are unable to access that loophole. That is the essence of the argument and how we get around it.

I see your submission talks about distance based payment. That would be saying there should be no assessment of means in the payment of this benefit; rather, it should be based entirely on where you live. Given that no government has embraced that to date, why should the current government take a step down that path now?



**Mr Brown**—The premise of that argument is based on the fact that our current policies and probably our recent policies have been very much socioeconomically and ethnically or Indigenous driven. They are the two key policies that we see reflected in a lot of decision-making processes. We are now starting to say that is fine; however, there is a third component in that process that, in a country like Australia with its breadth and its distances, we need to take into account, and that is the notion of location. Whether you combine socioeconomics and location I think is an area for discussion because obviously there are some people in rural Australia who are socioeconomically fairly well off. But what we are arguing in the paper is: let us move our policy framework not just from two bents but from a third bent as well. Often what rural kids did in accessing further education was use the loopholes in those two policy frameworks to get their intended outcome, whereas we have not really tackled the issue of whether, because I live in Bourke or Mount Isa, there is a support mechanism to have equity, the same opportunities as those kids who are located somewhere else that is five minutes around the corner.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Okay, but the kids who accessed that loophole were not just, or even in the majority, from regional areas.

**Mr Brown**—No, they were not. But rural kids use the socioeconomic framework as a loophole to access support mechanisms, whereas if we had a strategic or definitive process around location and support for kids' access around location then they would not have to look at loopholes elsewhere.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Should we be focusing on regional delivery of educational opportunity as the best method of redressing the disadvantage, given the diverse opportunities to study on regional campuses and the development of technologies which will enhance the opportunity to study remotely and the like, as a much more cost-effective and accessible mechanism for rural and regional students?

**Mr Brown**—There are two points of view I put to that. One is that I think it is a real opportunity for young people, especially in remote locations in Australia, to experience the world. If I wanted to be a solicitor or one of those sorts of people, then working in Minyip in the Mallee is not going to see me progress very far down that career path.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—But you can do that when you go to work.

**Mr Brown**—Yes, you can.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I am talking about when you study.

**Mr Brown**—It is that mindset of opening up people's minds to the possibilities, the choices and the opportunities out there for young people in the workforce and career options and all those sorts of things. There would be a disadvantage in some senses in keeping young people in their location when the globe is basically their workforce. The other component to look at is that, with the way the world is going and the way we can access further educational programs even at school level now, I do not have to be in my local facility to access that learning. So I think there is an opportunity for us to play in the communication technology world and start exploring ways in which access can be provided through that process. At a further ed level, that means a lot of

conversations about how that might happen, and the traditional view that we need to front to lecture rooms et cetera to get through the course really needs to be rethought. Admittedly there are a range of opportunities now for students to study off campus, but I do not think we have fully understood the full impact of what further education is about. It is also about building social networks and relationships et cetera in that process so that my career then becomes more meaningful to me. But certainly the potential is there to explore it, and the notion of virtual learning at a further ed level would be something we would certainly endorse.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—We have had a significant amount of evidence about the developments that are taking place. For example, in Queensland the six TAFE units are combining and embracing that in a whole range of areas. Students can download a podcast of their lectures, they can participate in chat lines and blogs on the various subjects, so there is some sort of social interaction. With the development of technology that will be effectively virtual face-to-face with visual and audio discussion instead of just text. All of those things are developing now, but we still get down to the students' right to choose where they want to go.

**Mr Brown**—Absolutely.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—But then the underlying question is who should pay for the choice?

**Mr Brown**—That is a good question isn't it? Our view would be the choice of where we live is our choice and we should not be disadvantaged by that process.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—But you are. Economically we live where we can afford to live not where we choose to live. There are a whole range of circumstances. With respect, that is a bit of a cute argument isn't it?

**Mr Brown**—In a sense I guess it is but if we took the Goulburn Valley out of Victoria, what would Victoria look like?

**Senator BACK**—South Australia!

**Mr Brown**—Not very healthy.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—You are really downplaying Gippsland there!

**Mr Brown**—It goes back to that argument again about whether or not we are serious about rural and remote Australia. I think that is the critical question.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—What is the benchmark for the test? That is a question which arises from your question: what is the benchmark for the test of are we serious?

**Mr Brown**—I think there would be a range of benchmarks.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—You can take that on notice. I would be very happy if you want to give a serious response to that because it is a debate that we can have. It is a good line to say, 'We're serious' What is a requirement at a federal or state government level to make an assessment of

that? How do we distribute resources? Is there already a weighting in those areas or against those areas? Is it a money test? Is it some other test?

**Mr Brown**—That is a good question.

**CHAIR**—To come back to the question as to whether we are serious about regional Australia does that hinge around the level of intervention potentially that is required from government to enable sustainability in rural Australia? Senator O'Brien is quite right, if you could take that on notice for us, it is a very serious key question.

**Mr Brown**—Absolutely.

**Senator O'Brien**—The other issue you raise is a tax rebate. Are you suggesting that on top of the youth allowance mechanism?

**Mr Brown**—I think the reason that one got put in there is to start thinking creatively about how we might do it. I will give you an example of what we are doing in Victoria. It is in a related field but it sort of picks up on that thinking. We are struggling to get quality teachers into schooling systems in rural and remote Victoria. In fact, we probably have 25 to 30 leadership vacancies at any given time in rural and remote Victoria. We started to think about putting in a system that actually attracted young people to be there because on the flipside of that they are playing in the international world—that is their mindset. So three years to five years is about what we can expect for people to be staying in one place. What if we actually start putting in place that if they stay for two years, we will give them study leave or long service leave on the basis that they do some work for us. If they return to us, we will pay their airfare if they return to a rural school. Or we will cover their HECS cost of their final year of studies. We have to start thinking about the way for us to start addressing the issues. We cannot keep just playing around at the edges. That notion of a tax rebate was that sort of thinking. Whether it is a tax rebate or something else, I think we have to start thinking outside the square about the possibilities rather than just criticising the youth allowance or the support mechanisms. Are there other more sustainable ways in which we can get that to happen?

**Senator O'Brien**—That is why I asked whether it was something on top of the youth allowance issue, given that inevitably those sorts of tax rebates heavily favour those with higher incomes because they are paying tax or they are paying tax at a higher marginal threshold. In terms of educational communities, how do we deal with the perception of prestige in the metropolitan universities versus the lack thereof in the regional universities? Is that a realistic assessment of the real world? You may see it differently.

**Mr Brown**—I think it is a generalist one. Certainly when working in my previous role as a manager in community health in this state, the selection was based very much on graduates of courses, not necessarily of universities. So you would find that Charles Sturt University, for example, was very attractive for physiotherapists ahead of Melbourne University and Monash University and those universities traditionally perceived to be high profile. I think it is a generalist comment and it is a perception out there, but in reality I am not sure how accurate it is and it would probably vary from career to career. For example, RMIT and Swinburne are seen as the engineering universities if you want a career path.

We are doing some work in this state to try and tackle those perceived high-profile universities and saying, 'Do you want to do some work with us in rural communities?' The Dean of Education at Melbourne University is very supportive and we have piloted a project this year, so there is some interest out there. I was also involved in Shepparton when the Melbourne University health and medicine concept was being developed to go out to regional centres and that was of a similar view. I do not think the thinking inside the universities is replicated by the generalist view or philosophy that they are the top end or the top eight or whatever. I think we have actually got to get in behind the walls and start having conversations with people and getting them to think differently about how they might do it.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Thank you.

**Senator BACK**—On the whole question of allocation of funds in this area—and obviously it is Commonwealth and therefore it is the Australian taxpayer—should we be focusing in general terms on access to education or should we be focusing at least partially on successful outcomes? In other words, if they are going to get financial support from the taxpayer, should there be some mechanism whereby students, from whichever region they come, whether it be urban or regional and remote, and whether they be from low or high socio-economic backgrounds, are penalised for failing or rewarded for passing? We seem to be focussing on access, but at the end of the day the community is better off with people going through tertiary education and passing and going back into their communities and actually practicing whatever the profession is. Would you comment on that?

**Mr Brown**—That opens up a can of worms!

**CHAIR**—A couple of cans!

**Mr Brown**—I think that really asks the question of what education is in Australia. Do we want to continue on this pathway of what I call a funnel process, where 15 to 20 per cent of young people who start their formal schooling at the age of five end up qualifying at university, as the promoted career path to get success at the end? If it is only 15 per cent then there is a question mark over that process. So I think it raises those sorts of issues, but there is still that perception in the community that if you want a good, decent career option out of it then university is the process. To actually answer that access versus outcomes based argument we have got to have a real debate about what we want from our prep education right through to our postgraduate education and about how they are linked, because they need to be. Twenty-five per cent of what we learn is learnt before we even hit the system, if not more. So how do we actually then put a system around that which allows access and gives you the outcomes you want? I think that raises the question of what it is. We have got young people sitting in some of our schools who have got three trade qualifications before they finish their school year. That opens up a whole range of pathways for people around that process and if we can get the various sectors of education to start working together in a more sequential process then we might address those issues of access and outcomes.

**Senator BACK**—It just seems to me that we do not have any focus at all in this whole process on the actual successful outcome of going to higher education, be it TAFE, VET or university. I am interested in your view of whether the taxpayer has a right to expect a bang for their buck in terms of successful outcomes for programs that are started—and I say that

expecting the onus to be on both the student and the provider. Would you comment further about the current system and the proposed changes to the gap year, the amount that people have to earn, the 30 hours a week and the impact on the students that you represent.

**Mr Brown**—The simple response, which I think I mentioned to Senator O'Brien before, is that young people in rural communities used a loophole in the previous system to help them pay for the transition to where they wanted to be with their further education. I think the review process has opened up this debate. As a society it provides us the opportunity to close those loopholes but also to have an honest conversation about the real issues and who the support should go to. There is some argument around socioeconomic issues and some argument around ethnicity, but I think there is also an argument now emerging that location has a fairly significant impact on access to further education.

**Senator BACK**—Sure, I understand that.

**Mr Brown**—Some of the anecdotal information that we are starting to get from our rural communities is that up to 50 per cent of kids in our secondary schools across Victoria alone will choose not to take further education on if they cannot get that support to make that relocation to do their studies. A flipside of that is the employment opportunities that exist within those communities. Because of changing demographics, changing industries and declining populations, they are hit with a double whammy.

**CHAIR**—So you are saying that the students have been using a social welfare measure, if you like, to address an equity of access issue?

**Mr Brown**—I think the loophole is there for them to use, yes—no question. If you talk to young people they will tell you, 'Take 12 months off, earn this amount of money and get some experience, and this is the support you get as a result.' I can do that in changed circumstances, but if I am located in Boort or Murrayville I still have that issue of getting in a car and going somewhere to get that further education, and that comes—

**Senator BACK**—But in Boort can you work 30 hours a week? Could people get 30 hours work a week?

**Mr Brown**—No.

**Senator BACK**—I do not know too many communities, rural or urban, where people who want work could get 30 hours, regrettably.

**Mr Brown**—Certainly that 30 hours stuff is a huge imposition on rural communities. When it was, I think, 15 or 16—or was it an amount?

**CHAIR**—Yes.

**Mr Brown**—It provided opportunities for people to get into seasonal work, so people in the north-east went and did snow work and all those sorts of things for a really hard block of three months and then did bits and pieces elsewhere. The western districts did a lot of the things around harvesting and so on. It gave them that flexibility. But I think, underneath all that, we

have to ask the question: do we want to give these young people in those locations the real opportunity to access further ed in our current system? For them to access that in the current system, nine times out of 10 they have to relocate.

**CHAIR**—It being nearly 11 o'clock, we will suspend the committee for a few minutes to stand and take a moment to remember all those who have fallen and to take some time to think of those who are currently serving this country in many fields of war.

*The committee then observed a minute's silence—*

**CHAIR**—Thank you, and the committee hearing has resumed.

**Senator BACK**—I come to the question of the asset test for parents. Obviously, there is an asset test in consideration of support and I am thinking particularly of the asset value of farming properties et cetera. Does your group have a view on that factor and on that level? Is it adequate? Is it too high? Is it too low? Is it preventing students from farming families from accessing tertiary education because of their inability to access the youth allowance?

**Mr Brown**—My response is that it replicates the philosophy or the policy around 'socioeconomic'. I think our argument would be that we should start with the question of location and access as a starting point without the consideration of asset tests. I think we do, and this probably needs a fair bit of work, but within that context if there needs to be a ceiling in terms of resources then I think there should be a thorough exploration of what makes income real for a lot of rural communities, occupation by occupation. We have had that debate in this state, for school funding processes, as to what is a farmer. The breath is so big, but I think that is a real in-depth conversation that we need to have. I think the point that we would like to make first of all goes to the fact that a relocation cost is critical and geographic location for people to relocate is an important consideration in this process. If we need a ceiling process or a means test in that, I think it needs a lot more exploration because it is a bit more complicated than if I were sitting in a regional centre with a career or a more defined process in terms of my job or my income. I think there is justification for a means test. That is just my personal view. I think that some of our quite-well-off Western District farmers should be included in a means test process, as opposed to those who are really struggling. So I think there is an element there, but I think our argument is that there is a relocation cost and there is an access issue so let us deal with all that firstly and then look at the socioeconomic implications of that.

**Senator BACK**—Can I finally go back and revisit the point you were making about people in a sense going past an institution which offers a program of the type that they could do but they want to go elsewhere, for whatever reason, and study at another location. Could you go back and revisit that? Let us imagine somebody in Melbourne who could study education here but, for whatever reason, wants to go to Adelaide. Should they get any extra financial support under this because of the location difference?

**Mr Brown**—I think it opens up another debate. If you are talking specifically about the constituents that we look after or represent, the rural and remote people, that is an interesting conversation because sustaining a Bendigo or a Wodonga could very much be enhanced by Melbourne people relocating to study at a La Trobe University facility. When you actually think

that through, you see in practice there is a relocation cost for those kids. But is the argument about choice or is the argument about rural and remote Australia?

**CHAIR**—It becomes a different defined outcome, doesn't it?

**Mr Brown**—It does.

**CHAIR**—So they would be quite separate. They both have a good reason but they are quite separate even though the relocation issue is the same.

**Mr Brown**—Absolutely. I think that is a totally new discussion and quite a challenging one.

**CHAIR**—Sorry, Senator Back, but it was raised in Western Australia by one of the professors at one of the regional universities who made a suggestion—and it was because he was looking at the benefits to regional universities, and therefore to the regional economies and communities, of those universities thriving—that there should be some thought given to some more attractive HECS arrangements for students who were going to study at a regional university. Is that something that you have considered? What would be the types of mechanisms if there were going to be an advantage for a student to attend a regional university?

**Mr Brown**—Not in depth is the answer, but it has certainly been an area that we have explored. At the moment our current thinking is all one way, so I sit in Mallacoota and my next point of call for further education is Melbourne or, if I wanted certain courses, I could get to Traralgon, but outside of that I have to come to Melbourne. If we actually changed that thinking and started asking, 'What if Melbourne students wanted to actually move somewhere else?' then that would open up a really interesting conversation.

**CHAIR**—Sorry, Senator Back.

**Senator BACK**—I am finished, thank you, Chair.

**Senator STERLE**—Mr Brown, with all the universities having their regional campuses out there and with all the TAFEs out there, do you honestly think to your mind that they have got it right? Is the balance right? Do you think the universities are working well enough with the TAFEs in providing opportunities that are selected for the areas, so that there might be more agriculture courses over here and over there there might be some other courses in aged care? Do you think they could do it a lot better?

**Mr Brown**—The simple answer to that is yes. I think they are moving in the right direction. The other area that we as an education society could look at is the whole notion of this virtual realm that we could start playing with—so do we need physical locations in geographic locations across the country? I am not sure. We are starting to talk—certainly as to more remote locations—about what is the role of schools in terms of further education. Can they provide an access point? If we are going to stick all this technology in there, then that opens up a whole range of possibilities for apprentices, for business people who want to retrain and all those sorts of people to rethink it.

I have just had the pleasure of being in the Northern Territory in some of the Indigenous remote communities. They are starting to say now, about some of their disadvantage, that it is about young people accessing education, first of all, but then further education needs to be much more creative because their ties to the local community are very strong. So the simple answer is, yes, I think in a sense they are going down that pathway but we can broaden that conversation out and we can certainly go down that pathway a lot further and the integration between the school system, the TAFE system and the university system could be developed a lot more.

**Senator STERLE**—Of course industry has a role to play too.

**Mr Brown**—No question at all.

**Senator STERLE**—We have taken evidence that some industries are very good at it and some just do not do it.

**Mr Brown**—Absolutely.

**Senator STERLE**—Thank you, Mr Brown.

**CHAIR**—Finally, Mr Brown, do you think enough work is being done? Have governments—and I use that word collectively for state and federal ones on both sides—placed enough focus on the broader implications of access to education particularly for rural and regional students? I ask that in the context that a lot of this debate that we have had has been around the current youth allowance measures. Those are the very immediate measures that a lot of this has been focused on. But it seems that there are much broader implications as to the importance of getting those students access to education, be it secondary or tertiary, particularly for regional communities. Do you think enough work has been done on the broader issues surrounding that?

**Mr Brown**—No. That certainly goes to the work that we have been doing nationally around looking at rural education. There is a very strong view that there needs to be a voice similar to what is in Health around addressing educational learning issues and skill development issues around rural education in its broadest sense. I think we need to actually start having a conversation about education being a tool to somewhere. I will share with you about the program that we did in the Shepparton area when SPC was under threat of closure. The industry HR managers said, ‘We want talented year 10 kids to start working on exploring food technology as an option for them to work in our industry.’ So the HR managers went to Deakin University and said, ‘You run a food technology course. Can we actually get exemptions for students if they were to do a course?’ They started recruiting year 10 students, the top maths and science kids, into a level IV one and employed them for 15 hours a week in their organisations in the food technology area. Over three years the students ended up with a certificate IV and an exemption from their first year of the degree in food technology. That is the sort of thinking we have got to start getting in terms of education being a tool rather than the answer. I think it needs industry working with education at all levels to facilitate that process. I think that, out of the first 18 that we put through that program, three ended up employed in those industries, so we lost nine of them, but those industries then said, ‘Well, we’ll pay you for the HECS bills that you have paid over the last three years.’ So I think there is a real opportunity for us to actually explore that whole private-public partnership arrangement but not necessarily in the traditional form but in the form of creatively thinking about how we might move on.



**CHAIR**—And start to think outside the square and take the blinkers off and not just think that this is the education, this is the student going into it and that is the end of it. So it is much bigger and broader.

**Mr Brown**—Absolutely.

**Senator STERLE**—There is actually something similar in the construction industry in Perth, where the Australian technical colleges outnumber those. It is very effective.

**CHAIR**—There being no further questions, Mr Brown, thank you very much for being here this morning. It has been extremely useful and we do appreciate your time.

**Mr Brown**—Thank you. Good luck with it all.

[11.14 am]

**AUCIELLO, Ms Julia, Immediate Past President, Monash University Gippsland Student Union**

**EDWARDS, Ms Michaela (Cayla), President, Deakin University Student Association**

**NIX, Miss Katherine Therese, President, Bendigo Student Association Inc.**

*Evidence from Ms Auciello was taken via teleconference—*

**CHAIR**—Welcome. You have all lodged submissions. Do you want to make any alterations or amendments to those? No? Then would you each like to make an opening statement before we move to questions?

**Ms Edwards**—Deakin University Student Association represents both urban off campus and regional campuses at Deakin University—all five campuses. I want to touch on four broad points that we included in our submission but that I thought would be helpful to highlight. It is well documented that VSU has had a most significant impact on rural and regional campuses, particularly in the student community and supported networks of students who meet certain need groups—for example, first-in-family students or rural and regional students who have moved either into an urban campus or from an urban centre to a regional campus. The lack of support networks for those students has increased the dropout rate and has also resulted in students feeling isolated, which we believe is a barrier to them continuing and graduating a higher education.

Also, we have noted that rural and regional students can be particularly debt adverse and we believe that that has a major impact on students identifying university education as something that they feel able to achieve, particularly when we know from our university that, say, one law textbook for one unit for one semester is roughly \$300. For a rural or regional student, who probably has less access to work and is probably from a low SES background, the cost of books can be prohibitive.

We would also note that in Geelong public transport does not meet the needs of students who travel to and from the campus, particularly from the city centre to the campus. Buses can leave anywhere up to once per hour and they do not meet the requirements of students—they are crowded, they are uncomfortable and they are expensive.

The last thing I want to touch on are the changes to Youth Allowance. DUSA believes that the 30-hour workforce participation requirement is unrealistic. If you are a student living in a regional centre like Colac or Mount Gambier there are no jobs that would give a graduate 30 hours worth of work per week. They do not exist. There is a large cohort of students who would say, ‘If I could get 30 hours worth of work a week, every week, for two years then why would I go to uni?’ We are really concerned that that will be a disincentive to students to achieve higher education.

**Miss Nix**—The BSA has for a long time suggested that there are two main mechanisms to help students to enrol in and stay in university, particularly for those in low socioeconomic groups. The first is providing access and the second is supporting students while they are at university. There are a number of steps forward being taken by our government but there are also some impediments that have been created by the steps forward that have been taken. I agree that for regional students there are not a lot of jobs available. In Bendigo, in particular, the most work that students can look for is in the hospitality industry and that is an industry that is really struggling at the moment because of the financial crisis.

Also, regional students face cultural issues, geographic location issues, financial issues and academic and non-academic issues in their needs. Having to take the two-year gap to be eligible for Youth Allowance is not only a problem for students but it is also a problem for universities. At the moment we are seeing that the cap is being removed from university funded places, students are now unable to defer for longer than 12 months at a time and universities are going to have to be able to change, adapt and create new courses and discontinue courses much more quickly in this new environment to cater to student need and what is needed at the time, so if students are taking gap years for 24 months then that can make it difficult for them as well.

**Ms Auciello**—I only have a couple of points to make before we start. First of all, I agree wholeheartedly with the points the representatives from Deakin and Bendigo have made. Although the university here in Gippsland is a part of Monash, students in the area do not really perceive it as being a part of Monash; instead it is looked upon negatively, as in, ‘A regional campus is obviously not going to give you the same outcomes as if you went to Clayton,’ which is obviously not true. That is an issue that we face down here. Secondly, it does come to jobs. Down here there is really not the opportunity for students to be able to work 30 to 40 hours per week. It is just not possible for them. Along with this, the time frame they have with which to work—the 18 months—really does not give students adequate money when they begin university. They are struggling for the first semester without any money and having to go into savings and or getting a loan from the university, which is not something that we want.

I suppose our biggest worry is that, if students are not coming to the campus, if they are not coming to regional universities, the future of Monash Gippsland really does not look that good. If there are no students, there is no funding and if there is no funding there is no Monash University Gippsland. We really do want to see regional students here and we really want to see them thrive in this community, because that is what our campus really is—it is a home away from home.

**CHAIR**—Thanks, Ms Auciello, that is a good way of putting it. Ladies, Senator O’Brien made a comment to an earlier witness about the youth allowance and it obviously being there to provide assistance where necessary up to a point and at that point then parental support was seen as the way forward. I do not want to verbal you, Senator O’Brien, I am just trying to give a sense of how you put it—because I thought you put it very well, actually. One of the things that has come out—and I am interested in your view and whether you would concur with this—is that we have also had some views from students that there are students who actually do not want their parents to support them; they want to be independent, which is why they take the gap year, so they can go and support themselves. There are also those students who said that, although their parents may be in a financial position to assist, it did not necessarily mean that that assistance was going to be there for the students. Is that a fair comment?

**Ms Edwards**—Yes, I think so. I do not know any students whose parents would support them wholly. I live out of home. My parents would assist me by maybe once a month giving me some food. They do not support me week to week.

**Senator STERLE**—Because they cannot financially?

**Ms Edwards**—No, they probably could make a larger contribution, but—

**CHAIR**—Which is now on the public record, Mr and Mrs Edwards.

**Senator STERLE**—I just want to get this in *Hansard* so I can whack my daughter around the ears with it.

**Senator McGAURAN**—You are protected by parliamentary privilege.

**CHAIR**—That is right.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—If there are any consequences, let us know.

**CHAIR**—Yes, do come back to the committee.

**Ms Edwards**—It is not that my parents are low socioec; they are probably lower to mid middle-class. It is more that they choose not to. I would not feel comfortable accepting that level of support. I would much rather work to support myself. I work two jobs, and I am comfortable doing so, but I still struggle.

**Ms Auciello**—When you are 18 and you are out of year 12 there is an expectation that you are an adult and that you should be supporting yourself. Going to university is that next step in your education. However, it does not mean that you are still a child and that you are still living at home. You are doing this on your own. I think there is that expectation from parents and from students themselves that it is time for them to support themselves and not rely wholly on their parents anymore.

**CHAIR**—Thank you. Ms Nix, did you want to add anything to that?

**Miss Nix**—Yes, I do think that students want to get out of home and be independent, but I think in terms of regional students and parents helping support their children, in regional areas it is hardly ever possible. Bendigo supports some of Victoria's most disadvantaged shires, so the students have enough trouble deciding that they actually want to come to university, because there are so many expenses involved. If we can get them there to start off with, that would be good, but supporting them while they are there is definitely important.

Research conducted by La Trobe in 2007 on student poverty suggested that 41.6 per cent of La Trobe University students had an income of less than \$10,000 per annum and a further 43 per cent had an income between \$10,000 and \$20,000—and that is regardless of whether they receive income support. Also, 25 per cent of students were forced to undertake their paid work while their classes were in session. So if we want these students to get into university and to do well, we really need to support them because their families, for the most part, cannot.

**Senator McGAURAN**—Ms Edwards, congratulations on Deakin's submission. If you do your assignments like that, I am sure you will pass with flying colours. I want to explore parts of your submission—on the cost imposts and also your introduction. You spoke about the effect that the youth allowance changes will have on students. Yet, on the flip side, you spoke about reintroducing compulsory unionism, which is around \$600 per year—that would buy a lot of books. I see that as a contradiction, and a greater impost on rural and regional students.

**Ms Edwards**—DUSA's position on the VSU has always been in support of an opt-out model—the Victorian model. DUSA supports the government's proposed cap of \$250,000. Particularly on rural and regional campuses, we have seen services disappear. Without that funding, the services will not come back. We have a campus in Warrnambool. Students come to that campus seeking assistance to find a suitable home in town, but there is no-one on campus who can assist them with that because the services are not funded. We believe a student services fee would enable this type of service to be reintroduced on campus.

**Senator McGAURAN**—So the Warrnambool experience is a direct result of abolition?

**Ms Edwards**—Yes.

**Senator McGAURAN**—So you are advocating the return of compulsory student unionism?

**Ms Edwards**—We are advocating the return of funding for student services.

**Senator McGAURAN**—Isn't that equally the responsibility of the administration? The Vice-Chancellor of RMIT appeared before the committee. She said they had picked up all of those advisory and counselling services—'picked up' is how she put it; I think they always had them. The administration have a responsibility in that area, too.

**Ms Edwards**—I believe the services should be provided. Our experience is that the services are better provided by the student association than by the university proper. We are more than happy to work in partnership with the university to ensure that the services are provided. But our experience is that, without the funding coming from a student services type fee, the services are not provided.

**Senator McGAURAN**—We have also discussed at this inquiry the whole-of-life experience of university. As a principle—which is often as important as the cost—is your organisation pushing for compulsory student unionism?

**Ms Edwards**—DUSA has never advocated compulsory student unionism.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—One of the issues that has arisen in this inquiry is the availability of educational opportunities in regional Australia and the creation of opportunities for regional students to study where they live. Some courses are not readily available and perhaps never will be. But, excluding those courses, whose responsibility is it to fund a student's choice to move to study when there is a local choice available?

**Ms Edwards**—That depends on the circumstances. If a rural and regional higher education provider can provide a well-accredited, successful course then I suppose you would have to

encourage the student. I know that from Deakin's perspective the university proper does a lot to encourage regional students to stay in Geelong, for example, by offering them well-equipped, popular courses. I think it was the Monash Gippsland experience that there was a stigma around rural and regional universities. I think that if that is the case then students have a right to choose which university they want to go to. If a student does not feel that they are going to get an equal education in a rural and regional provider, for whatever reason, they have a right to choose. That said, I think that we should be investing in rural and regional providers so that there is not that stigma.

**CHAIR**—Ms Auciello, feel free to jump in whenever you like. Do the proverbial voice equivalent of sticking your hand up!

**Senator O'BRIEN**—It is a question for you as well.

**Ms Auciello**—I suppose that is the biggest issue: is a regional campus as well qualified as a metropolitan one? I think that there are not those opportunities in regional areas. In Gippsland we only have Monash University and GippsTAFE. They are the two options for students. They can choose to either get a university degree or go to TAFE. Otherwise they work or go to Melbourne. For many students, even in high school their choice was already that they were going to go to Melbourne. They did not want to stay in regional areas. So I do not think that it is a university issue alone; I think it is a council issue and a government issue of looking at why students do not want to stay in the area. Is it because, after graduating, there are not the job opportunities in Gippsland that there might be in Melbourne? I do not think it really has to do with course choice. I just studied journalism, and I know that there is much less opportunity in Gippsland than in Melbourne. So why would you study in Gippsland? I think it is an issue that covers more than just what universities are offering and the choices that students have to make. I do not think they are deciding on a university campus based solely on what course they can do. They are looking at outcomes afterwards, where they are going to work and how they are going to support themselves while they study. Even if they have to relocate, at least they know they can get that work that will probably fit in with their timetable, whereas in Gippsland that is a little bit harder. You are working either not enough hours or too many hours. So I think it is a bigger issue than what we are looking at right now.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I suppose we are looking at that issue, because we are not just looking at Youth Allowance in this inquiry. One of the issues that the question was encouraging you to address is: if there is an opportunity to study in a student's own community but they select a course that is not there, is it the taxpayer's responsibility to provide support?

**Miss Nix**—I think that universities tend to pick out areas that they are good at, and they develop them. I think that courses that are developed specifically in regional areas are based on labour market needs. For instance, in Bendigo we have a large health science faculty and a large education faculty because we need teachers and health professionals in the regions. If you are a person in Bendigo who wants to enrol in university to do a course that is not in one of those two faculties and is not as well funded, I do not think that you should have to attend that university just because it is the one in your area. I think we need to have access to proper courses. So students should have the support to travel where they need to go to university, or more funding needs to be provided to regional campuses so that they can develop a more holistic set of university courses.

**Ms Edwards**—I know that at Deakin in Warrnambool they do start law, so you can do the first two years of law in Warrnambool, but you cannot finish; you have to transfer to Geelong. In that case it would seem unfair for a student to start and get full support in Warrnambool but not be able to finish the course because the university does not provide it there.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—That would be a case where you would probably be able to argue that at the third-year point that student does not have the choice to remain. So it is a different category. It is not a choice; it is a requirement to move to complete the course.

**Ms Edwards**—If a student was living Warrnambool and did not want to start their degree at one campus and then move campus at a critical part of their degree then the argument could be made that they could get support to move.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Perhaps, being the devil's advocate in this, the suggestion would be made if you could establish that there was a differential in educational outcome that might be justified. I am raising these issues because we have also been discussing the provision of educational opportunities in the regions. As the technological advances develop with broadband et cetera the expectation of many witnesses has been that there will be many more opportunities to deliver courses across Australia remotely using the technology and the various things that are being developed for it and that may reduce the requirement for students to leave home, and to experience all the pressures that that incurs, by studying remotely. Ms Edwards, you were saying that you have left home.

**Ms Edwards**—Yes.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—It sounded like it was your choice.

**Ms Edwards**—Yes, it was. Are you talking about off-campus study or are you talking about moving to study?

**Senator O'BRIEN**—The question was about the opportunities for off-campus study, allowing people to remain at home. But I guess you have got a reason—if you do not want to share it with us, that is fine—but I guess the general theme of my question is: in the case of the taxpayers' responsibility, where does it start and end. I am inviting you to tell us why, for example, your circumstance might help us to understand the issue.

**Ms Edwards**—From my personal circumstance, if I were to live with my parents I would have to travel about an hour and a half each way to university on public transport, which is probably just on the border of what is okay and what is not. I would much prefer closer to campus and participate in campus activities and extracurricular things than travel every day. I think that that is fairly indicative of what most students would prefer to do. I am happy to work to support that lifestyle but, simultaneously, the reality is that it is often very difficult for me to get the work to support that.

Services like rent assistance are available to students who live within a certain parameter. I think that, in a lot of cases, works quite well as an indicative. If you can provide a reason why you need to move out of home to study then you can be supported. I do not think that it should be a free-for-all.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I think 90 minutes is the threshold.

**Ms Edwards**—That is right.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—So it is a matter of an objective determination of whether by travelling by public transport you can get to the destination in under 90 minutes.

**Ms Edwards**—That is right.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I think that in Bendigo's case we established from an earlier witness that you cannot get to any of the Melbourne universities, if you needed to go to Melbourne, within 90 minutes.

**Miss Nix**—No, I would not think so.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—So the requirement under Youth Allowance legislation to move to study would have been established.

**Senator BACK**—If this committee were to in some way come to terms with a recommendation regarding equalisation for attendance at tertiary college—in other words, accepting that if you have to travel and cannot live at home then there is some financial support—can I put a proposition to the three of you. There is already a HECS system in place for the payment of fees, which are paid back once the person completes their course. What if we were to propose a notion whereby there is an equivalent to HECS—a low-interest loan—to support a student's living allowances?

Is it the case here in Australia, unlike other countries, that, because primary and secondary education is provided for the child, there is an expectation that tertiary education should be too? Let me give you the American analogy. A student going into tertiary education makes an investment decision. They either go on to work—and, therefore, they work and they earn—or they make a decision to invest in a period of time in education in the expectation that they will end up in a more satisfying and, hopefully, higher paying job. Therefore, they then must meet the return on the investment they make. In other words, why should youth allowance be free? Having taken account of where people live, why should a youth allowance be free of charge? Could I get your reactions to that?

**Ms Edwards**—Our concern with that would be that a lot of rural and regional students—particularly low-socioeconomic students—are debt-averse anyway, so I do not think that a HECS system would assist them with overcoming the barrier of incurring a debt. I do not think it would address the issue for low-socioeconomic students to attend university. I think a HECS system would assist some students. Students like me, who do not come from a low-socioeconomic background, would probably be able to spend more time studying rather than working. But I do not think it would be of any assistance for students who are in absolute need.

**Senator BACK**—The fact is that they have nothing now. This provides them with an opportunity to receive financial remuneration on a weekly or fortnightly basis in the knowledge that, having gained a qualification, they will be in a higher income earning bracket and can afford to pay it back.



**Ms Edwards**—I understand that and I, too, have sometimes had difficulty understanding their position. However, what we are told is that so many students—particularly first-in-family students—have a set mindset that says: ‘I could go and get a job, work 20 hours a week at Safeway or whatever and earn \$300 a week, or I could go to university and spend \$5,000 every three months. Which am I going to do?’ So often first-in-family students have pressures from their parents or high school friends, asking: ‘Why are you doing that? Why are you going to university? Why are you spending money? Why don’t you come work with me?’ I do not believe that a HECS-style system would assist those students, because they are very debt-averse. They know in their minds that they have to pay the money back, but they do not really believe that they are going to be able to finish their degree and, therefore, have an earning potential to be able to pay it back.

**Senator BACK**—But they are going to be debt-averse to HECS as well, aren’t they?

**Ms Edwards**—They are; that is why they do not go to university now.

**Miss Nix**—Yes, that is the inherent problem with paying for university. Regional students are deterred by the fact that there is debt following university, and they do not feel that they would be able to afford it. This is not to mention the fact that HECS is also indexed, so the longer it takes to pay it back the more you will be paying anyway.

**Senator BACK**—Ms Auciello, do you have a response to that?

**Ms Auciello**—Sure. We are a low-socioeconomic area, and the amount that graduates will be earning in this area compared to metropolitan areas is a lot less, so it would take quite a long period of time for them to be able to pay off their debts—not only their HECS but also their living expenses if that were to be done in a HECS style as well. So I do not think it really benefits students who are from a low-socioeconomic area such as Gippsland.

**Senator BACK**—All right. Let me put a second proposition to the three of you, then: a return, as we all were experiencing in Australia, to a cadetship system. I also came from a very low socioeconomic background. I had to go from Perth to Queensland to university to do vet school. There was no way in the wide world that I would ever have done that had I not had a cadetship through the relevant department. Of course, most people who went through teaching in Australia also went through as cadets, as did those in agricultural science and many other faculties. In that circumstance our fees were paid, we received a very modest sustenance allowance, we got a flight once a year from Perth to Brisbane and then we worked for five years. If we did not, as in my case, and worked for two and a half, we paid back half the money. Could I get your reaction to that concept? Local governments, federal governments supporting local governments, industry and business in rural communities may well be influenced to provide this sort of assistance to students, firstly, because it supports the students and, secondly, because it guarantees that they will come back and work in those communities for those companies or government agencies, as in education and agriculture.

**Ms Edwards**—Could I just clarify what you mean. Do you mean that, say, when you do a journalism degree, you volunteer or work for a minimum wage as a journalist?

**Senator BACK**—No, you do not volunteer. You decide you want to do journalism, and the local newspaper, for example, possibly in association with federal government, offers you a cadetship to go through journalism. It pays your fees, so you do not have a HECS bill. It pays you some living allowance equivalent to youth allowance. You may in fact, in each long vacation, go back and work at that newspaper as part of the condition of the cadetship, and upon graduation you are then bonded to that newspaper organisation, usually for the equivalent number of years that you were supported. So, if it is a three-year degree, you work for them for three years. If you pull out at the end of two years, you pay them back a third.

**Ms Edwards**—I think particularly for rural and regional centres, as long as it was a choice, many students would support that. I know students in Warrnambool would.

**Ms Auciello**—I would support that. I wish we did have that system, because I would like a job for three years as a journalist in Gippsland!

**Senator BACK**—You might not have the job in Gippsland, incidentally; the media outlet might send you—heaven forbid—even to Western Australia! Nevertheless, you are in the system, so it is a plus, isn't it? Everybody wins.

**Ms Auciello**—I think that addresses two issues, not only the cost for students but also the issue for graduates who really cannot find work, especially at this time, when they are struggling, when people who were already in jobs who have been let go cannot find work, so what chance do graduates have? That is the issue that I am facing at the moment. So I think a return to a cadetship style—I am sure there are negatives to it as well; however, as opposed to a HECS style thing, I would really go for it.

**Miss Nix**—Yes, absolutely. Over the past 12 months in particular BSA has been talking to Latrobe University about involving more work experience type activities with the courses that they offer as well. I think that we are starting to get somewhere on that too. A lot of the time, particularly regional and rural students, who have to just take the first job that is offered to them—and it is usually in a field that has nothing to do with their course—need more practical experience in the life that they are going to be involved in, so it would be good to have a kind of cadetship that also allowed for work experience and leadership development skills so that we can develop good graduates, really great graduates, in Australia.

**Senator BACK**—Those were my only questions.

**CHAIR**—Just to finish up: an issue has been starting to emerge through the inquiry—that is, the separation of youth allowance as a social welfare measure and also the separate issue of inequity of access for rural and regional students because they have to relocate and because of the extra costs associated. That is becoming quite clear. There has been some suggestion from witnesses that there be a separate tertiary access allowance to address that relocation issue for those rural and regional students having to travel away, separate from the youth allowance measures, which are social welfare. Is that something that you have considered, would give consideration to or think has any merit, or not?

**Ms Edwards**—I suppose it depends on definitions. It is hard to make a comment on it without knowing—

**CHAIR**—I am very happy for you to take this on notice, give it some thought and come back to the committee.

**Ms Edwards**—Yes, we can do that.

**CHAIR**—Miss Nix, do you have any comment?

**Miss Nix**—Not at this stage.

**CHAIR**—Ms Auciello?

**Ms Auciello**—No, nothing on that at the moment.

**CHAIR**—If you could all take that on notice and perhaps come back to the committee, that would be really useful. Are there any further questions?

**Senator BACK**—Relating to the question of the 30 hours now required, could you give some comments. Do you think, if it were changed from a minimum of 30 hours each week—which we addressed in an earlier Senate estimates—to be an average of 30 hours, that would be a more acceptable figure, or is there a figure different to 30 hours that you think is acceptable in the context of gaining independence under the youth allowance provisions?

**Ms Edwards**—DUCA's position is that we have been lobbying on average participation. We have not really given a whole lot of thought to a lesser amount of time. I think 30 hours is a lot for students. If they are working 30 hours, that is a real lot. Deakin University has already changed its policy so you can defer for up to two years, which has been good, and the university has been quite proactive about keeping in touch with students and establishing procedures to keep students deferred for up to two years within the university community. I think 30 hours is a lot. If it were standardised, it would certainly be better but still not ideal.

**Senator BACK**—No comment, Miss Nix? Ms Auciello?

**Ms Auciello**—I suppose the only comment I would make is that, while I understand that there is, I suppose, an issue with the amount that is being earned over the 18-month period, which was around \$19,000, and I understand that there are ways for families to change that if a student is working for their family's business, I still think that that is a good indication to show that students have been working and that they have been able to support themselves. I think hours can be a little bit too restrictive on students. There are a lot of factors that should be taken into consideration with study. We do not want students dropping out of university or even deferring, because of the chance that they will not come back. Our position was really that we do understand that there can be issues with setting a financial benchmark, but in the long run it may be more beneficial than putting restrictive hours on students.

**Senator BACK**—Thank you. This is my final question. Do the student groups have any figures on what I will call 'wastage'—in other words, if 100 per cent represents the number of students who go straight from school to university, then there are those who defer for one year and come or not and then there are those who defer for two years and come or not. That is what I refer to as wastage. Do you have any feel for or could you take on notice and give us any

statistics of how many potential students do not turn up as a result of having worked for one year or two years?

**Ms Edwards**—I can take that on notice and get back to you. Anecdotally, I know that it is a lot.

**Senator BACK**—One year and two years?

**Ms Edwards**—The dropout rate increases as the time of deferral goes up.

**Senator BACK**—Is it possible for you others to provide us with that information, if you have it from your respective institutions?

**Ms Auciello**—I can get that.

**Senator McGAURAN**—I just want to ask Ms Edwards a question. As a sample, you said you work two jobs and you are a full-time student?

**Ms Edwards**—I am a part-time student.

**Senator McGAURAN**—Anyway, I will ask: how many hours a week do you work?

**Ms Edwards**—I am a student rep and I get an honorarium, so I get paid for about 30 hours, and I work about 15 hours waitressing.

**CHAIR**—Just following on from Senator Back with the 30 hours a week, whether that should be averaged and whether it would make any difference, can I ask you a different permutation of that. What if the 30 hours applied averaged, but just for the 12 months over the 18 months, so you came back to a one-year gap scenario but the 30 hours only applied to the one year and you were able to average it? Can I ask you to take that on notice and consider whether that would work? We need to think outside the square and look at all the options here.

**Ms Auciello**—Can I ask a quick question on that?

**CHAIR**—Certainly.

**Ms Auciello**—Would that mean that, after the 12-month period, if an average of 30 hours had been worked, youth allowance would automatically start for that student, or would they have to wait the 18-month period?

**CHAIR**—That is something I would very much like some advice on from all of you: what you think would be the most appropriate and what the differences would be for students if they could start at the end of the 12 months or if indeed they still had to wait the 18 months, even though the 30-hour average could occur over the 12-month period.

**Ms Auciello**—For us, we would really go for after the 12-month period and payments would start.

**CHAIR**—Okay. And I am getting some nodding here from Miss Nix.

**Miss Nix**—Previously, we have had that you can work 12 months but not receive your payment for 18 months, and I think it really needs to get to students at the start of the year. There is no point beginning a semester at university if you cannot afford to buy your books and get accommodation.

**CHAIR**—Yes, that is very true. As there are no further questions, I thank you all very much for appearing today. We really do appreciate it. It has been extremely useful, and thank you for giving us so much of your time.

**Proceedings suspended from 11.55 am to 12.58 pm**

**BAIKIE, Ms Jessica, Student, Launceston College**

**PETERSON, Mr Hunter, Student, Launceston College**

**WILKINSON, Ms Rachael, Student, Launceston College**

*Evidence was taken via teleconference—*

**CHAIR**—I welcome you all this afternoon. Would you like to make some opening statements before we move to questions?

**Ms Wilkinson**—Yes, we have an opening statement. Since May 2009, when we became aware of these changes, Jessica Baikie, Hunter Peterson and I have been campaigning for an education revolution. Throughout the campaign we have held a community forum with attendees including Bob Brown, Leader of the Greens, Senator Guy Barnett and Alison Morehead of the Labor Party as well as members of the community. We have also presented the House of Representatives with a petition of 1,217 signatures and participated in lobbying politicians privately.

We have sent many letters and received one in return from Julia Gillard's branch manager Robyn Shannon which simply directed us to the DEEWR website, which we would obviously have looked at given the level at which we had been campaigning for seven months. It failed to acknowledge the level of knowledge and articulate interpretation we had on this matter. In fact, Jessica Baikie had even spoken about this issue in Canberra with Ms Gillard herself. It seemed like a pro forma response to a very specific issue that we had raised, and this is terribly disappointing.

We would like to thank Senator Kerry O'Brien for his support and for hosting the teleconference in his office, and also Senator Guy Barnett for his offer to hold the teleconference in his office. We would like to thank both of these senators for this support, as well as the Greens senators Bob Brown and Sarah Hanson-Young. However, we are not here today to represent the interests of any one political party, and we want to make this clear from the outset. We are here to represent the interests of regional Australian youth and we will do this to the best of our abilities.

Before we present our arguments to you all today, we would first like to make the comment that we are extremely disappointed that this inquiry is being held in the midst of our end of year exams, which are an extremely hectic, busy and crucial time in our lives. To take time out from our exam study is detrimental to us and we feel it is unfair that we have had to do this. Furthermore, we are disappointed that the Senate inquiry did not physically come to Tasmania. We thought it was unfair that people in other states got the chance to voice their concerns whilst looking the senators in the eyes, whereas here in Tasmania—the only state in Australia that is entirely regional—we are denied that opportunity, like so many other opportunities Tasmanian students do not get because of our geographical location. We will highlight this disadvantage throughout our arguments.

We would like to talk about the recommendations that we would make, and then we will follow this with the arguments for these recommendations. First, full-time students in approved tertiary education who live 80 kilometres or more from the family home should be deemed independent and eligible for a level of financial assistance that provides a reasonable and adequate contribution to actual living expenses. This amount should be determined by a realistic assessment of actual living expenses for full-time students who have to live away from home. Second, students should not have to work more than 15 hours a week to supplement this allowance, as this has been demonstrated to be detrimental to their educational outcomes. Third, apprentices who have to travel away from the family home in order to complete compulsory educational programs should be given financial aid to do so. Fourth, independence should be automatically granted to those students over 18 who have worked an average of 20 hours per week for one year. Fifth, Australia should adopt a similar program to the UK's and New Zealand's, in which student loan systems exist to support students in independently pursuing their studies regardless of the financial status of their parents, taking personal responsibility for all accumulated debt.

On 7 July 2009 the Australian minimum wage was set at \$543.78 per week, which is \$172.38 more than the maximum fortnightly payment of youth allowance, which is \$371.40. This means that somehow Australian students who are receiving the full youth allowance benefit need to try and live on \$185.70 per week, which is \$87.60 less than a single individual not working and living Newstart allowance. The alternative for students is to take on extra employment to supplement this and to earn enough to meet the basic requirements of living. For a student who is receiving the full youth allowance, this would mean working an additional 25.02 hours a week to make the \$358.08 required to make Australia's minimum wage.

The Henderson poverty line is currently calculated at \$673.12 a fortnight, which is about \$335 a week. That means the maximum government youth allowance payment of \$371.40 a fortnight falls \$298.60 shy of the poverty line. In summary, this means that the average student is expected to live about halfway under the Henderson poverty line—that is, on about \$300 less. Australia is meant to be the lucky country, an egalitarian haven, a place of rich opportunity. Pushing students who are trying to get ahead in life so far into poverty does not really fit with our value of a fair go for all.

According to the University of Adelaide the average student can expect to spend about 48 hours a week in total on their studies during teaching periods. If the student is living on youth allowance, they will have to work an estimated 25.02 hours on top of this in order to gain the minimum weekly wage to live on. This means that the student will have to spend about 73.02 hours a week working, studying and attending classes. This is almost equivalent to having two full-time jobs and there is no doubt that this will adversely affect a person's success in education. This notion was supported by the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee report in 2005 which found that working more than 15 hours a week is detrimental to study.

For rural and regional students this composes serious problems. Most of us cannot live at home while we study which is one assumption that we have heard politicians make a lot during the course of this debate about the changes. To live hours away from home, pay rent and bills, buy food, clothes, transport and other everyday costs, such as medical bills, without the support of the parental home is more common for students from regional and rural backgrounds. However, both the old requirements and the new changes do not accommodate this or take into

account this kind of independence. Members of the staff at Adelaide University have collectively said:

... levels of income support do not reflect actual needs of students.

Many students have to undertake excessive part-time work to supplement their income, and this can have a substantial impact on their educational experience. This in turn puts pressure on students and their families.

If we are to increase access to higher education and ensure Australia benefits from its intellectual talent, we must resolve these issues, ...

... Living costs are also an increasing challenge for many students. Many students have inadequate food and/or housing, which is made worse by increasingly strict eligibility criteria for student support.

Providing adequate educational and financial support for students is crucial to ensuring students, particularly those traditionally excluded from entry, are able to participate and succeed at university, ...

Furthermore in a letter we received on behalf of Julia Gillard in response to our letters it was claimed that these changes were, 'Designed with the view of increasing the higher education participation rate of underrepresented groups including students from rural and regional areas' and that, 'The government package of student support reform is designed to be budget neutral.'

However, this is not the case. The government stands to save about \$1.82 billion over four years which is said to be redirected into other areas of student support. However, even with these extra boosts in the other areas, the government still stands to make a net saving of \$1.4 billion from the changes according to government estimates. To add insult to injury the government has removed all the money from the Commonwealth Scholarships and even though the changes were delayed for a year to help the current gap year students the money was not replaced for my year group. What does that mean for people like me? It means that I have less chance to access scholarships, no access to the positive elements of the new changes and even less hope of the bright educational future I once dreamt of.

In the United Kingdom you are able to access a certain amount of financial assistance from the government that you pay back at zero per cent interest. This system is similar to HECS; however, it is targeted at retaining students by minimising disadvantage. This ensures that people who fall through the cracks in the system can at least access some kind of assistance off their own bat. The maximum anyone can get is close to £8,000 a year with the minimum being about £3½ thousand. This loan system minimises disadvantage and allows students to take responsibility for their own debt. A similar system exists in New Zealand as well; however Australians who earn above the threshold or the taper are on their own.

I have dual citizenship to the UK and Jess has dual citizenship to New Zealand. Honestly, we have considered leaving the country to become students who are supported to be educated. We could actually independently access money to support ourselves through our studies in both of these countries unlike Australia where we feel that the whole system is geared against students, particularly those from regional and rural areas, such as Tasmania, who are from average income homes. It is no secret that rural and regional students are among the most disadvantaged in



education. In fact the government's own Bradley review of 2009 on which these changes are based states:

People from regional and remote parts of Australia remain seriously under-represented in higher education ...

And that:

... provision is to be made.

But where are these provisions for rural and regional students?

According to Prime Minister Rudd, 'Unemployment has always been an issue for Tasmanians.' In tough economic times how are so many students going to be able to meet such strict criteria especially in small towns where employment is hard to come by?

**Mr Peterson**—As was mentioned by Rachael previously, the report of the Vice-Chancellors Council of Australia in 2005 found that working more than 15 hours a week is detrimental to study and working more than 20 hours a week is ruinous. Rachael also mentioned that 25.02 hours of work will have to be undertaken by unsupported students, on top of the standard 48 hours study. Factor in the average time taken—56 hours a week—and this means there is 38.68 hours miscellaneous time. This time is often quickly eaten into by transit, especially for those students who live both far from home and far from school, as well as the running of menial errands, such as cooking, cleaning or using the bathroom. In most cases, there are more than the recommended hours of study undertaken by students, also cutting into this time. The end result of this is greatly diminished health and learning, tired students and, generally, great difficulty in existing away from home. Bear in mind that this is the best case scenario for those who live away from home.

Let us consider a more average example, less than the ideal. Me, for example. My family are low-income earners, owning a small business in a small town. The local university, the University of Tasmania, has two campuses. The one closest to me does not have the classes that I want that can be completed there, all the way through. The most I can get is one of those for one or two years. Available degrees are mostly related to nursing or business. Therefore, if I am to pursue any other line of study then I will have to leave my city, which essentially means that in order to further my education I will be required to totally cut myself off from my entire social support structure, not least of which being the stability of the family home and dinner table.

Whilst it is well known and largely accepted that university students are impoverished, I am instantly assured of this by the simple fact of leaving my home. Even if I were to move to nearby Hobart I would be cut off. I would have to find work in order to support myself, as well as secure accommodation. This is a great difficulty, largely due to the global recession. If I were to move to a larger city such as Melbourne or Sydney with their plethora of universities then the expense would be even greater. I would most likely have to pay more rent for a house further from my school, requiring commuting. All of a sudden, I would be in a similar situation to those who live out in the outer suburbs of large cities; but entirely cut off from all support outside of the government. I would be forced to find a job that will give me 25.02 hours per week of work, which is difficult in this financial climate, in order to be above the Henderson poverty line and, hopefully, pay for my basic needs. This is very optimistic thinking as rent is very expensive in

the bigger cities, so it is not assured that I could live in a house. Pile on top of this the mounting exhaustion of life as a student and school suddenly looks a whole lot less viable.

There is also the chance that I will find employment, which is even more unlikely than me finding cheap rent. As a partner in a small family business I can personally attest to the fact that we cannot afford to employ very many people at all. Add on to this that I have no real work experience and it gets even more difficult to find employment—much less a business willing to employ me for 25.02 hours a week. Unfortunately, I am somewhat of a typical case. There are many other people worse off than me. Due to the reshuffling of funds, those who are more disadvantaged have parents who make slightly more money than mine, pushing them over the threshold. I am from the lower middle class and I am feeling the pinch. The rest of the middle-class is further excluded than I am. In fact, I am in a comparatively good position, but I am still not poor enough to get the maximum benefit. Consider those from a slightly higher socio-economic background than me. They are not only excluded from government benefits; they are most likely to have creditors. The National Welfare Rights Network believes that there is a correlation between youth debt and Centrelink payments. The president of the network has indicated that this is ‘providing little more than pocket money and forcing young people into a spiralling cycle of debt’.

Many students have youth allowance debt at the beginning when they are forced to supplement their income with the meagre government loan of up to \$500. That is a next to useless amount that is not immediately given. Students often struggle to pay off the debt, often having to live on \$16 a day. Labor wondered in its report how it is even possible that young people can survive, pay rent, buy food, books, a bus ticket or buy a dress or suit for an interview. That is not the only issue of youth allowance. Changes are proposed so that scholarships will be paid by the government in the form of the start-up scholarship and the relocation allowance.

Although in theory these are a good addition, in reality they are not. For starters, this reduces the number of scholarships that universities offer. Secondly, these scholarships are being used by the government to make their tables and numbers appear better than they are—as exemplified by Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations fact sheet No. 10, whose main table, table 4, has these scholarships mixed in with the monthly figures in order to make the numbers appear larger than they really are. This is a blatant attempt to gloss over the negative implications of the government’s proposed changes and mislead the public—or perhaps it is simply to avoid bad press. Either way, it is entirely symptomatic of the government’s willingness to sacrifice Australia’s youth for some savings across the board. As Rachael mentioned before, \$1.4 billion is to be saved by this supposedly savings-neutral proposition—and that is at the expense of the future.

**Ms Baikie**—In 2005, Brendan Nelson was lambasted by the Labor Party for declaring that ‘education is a privilege’. Labor claimed that ‘the great mission of the ALP is to improve the lives of ordinary Australians, giving every student the opportunity for an education and ensuring fairness’. This statement rubs the wrong way for many regional students who are now effectively excluded from tertiary education due to the Labor government’s legislation. The letter from Julia Gillard’s staff, which Rachael mentioned earlier, advised us to go to the DEEWR website to find the answers we seek. Obviously we had already checked the DEEWR website many, many times. What the government failed to realise was that directing us to the DEEWR website does not solve our problems; instead, it just confirms that we are unable to get youth allowance—or

that we are only able to get a very small amount—under the proposed changes. The website also contains a disclaimer which advises us to ‘use the information as a guide only and check with Centrelink on 132490 for information about the assistance you may get in your individual circumstances under the proposed changes’. However, when we do chat with Centrelink regarding these changes, they say, ‘We don’t know.’ One officer even apologised to Rachael because these changes have not been passed yet, they are not yet law, and Centrelink have no idea what they are advised to do in this murky area of financial limbo with regard to assistance for our disadvantaged future.

The DEEWR youth allowance estimator advises that, on a family income of \$30,000, I am eligible for approximately \$172.67 a fortnight, which works out to around \$4,489 a year if I am living away from home. This leaves us \$20,000 short of Monash’s estimated \$25,000 yearly cost of living in the metropolitan area—\$20,000! When your parents are already recognised by the government as low-income earners, \$70,000 annually is not a high family income. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics an annual income of between \$80,000 and \$90,000 a year is the Australian average. However, according to the DEEWR website’s family income estimator, with this ‘average’ family income of \$90,000, regardless of geographical location, a student living away from home is not eligible for any financial assistance. According to the Monash University website the estimated cost for a student living away from home is \$25,000.

Currently, I am not eligible for any youth allowance. Under the proposed changes, I will be eligible for a small amount of youth allowance—\$172.67 a fortnight. I have done some calculations to tell me how far this will get me in paying for living expenses. I have calculated that, to meet living expenses of around \$25,000 annually, I will be required to work 26 hours a week to supplement the \$172.67 in youth allowance that I will be eligible for under the proposed changes. I made this calculation on the basis of the national minimum wage, which is what I am realistically able to aim for. Doing 26 hours of work plus full-time study would be detrimental to my study. This is shown by the research of Margaret Vickers and others, which found that working anything over 20 hours a week increases the odds of a student dropping out of tertiary study by 160 to 200 per cent. But let us say I work these 26 hours a week, on top of my full-time studies, earning \$769 a fortnight. Combined with my \$172.67 in youth allowance, it will pay for my rent, groceries, textbooks and perhaps a new jumper in winter—if I am lucky. I will be living just above the Henderson poverty line of \$673.12 a fortnight. But if I become sick or lose my job, I will be in severe trouble. Basically, I will be holding on by a financial thread.

But it gets worse. Under the proposed youth allowance legislation, if I earn over \$440 a fortnight, which I will need to, my youth allowance will be cut off. The thread snaps. I am going to be worse off the more I work, and yet if I do not work I cannot afford to pay my expenses. The irony of this is heartbreaking for regional students. Average income families are cut out of youth allowance payments under both the current system and the proposed changes. This is no education revolution. This is merely shuffling around the numbers of disadvantage. If the government is really serious about increasing regional participation in tertiary education to the levels of metropolitan Australians in success, retention and completion as is outlined in the Bradley report an actual education revolution is required. These proposed changes do nothing for regional Australians; it instead takes away their one chance to achieve independence and does not go anywhere near actually helping young Australians in achieving a tertiary education.

Under the proposed changes I will get \$172.67 a fortnight. I would like the senators to consider for a moment how they would budget their fortnightly expenses on such an amount. What shall I go without: soap, Panadol, food? In reality, of course, \$172.67 a fortnight is a miniscule amount and I will have to work many hours to supplement this allowance. I will be paying the majority of my expenses through my wages. What I need is at least the full amount of \$371.40 a fortnight, which is nowhere near enough as outlined by Rachael earlier. However, at this point, I would take any small amount of assistance, because for me it is the difference between a university education and nothing. This is not a scenario the government should be forcing bright young Australians into. The government needs to recognise the fact that recipients of youth allowance are not just numbers; they are real people with real dreams and real potential.

The government have improved the old system in regard to the income threshold and rate of tapering, but by 'improved' I am referring to the fact they have brought up some entirely unacceptable levels to a slightly less unacceptable level. This is not something to rejoice. Frankly, this is even more of a disappointment. For a government that keeps reminding us how terrible the Howard government's youth allowance requirements were to keep them basically the same in a supposedly budget neutral package is appalling. As I outlined earlier, a tapered amount will require you to work more, which will in turn cut off your youth allowance. This effectively means a tapered amount is hardly better than nothing. There is clearly a need for wide-ranging reforms to address the disadvantage of rural and regional students.

The government's fast-track changes, due to their intrinsic injustice, have been held up in parliamentary debates. This has caused students to be stuck in limbo, unable to plan effectively for next year, with no knowledge of a future system. This is particularly pertinent in regard to the scholarships the government keep reminding us about. These changes are fatally flawed. The numbers tell us this. Regional students tell us this. Our circumstances tell us this. Even Centrelink tell us this. We were hopeful upon the election of a government that promised support for working families and an education revolution that we would be all right. We would be looked after and no longer disadvantaged because of our geographical location and financial needs. How fickle this hope now appears. The government's changes are not revolutionary, nor do they benefit working families. Instead, they cut us out, making education, as Brendan Nelson said four years, 'a privilege' for the few lucky enough to live around the corner from a metropolitan train line or to have \$25,000 spare, which is what is needed to send us to the university we need to go. We will not be happy if these proposed changes go through. We will not be happy in a system that traverses.

The only way that we will be able to afford university is if the government moves past a budget neutral package and begins to realistically invest in education, as any thinking government would do. Our suggested changes would benefit disadvantaged rural and regional students, providing the provisions that the Bradley report suggests. I will outline the changes once again. Full-time students in approved tertiary education who live 80 kilometres or more from the family home should be deemed independent and eligible for a level of financial assistance that provides a reasonable and adequate contribution to their living expenses. This amount should be determined by a realistic assessment of actual living expenses for full-time students who are living away from home. Students should not have to work more than 15 hours a week to supplement this allowance as this has been demonstrated to be detrimental to their educational outcomes. Apprentices who have to travel away from the family home in order to complete compulsory educational programs should be given financial aid to do so. Independence

should be automatically granted to those students over 18 who work on average 20 hours per week for one year. Also, Australia should adopt a similar program to those of the UK and New Zealand whereby student loan systems exist to support students in independently pursuing their study, regardless of the financial status of their parents, and taking responsibility for their accumulated debt.

We would like to thank the Senate committee for their time. We are happy to provide our extensive bibliography regarding the references and statistics used in our presentation, if this would be of any use to senators. We also hope that they have taken our advice on board, both with their head and their heart, to make the right choice regarding the future of our nation. Thank you.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much, Ms Baikie, Ms Wilkinson and Mr Peterson. Ms Baikie, in relation to your initial comments about being in the middle of your exams, we are very acutely aware that you are in the middle of your exams and we do appreciate your taking the time to give evidence today. I understand that the secretariat had a conversation with your teacher about us possibly doing this with you after your exams, but I gather that was not an option and so was not explored any further by her. We certainly would have been happy to try and accommodate a different time.

In terms of not coming to Tasmania, the whole committee was really disappointed that it could not get to Tasmania—neither could it get to the north of WA, nor to the outreaches of South Australia. This was just simply because of the logistics of getting so many senators together within the certain dates before the reporting date in December. So please do not think that we have just bypassed Tasmania; we have just simply not been able to get to all the places which we would have liked to and have face-to-face meetings with the witnesses.

Firstly, I want to thank you for and congratulate you on the amount of detailed work and research you have done on this issue and obviously all the advocacy work you have undertaken over the last few months. It is because of students like you right across the country that this issue has been raised to the level that it has and that there has been so much focus on it. A lot of the credit for that is due to the students themselves.

Just before I pass to my colleagues, I would like to run one concept past you. A number of witnesses have talked about rural and regional access. They talk about the youth allowance measures as a social welfare measure but it does not address the inequity of access for rural and regional students who have to relocate to go to university. They would like to see a separate tertiary access allowance to go to rural and regional students to assist them with those costs. Is that something that you are aware of or that you have considered and, if not, would you perhaps take that on board and come back to the committee at a later date?

**Ms Baikie**—Could I just clarify: are you talking about more provisions for universities in regional locations?

**CHAIR**—Sorry, Ms Baikie. What was that? I could not quite hear you.

**Ms Baikie**—Are you talking about more resources for universities in regional locations?

**CHAIR**—It is about more resources going to students who have to leave a rural and regional location to attend university because there simply is not one in that rural and regional location. This is separate to the youth allowance that currently exists. It was explained to us by a witness that, if you have a family on \$60,000 in the city and a family on \$60,000 out in a region, the students from those families get the same amount of assistance, but that does not take into account the extra costs that you have been talking about, simply because the regional student has to move away. The view is that there should be a separate access allowance for those regional students.

**Ms Wilkinson**—That sounds really good. Obviously, that ties in with our first recommendation about realistic assessments of actual living expenses for people who have to move. Would that be on top of the youth allowance—that is, a separate payment for those students?

**CHAIR**—Yes. The way it has been put to us is that it would be a separate payment.

**Ms Wilkinson**—That sounds like a really good option to explore. Obviously, we would have to see the numbers and things like that before we could comment on how fantastic it was, but it sounds like a really good idea.

**Ms Baikie**—You have to clarify how you would define ‘need to move away’ because there is still a university in Launceston, obviously, and it is a very good university, but there are courses that are not offered here or certain parts of courses that are not offered here so it depends on the definition of need.

**CHAIR**—That is a very good point, and it is one we are working through at the moment because there would have to be exactly that: a definition of need or requirement if you like. We certainly do not expect taxpayers to pay for a student who has a course on their doorstep when they just choose to move away. That is the sort of thing we will be working through. But just as a principle I wanted to run that past you and get your views on it.

**Ms Wilkinson**—As a principle it is a very good idea as far as we are concerned and something that we really do need, because it is very hard for people from rural and regional areas to get there.

**Senator BACK**—Thank you very much for your presentations. You obviously have material that you were reading from. I just wonder if, to assist Hansard, you could make that available to Senator O’Brien’s associate so it can be fed through so we make sure we do not miss any of the value of what you have had to say. I am not sure which of you made the observation about needing \$25,000 per year. Was that in consideration of a student who would have to reside away from home at a university campus?

**Ms Baikie**—The \$25,000-a-year estimate we got from the Monash prospectus. It is mentioned quite a few times on their website as well as the things they send out. We looked at a large majority of universities around the country and we found that Monash is probably the most realistic and extensive because it includes not just purely the rent, which many do, but also food, transport and all the costs that are part of it. It is just a general ballpark figure; it is not a total by any account. But I think it is the most realistic out of the ones we have looked at.

**Senator BACK**—I have done some figures, I must admit, but perhaps I am a little out of touch. I would have thought it was possible to attend university away from home in most circumstances for a figure less than \$25,000 a year, but I would be happy to defer on that. You made the observation about student loans in New Zealand and the UK. I think you said that in the UK they were interest-free loans. Could you comment on that as a prospect for part of the solution for students, particularly those having to live away from home to pursue university studies?

**Ms Wilkinson**—Obviously there would be less need for that should a provision separate to Youth Allowance be made for those who have to move away from home. In terms of our particular situation, we would not so much need to rely on that sort of thing.

**Senator BACK**—But from a funding point of view if it was an alternative as part of the mix then to what extent would students welcome or be satisfied with something like an interest-free loan?

**Ms Wilkinson**—Obviously it is not a perfect world because it is more debt for students to walk away with. But it is our view that if you really want to go to university then you will be willing to take on the responsibility for that debt and you will do anything you can to get there.

**Senator BACK**—On a different topic altogether, can I ask you from your own experience and from your observation of your associates and colleagues, perhaps even in proportion terms, how many year 12 students if the preference was there would want to go straight on to higher studies as opposed to those who would want to take a gap year and as opposed to those who would be satisfied to effectively take two years off before starting university?

**Ms Baikie**—I think the majority of students do want to go straight into university—they do not want to delay their education and their future employment that much longer. Also for regional students even just moving away from their home town to a larger city is enough of an adventure that they do not need that extra gap year. Many people I know are taking a gap year for travel purposes or a combination of work and travel. There is no-one really considering doing a working gap year fully, because the work has gone now and there is not that choice. The 30 hours a week over 18 months is not realistic for anyone. I do not know a single person who is considering that.

**Ms Wilkinson**—Just on that, for most people—especially in our city, where employment is hard to come by, especially for people of our age with, perhaps, fewer qualifications and skills for jobs—it is hard to find that steady 30 hours, and most people have decided, ‘Well, that’s it; we can’t get it.’

**Senator BACK**—Mr Peterson, do you have a response to that from your experience? How many people, given their preferred option, would go straight on to higher studies, how many would have a year off and how many would be satisfied to take two years?

**Mr Peterson**—Nobody is satisfied to take two years. Most people would rather just go straight on to university. There are a couple of people who are better off who are willing to travel or who have relatives in another country, but other than that everyone who wants to go to university just wants to get university over with so they can do their lives.

**Senator BACK**—You may not be familiar with a mechanism that was in vogue many years ago. I certainly went through it. It is what is called a cadetship, where you attend university for the length of the course, paid for by an employer, and at the end of that time you are obliged to work for that employer for the same number of years that you attended university for. It does two things, I guess: it pays your university fees and gives you a living allowance—not necessarily enough to cover all your costs, but sufficient—and it guarantees you a job on graduation. Generally speaking, there was a commitment to work in the long vacation in the workplace of that employer. Is that something you are familiar with, and what would your comment be? For example, a generation ago nearly all teachers went through their teaching qualification and were what is called bonded to the education departments in the respective states. If they had three or four years of their university education paid for, for example, they were required to work that time, and if they broke their bond halfway through then they paid half the money back. Would you have a comment on that? Is that something that would be seen as desirable by your group of people?

**Mr Peterson**—I think I have heard of that before, but we have probably progressed beyond that stage. It sounds as if some sort of adaptation of that could be useful, but for a lot of jobs people want to do, especially in a regional community, there just are not places that would be offering such cadetships. So it depends widely on what you are going to do. There are a lot of more specialised things that are more difficult to get jobs in and that still require you to move away, so provision should be made.

**Ms Baikie**—I know that there are some that exist in regard to doctors. Doctors who have a cadetship have to go to a regional community. I think the problem with cadetships in our current environment is that it is a rapidly changing working environment. Today there are young people entering uni who will end up doing jobs that have not even been invented yet. There is no way of predicting it. I think any means to support students financially is a good idea, but I am not too sure how I would feel being tied to a company for a large number of years—including the course it might be 10 or 15 years—because people our age are not as likely to stay in the same job for their entire career and get the gold watch at the end of it. It is more of a multifaceted, constantly changing, flexible workplace.

**Senator BACK**—It did not take me 15 years to get through veterinary school, I assure you.

**CHAIR**—Senator Back was suggesting that the number of years it took you to get through would be the number that you would be bonded for. He was just clarifying that it did not take him 15 years to do vet.

**Senator BACK**—Most teachers were bonded for, say, three or four years, dentists for five, doctors for six et cetera. But I take your point. Thank you very much for your contributions.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Thanks for your well-researched presentation. What regard have you had in your calculations to the availability of rent assistance?

**Ms Wilkinson**—Rent assistance is quite helpful, but that is only if you can access the money in the first place. In my personal situation, we are not well off. We do not have the estimated \$25,000, \$20,000 or even \$15,000 to send me to university. Because I am not eligible for Youth Allowance rent assistance, it is just a write-off for me. For the people I know who do receive



rent assistance, it is still not much. It is often less than half of their rent. If you are living somewhere like Melbourne, that is not a lot for a student.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—We have had some information about the cost of campus connected residences, both full board and accommodation only, which come in somewhere around \$12,000 to \$15,000, depending on the area. What information have you been able to acquire as to your opportunities in that regard?

**Ms Wilkinson**—I have done a lot of research into on-campus accommodation because that is what I am looking for. Melbourne University, for example, is \$38,000 a year for a fully catered residence, which is quite high end. Monash is more around \$200 a week. It really depends on what school you go to and what type of accommodation—whether it is catered or whether it is self-catered—and to make an estimate purely on rent is not a very good idea when you are planning for university, because in Melbourne transport is very expensive, you have food and there are so many extra expenses that would rival the amount of rent.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—The Townsville campus—and I am not suggesting you are even thinking about going to Townsville—has on-campus accommodation, and the suggestion was that it was better for the student, at least in the early years of their study, to select that, because they have access to all of the pastoral care as well as the community of the university by doing that. What do you think about that?

**Ms Wilkinson**—Yes, on-campus can be good in terms of social factors and so forth, but the point is it is still a very expensive thing and, without the support, most people do drop out. I cannot remember what Jess's stat was. It was about a 160 to 200 per cent dropout rate for people who have to work more than 20 hours a week—and you do need to work that, as our figures show, to earn enough to live on campus.

**Ms Baikie**—While on-campus accommodation is really good, it is definitely far more expensive than share housing and other examples such as that. I would love to live on campus; I think it would be a far better environment for my first year in a new city. I am planning on it, but with youth allowance that option is cut off, because youth allowance does not cover it and the amount of youth allowance I am eligible for goes nowhere near paying for it.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—You gave your example and did not include rent allowance, but you would be eligible for rent allowance as well. That would put you a little bit closer but does not cover the cost.

**Ms Wilkinson**—Jess was saying that it was about \$200 at the university she wanted to go for. I have a real-life example. A very close friend of mine receives Centrelink and receives rent allowance. Her rent is about \$200 a week and she receives \$100. So Jess would still need to find \$100 on top of food, clothes and so forth, yet her youth allowance would still be \$170 a fortnight. So it is still a huge issue.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I understand that it is not covering the gap. That was just to add to the equation, because my understanding is that in campus accommodation or share housing there is eligibility for youth allowance, provided it is a commercial arrangement. Thank you for that. In terms of the promotion of available education in your region and depending on the course you

are thinking of, would it be possible for UTAS to ramp up the courses offered? Would that be an acceptable solution, if not for you then for future students, to save them the need to move away from home to study?

**Ms Wilkinson**—That would be a good thing for the government to consider, given that if UTAS Launceston or anywhere else were able to offer a larger selection of courses there would be less need to give people extra money to relocate and so forth. I myself want to do law, and you can only do the first year of law in Launceston. I am not sure how hard it would be to change that to the full course here, but it would be a very good option.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I refer to the 80-kilometre figure you gave. Personally, I can see some problems with that because it becomes a line on a map and if you are 81 kilometres away you are fine but if you are 79 kilometres away you are not. Also, the current system is a bit more flexible and in some cities you can be 80 kilometres away but be on a public transport system—like Sydney's—that will get you there in less than an hour. Where did you get the 80-kilometre figure from?

**Ms Baikie**—I got the 80-kilometre figure from a rural scholarship that was being offered at Monash University that cited 80 kilometres away as being 'eligible for rural'. While I understand what you are saying about it being a line in the sand, I also agree that the current system has a line in the sand because it is at \$93,549—something along those lines—that it gets completely cut off. There are many lines in the sand in the current legislation and it is almost impossible to get rid of lines in the sand from any sort of legislation regarding financial assistance.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I think the current requirement to be eligible for the living away from home allowance, as I understand it, is if you are more than 90 minutes by public transport away from your tertiary education provider. That is the information that we have been given by the department. So you might want to think about how that would work.

**Ms Wilkinson**—Here in Launceston if we are to go to Hobart we are about a two- to a 2½-hour car ride away.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—A bus ride would be longer—I know that.

**Ms Wilkinson**—There would be a way to think our way around it being so much of a line in the sand. But this is just a general idea from us to encourage the government to consider the distance that we do have to travel.

**Ms Baikie**—Also we are expecting the government to have a look, with their proper policy writers, at these recommendations and to make up their own ideas, because obviously we are not policy writers; we are just law students.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Thank you for that. At this stage it is of course this committee that looks at it all and makes its recommendations to government but I am sure we are happy to pass on any information that you want us to pass on. Thank you, all.

**CHAIR**—Ms Baikie, Ms Wilkinson and Mr Peterson, thank you very much, and I mean that very sincerely on behalf of the committee. You have done an extremely good job of putting your

case and we recognise the real difficulty in doing that in the middle of your exams. Your evidence in appearing as witnesses today has been extremely useful for the committee. We wish you the best of luck in your exams.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I don't think you will need any luck.

**CHAIR**—Yes, we do not think you will need any luck. It was very well done, and thank you.

[1.47 pm]

**McHARDY, Mrs Gail Elizabeth, Executive Officer, Parents Victoria Inc.**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. You have lodged submission No. 533 with us. Do you want to make any alterations or amendments?

**Mrs McHardy**—No.

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

**Mrs McHardy**—Yes. The opening statement would be just to say that we had the opportunity to read some material on the state inquiry in relation to geographical impact. We are hopeful that this Senate inquiry would take into consideration those submissions as well.

**CHAIR**—We certainly will. We will proceed to questions.

**Senator BACK**—The question that comes to me, and I would appreciate your advice on this, is to do with the fact of a student or students having to be away from home to study in relation to students who can study at home—so this is in contrast to them. Do you think this committee should be looking at recommending a process whereby those who have to reside away from home are given an accommodation allowance irrespective of the means test of the parents? In other words, if children have to come to a city campus should everybody who is then in the city start from an equal position having regard for that added cost of having to relocate and find rental accommodation? That is before you start talking about actual youth allowance.

**Mrs McHardy**—Yes, that is correct. We would strongly recommend that that be recommended, the reason for that being that it is being strongly reported to us that changing situations with employment and a whole range of complexities are impacting on families, so that would be a very good starting point additional to any other support payments that are available.

**Senator BACK**—Without getting into actual dollars, could you give some indication as to what you believe would be a fair figure? Obviously, if it were set at the cost of university college accommodation that would be going to put it at a high level. Would you have some thoughts as to how that fee might be structured?

**Mrs McHardy**—When we talked about this we talked about it in the sense that, depending on the facility and the infrastructure as to where these students might be going, it might be the fact that it concerned, as we worded it, alternative low-cost accommodation, because I suppose it would be dependent on the facility where these students may reside. It would be depending on whether it was a residence that was local to the education provider or it was shared accommodation housing or whatever it might be. The other alternative would be a subsidy, so that it would be subsidised, or at least there would be some sort of form of payment. But ideally it would be more factored into the arrangement with the educational provider as to the available housing of that provider. The other part of this is locality. If we do not have accommodation local to the education provider then we have got issues around access to transport and the costs.

**Senator BACK**—Yes, so transport as well. There is a proposal that it be a higher figure in the first year dropping back to a lower figure in the subsequent year. Do you have a comment on that?

**Mrs McHardy**—From our perspective there are always the start-up costs as to the changes particularly for first-year tertiary students, but the other component is the fact that a lot of rural families are sending children down for their secondary education as well so there are additional costs for VCE, VET or VCAL years or whatever they might be.

**Senator BACK**—It is interesting that you have raised that. We were discussing it earlier today in terms of the success of education outcomes at the tertiary level. Do you believe that children who come to city universities, having finished their schooling in the country, are at a disadvantage compared to those who come down to a city school earlier and actually might have had some or all of their secondary education in the city?

**Mrs McHardy**—The variables are quite great from one community to the next. You hear interesting success stories in some areas of Victoria and then you hear otherwise in other areas because of complexities that are connected to their local community, say, up in the Mallee if there have been drought impacted areas and so forth compared maybe to outer eastern areas where there may be differences because of bushfires and so forth. Now we are seeing some other evidence of impacts.

**Senator BACK**—Sure, I can understand that. As for some of the questions that have come up, the last young group who were talking to us by teleconference mentioned the fact that the UK and New Zealand offer low- or zero-interest loans to cover accommodation costs either partially or wholly, but I imagine it would probably be partially. How would the Parents Victoria group react to that sort of concept if it became part of the mix?

**Mrs McHardy**—The only reservation we have in relation to any form of loan assistance programs is that students may have a debt before they begin their employment. We are mindful of the debt that they will have hanging over their head dependent on when they start to get employment. So there are some concerns by families about what that might be. But if we are talking about zero or very low debt that certainly would be very feasible and attractive to most families.

**Senator BACK**—There might be a reasonable debt but the interest on it might be zero. I guess the question I am getting at is this: do you believe there should be an expectation that effectively people have a tertiary education paid for by the taxpayer or supported by the taxpayer to the extent that the person can afford to receive that tertiary education? That is the nub of what my question is.

**Mrs McHardy**—The organisation is 84 years young this year. It is interesting when you read through the history of the organisation about the previous generations, those that went before us, and about the concept of free education and what you are eligible for. Some of our forebears had the opportunity of having free tertiary education. There is concern among the current generations that it be seen as an investment in our future. If we invest in our young people now we are going to reap the benefits in the long run for the social good.

**Senator BACK**—‘We’ being the community, rather than the family?

**Mrs McHardy**—‘We’ being the community.

**Senator BACK**—There is an interesting point in terms of the proportion of children from low socioeconomic families receiving tertiary education by time frames. The point was made here in Victoria by a group of vice-chancellors this morning that, for young ladies, that target has already been met. I do not know what the percentage was. Was it 20 or 25 per cent? They made the point that in Victoria, if you look at the stats, for young women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds now participating in education, those targets are already being met. That suggests quite clearly that they are not being met for young men. As a parents group, do you think this committee should be recommending a greater emphasis on attracting young men to tertiary education, if indeed young females in our community are already seeing the benefits and taking advantage and young men are not?

**Mrs McHardy**—Without knowing all the detail, from our discussions we have determined that our concerns remain around the awareness and promotion of support payments, scholarships, all those things. Irrespective of the gender of the applicant, that is reliant heavily on how it is promoted and the information exchange with students leading up to their senior years and tertiary years. As an organisation, we would be hopeful that it would be equitable between both genders but we would see it as: the more students that go on to do tertiary study, the better. Irrespective of meeting targets, we would like to think that we go beyond the target.

**Senator BACK**—Are postcodes a good process for determining the socioeconomic background of people?

**Mrs McHardy**—No, not from our organisation’s point of view. Even in the areas of education in the department—and at all levels of government, both state and federal—a lot is dependent on that, but the reality is that a lot of our society is very transient. The other part of it is that it is reliant on people telling the information about what their occupations are. We feel that some of those determinants have flaws in them. I can even use myself as an example. My husband has a very low educational level, and works in a reasonable job, and neither of us have tertiary qualifications, but we have two daughters who have gone on to do tertiary education. Again, it is not really good measure of the SFO for us.

**Senator BACK**—What is a preferable measure? Obviously in country areas the postcode becomes less reliable because of the geographic area it covers. What do you think is a better measure?

**Mrs McHardy**—We are getting into sensitive areas. Again, it is about how much information people are willing to share. Our organisation is very strong about making sure that students are supported and they can take their educational opportunities. We believe that, if families are communicated to effectively about how the information is going to help in supporting their child, that is going to be far more affecting about making funding arrangements, be it at the school level, the tertiary level or directly to the family or to the student. Families react to the way things are put in place by government, either state or federal. People always find a way. People are very creative with their accounting because they want their best situation for their family, be that legally or illegally. The reality is that, if the information were shared more openly and

people did not feel threatened by it or have fear—again, I think it is about the communication strategy around all that information sharing about how to support your son or daughter for the future. That is why there is this sort of gap. The other part of this is the currency of the information, how frequently it is updated. People's circumstances change quite regularly these days, probably within a 12-month period, with retrenchment and a whole range of other social impacts.

**Senator BACK**—Finally, regardless of socioeconomic background, from your knowledge in rural and regional areas, what do you think the main drivers are that determine whether a young person in a family ends up going on to tertiary education or not? I know there are a plethora of reasons, but are there any that stand out to you?

**Mrs McHardy**—In particular, we are seeing it well before the tertiary level. We are seeing it actually in the selection of senior secondary subjects and courses. The rising costs of education at school level are already having an impact. Families are getting quite concerned. You have only got to watch the media about what is happening around the costs of schooling et cetera. Again, families are reluctant to give a lot of information about that for fear of reprisal at the local level. It is quite timely, because it was Anti-Poverty Week recently and we have been talking with all these support agencies in relation to supporting people in disadvantaged communities. The conversation I have been having with those agencies is not about the disadvantaged families we would normally see; it is actually about quite normal families who still have students who are disadvantaged. To explain that a bit further, I will try and give some examples. We are talking about giving some additional learning support to students. Often those students are not enrolling, or their parents are not encouraging them to enrol, because either they feel that the information is not coming from the school or the external providers of this education are not getting to the families directly—it is via the school—and there are all these associated costs and all these other fears. There is a whole lot of complexity with those things.

It is quite interesting that when we talk about disadvantaged families and schools. In pockets of Victoria, in particular, I am quite stunned by the lack of understanding about all these impacts and how they will influence a young person in a family to decide about what they choose to do. We had a couple of examples of families approaching us that are probably a bit more assertive and have concerns where they have had changes of circumstances and their children are actually paying for textbooks and tuition—to support their parents to help them to attend a local secondary school. That is just at the local school cost level. We have got lots of little examples of anecdotes of where students are not punished as such but there is indirect reprisal for their being unable to afford to pay fees. This is in public schools. We have got that problem to begin with, so that certainly does influence what students choose to do. A lot of students are actually working part time to support their secondary education prior to even considering their long-term pathway.

**Senator BACK**—I think I heard you say at the beginning of that answer that it goes back to the time prior to them making the decision of the subjects they are going to study in upper secondary.

**Mrs McHardy**—Correct.

**Senator BACK**—So it is not an issue for them towards the end of year 12; it is an issue for them halfway through year 10.

**Mrs McHardy**—Definitely.

**Senator BACK**—So the thought process one way or the other—

**Mrs McHardy**—It is already beginning.

**Senator BACK**—Thank you.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I am interested in your calculations of cost. The person who wrote the submission gave the example of her daughter attending a university and paying \$230 per fortnight in rent. Can you give us any more detail about that? We have had a lot of information about these sorts of costs, and this amount seems fairly low compared to many we have had.

**Mrs McHardy**—Elaine actually provided this example from her own daughter. She has had three students go through tertiary education and two of them living away from home, from Bendigo—one in residence and one external to the educational provider. With the other examples we have had, those calculations really depend on where they choose to live and availability of accommodation. The other part of that is, depending on where those areas are, the economy is at work as far as demand dictates the cost of rent.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—How many students in a house, those sorts of things.

**Mrs McHardy**—That is right. Even my own daughter when she was studying at Ballarat survived up there 12 months before moving her course to another institution in Melbourne, RMIT, because just the travelling to and fro at weekends back to Melbourne. That was shared accommodation and her rent was exceeding \$200.

The other complexity is families that are not together, split families, and how costs are arrived at and supported to that student. So there are all these complexities for the young person that families are having to grapple with.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—What feedback, if any, has your organisation received about the change in the parental income thresholds?

**Mrs McHardy**—It is early stages yet. I think the focus for our organisation particularly has been at the school level. We get occasional emails and so forth but more so probably through the education union we are hearing about impact, particularly with TAFE increases in fees and so forth. But early stages yet, not anything particular other than sort of discussion and phone calls.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—What would your organisation consider a reasonable distance for a student to have to travel to get to an educational institution without having to move away from home?

**Mrs McHardy**—That is an interesting one. Just by way of example, we live in the outer eastern suburbs so we are still considered metropolitan.. My daughter's institute is actually in St Albans but it takes her two hours to get there of a morning and two hours to get home.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—In a car or by public transport?



**Mrs McHardy**—In the car. That is about traffic conditions too.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—What about public transport: is that an option?

**Mrs McHardy**—No, not an option. She would have to take three forms of trains and buses. There is no way, not for an eight o'clock start for a paramedic student. So that is an example of a metro student. For a rural or regional student, again you would have noticed in our submission the other thing about sessional teacher provision stuff in education providers to. The other thing around all that, getting off that travelling, is that some of those choices about where students attend is about course provision and who is doing the provision. You might be guaranteed the course but you are not really sure about the skilled teaching profession in those institutes as well. So there are submissions about where families and students are selecting to send their children to those courses. That is a hard one because the variance, again depending on traffic conditions—

**Senator O'BRIEN**—That is an interesting proposition. We have asked some questions of people about perceptions of the value of courses at regional institutions. It seems that there may be more bias than substance to some of those perceptions. How do we change that?

**Mrs McHardy**—I heard the end of the previous speakers. Students are very articulate in sharing what they feel, I think because a lot of online learning et cetera has created a lot of awareness of what is out there. So now students have the opportunity to compare what is on offer, and the quality of teaching in these learning institutes. It is a really difficult question to answer in the sense of being based on perception, but again awareness is a big thing because there is so much research on the internet, there is a lot of level of understanding. It is about how you measure—

**Senator O'BRIEN**—A lot on the internet should not be believed.

**Mrs McHardy**—No. I understand that. But if you are looking at research papers and if you are looking at some of the course provision, because certain places cannot provide those courses that is the alternative option. Students with ICT learning are taking that option because of cost effectiveness.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I think it is fair enough if a course is not available or if you do not have an option to study locally. But if the course is available locally and you choose not to, what is the responsibility of the taxpayer?

**Mrs McHardy**—From the people that have shared information with us, it is about what can be sustained in the local area and the local infrastructure as well. To be fair about those regional providers, I think they go to a great deal of effort to make sure they have service and delivery for their local constituents. We had an interesting conversation yesterday around the Bendigo region in that they are encouraged to stay in Bendigo but then by the same token they feel obliged to stay there in their regional city but they are not often encouraged to look outside that scope into other providers, because then there are all those other impacts of cost. Again, it puts a lot more pressure back onto the young person about that decision.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I guess there is a lot of pressure on young people to make decisions about a range of things. The course they do is one, and if it is not available locally then if they choose the course they have to move.

**Mrs McHardy**—On the equity issue, from the organisation's point of view, the reality is that we need to be able to give this provision locally as well as by distance, as required. We are trying to support rural and regional areas, but the reality is that young people are moving away—and we do not actually have the stats; we are quite happy to admit that—and the return rate is obviously quite low. That has a future impact on the local community long term.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—In many cases, is that because the work they become qualified for is not where they lived?

**Mrs McHardy**—I think it is human nature. When they move away they build relationships.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—There is that, too.

**Mrs McHardy**—They relocate and that is where they start their families and their futures. They may visit and return in that regard, but they do not return full time to contribute the skills that they have learnt back to their local community—some people do. It is interesting when you have a look at this topic, and of course a lot of it is through research on the internet. Some interesting things have been happening in local rural communities where some people have been really quite creative. There was one up in the Gippsland area, I believe, from memory here, in relation to trying to get people trained in surveying, where the local industry and people trained in that skill worked cooperatively to retain the skilled people in their local area. If those sorts of programs and projects could be supported by government, and these people did not have to go and find external funding to do that, I think that would be very viable.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Who did the surveying training you mentioned?

**Mrs McHardy**—It was people from their own industry who they brought in to do the training locally, rather than people having to go out.

**CHAIR**—I was just looking for the bit in the submission where you say that the federal government must provide equity. I think this is one of the issues that have become very clear. I am not sure if you were in the room when I was saying this before, but coming through the inquiry now is the view that the youth allowance is a social welfare issue, but then there is this separate issue of equity of access, particularly for rural and regional students who are required to move away. It links back into what Senator O'Brien was saying before about whether the taxpayers should fund this if there is not an actual requirement or a need. So we are tussling with this requirement. Do you think that that is indeed the case, that there is a separate case for the issue of access for rural and regional students over and above the youth allowance? It has been put to us by some of the witnesses that there should be a separate tertiary access allowance which targets the increased costs of students having to relocate, particularly from regional areas. Is that something you have given any consideration to and, if not, could you and come back to the committee?

**Mrs McHardy**—From our perspective, it would be determined more case by case, because I think the variance between one family and the next can be so great. We have certainly given consideration to the equity issue in relation to support payments and scholarships. It is about access to information and the equity around that. A parent from the Castlemaine region wrote to us in relation to that, and I believe that letter was submitted as an attachment to our submission. It was about people doing the application for the scholarships and then either getting a scholarship or not and about the eligibility.

In answer to your question, it is very complex because of the variance from family to family. As an organisation, we think it is fair and reasonable that governments would not necessarily means test it but certainly look at it case by case. I know that is a huge task, but it should be based on merit. A lot of families are far more deserving than some people who may have demonstrated on paper and articulated their case quite well and who have then succeeded in getting their scholarship or their support payment. But then there are others who are not equipped with the appropriate resources or tools to express themselves to make that same undertaking and application. So you have that difficulty.

**CHAIR**—As I said earlier this morning, we are becoming more and more aware that it is incredibly complex to try to get through to the solutions that we are going to need to improve access to education. We were up in Townsville yesterday and I think we were all a bit saddened by a bit of evidence given to us. Some of the students who were being spoken about had applied for scholarships but had not told their families because they knew the families could not support them financially and they did not want them to be aware and to worry. So if they did not get the scholarship they simply were not going to be able to go, and the family would never know. I think that struck a chord with all of us. That situation should not be allowed to exist. There should be equity of opportunity for students to go on to further education. Would you care to comment on how we can create greater aspiration in some of our secondary students to go on to tertiary and further education and what we as a committee should look at to improve the ability of those people to do that?

**Mrs McHardy**—I would highly recommend, as we have done to other educational authorities in the past, the *Where to now?* pack that the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority does for year 10 students. It is a booklet that puts together a number of tertiary educational options. There needs to be a bundle of information incorporated into that—not just about those pathways but also about the support payments and all those sorts of things.

**CHAIR**—That is a good point.

**Mrs McHardy**—We believe that students or families would not have to resort to those measures if they were equipped with the information beforehand so that they could make informed choices. We need to focus on those families who cannot access the information, be it via the internet or through their school. There are those who are engaged with their schools and there are the ones who are not, and we need to focus on the ones who are not as well, because a lot of assumptions are made about who has and who has not got the information. I only have to talk to my local friendship group. I am quite astounded at the number of people who do not read the information that is readily available to them. I think it comes back to what you were saying earlier about the responsibility we as families have, but by the same token I would also question

how effectively information is shared. There is probably quite a need for an effective communication strategy around all this.

**CHAIR**—Would you perhaps take it on notice to give some thought to how those communications strategies could be improved? I think this is quite important. It has come out through the inquiry that we need to have the information available for students and their families at an earlier point so that they can look at their pathways quite early on, because a lot of the choices they make, even in year 9, can lead them to a certain pathway for whichever further education they choose.

**Mrs McHardy**—Particularly, too, the students who are choosing not to do senior education, as in their VCE or VCAL, and leave to go to apprenticeships. The other part of that is that they get into an apprenticeship and then decide that it is not their course or direction and they might re-engage with things, but they are already out of the loop. There has to be some place for them to go. Yes, there are all these whizz-bang websites and so forth, but the reality is, as young people will tell you, that a lot of it is word-of-mouth. Again, it is about informing people and getting those opportunities—I like to call them opportunities—where information can be shared with families, whether or not they are engaged with the school.

The other point I really did want to make when we were talking about those students who go to extreme measures to try to work out their future careers was about the students who are living out of home, be it or be it not by choice. There are quite a number of them now.

**CHAIR**—We have had a significant amount of evidence now from organisations that cater for students who have those issues and it has been very worthwhile and very interesting. Thank you very much for being here today. We do appreciate your time.

**Mrs McHardy**—Thank you.

**Proceedings suspended from 2.19 pm to 2.30 pm**

**IRELAND, Mr John Charles, School Focused Youth Service Coordinator, Gippsland Lakes Community Health**

**CHAIR**—Mr Ireland, welcome. Do you have anything to say about the capacity in which you appear today?

**Mr Ireland**—Bruce Hurley, the Chief Executive Officer of Gippsland Lakes Community Health, asked me, as I was in Melbourne anyway, to come and represent him at this hearing.

**CHAIR**—Thank you, Mr Ireland. Gippsland Lakes has lodged a submission with us. I am assuming you do not want to make any alterations or amendments to that.

**Mr Ireland**—I have not been instructed to.

**CHAIR**—That was my assumption.

**Mr Ireland**—I did have a bit of input into that submission. I also had some input into the submission from the Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Network, of which I am the chair as well.

**CHAIR**—Would you like to make some opening remarks before we move to questions?

**Mr Ireland**—I have not really prepared anything.

**CHAIR**—That is okay.

**Mr Ireland**—Just so that you know who I am and what I do, I have been involved in East Gippsland education at both secondary and TAFE level and in youth work for 35 years. For the last 11 years I have been the school focused youth service coordinator, which is a program instituted by the state government. It is about the mental health of 10- to 18-year-olds. As I mentioned a minute ago, I am the chair of the local learning and employment network, and I am also the father of two young people, one currently at Melbourne university and one at Monash University in Clayton. So I am right in the middle of it, really.

**CHAIR**—You have firsthand experience all round.

**Mr Ireland**—Yes.

**Senator BACK**—Where do you reside?

**Mr Ireland**—Out the back of Bairnsdale, at the end of a dirt road.

**Senator BACK**—So your children are both away from home.

**Mr Ireland**—Yes, four hours drive.

**CHAIR**—On the broader issue of health capacity in regional communities, we were up in Townsville yesterday. We were at the university up there and talked to the medical faculty about their view of the linkage between ensuring that there is access to education and further education for students in regional areas, with the view that they are more likely to go back to regional areas, take up those professions and provide those health services to the regions. From your position—obviously you cover all of those areas—would you care to comment on that?

**Mr Ireland**—Certainly it is something that is on our agenda as a health service provider. We battle continually to attract health professionals, from doctors through the allied health area. I know of three or four quite young people, in their 20s, who have qualified in various fields and come back to East Gippsland. They stand out a bit, so I know them. More often than not we are attracting people from overseas rather than Australian-born people. Our list of doctors is a bit like the United Nations. There are people from India, the Middle East, Hong Kong, Scotland and all over the place. It is very difficult. We believe in the strategy of trying to encourage our own young people to look to health as a career choice with a view to attracting them back.

**CHAIR**—On that basis, in your view are there ways that it could be made more accessible and easier for regional students to go on to tertiary education, bearing in mind that they are more likely to come back? From your perspective as a parent with two children at university, and from the health perspective as well, what would you like to see the government do to increase the capacity of regional students to go on to tertiary or give them greater encouragement or support to do so—if there is anything?

**Mr Ireland**—A lot of it comes back to economics, obviously. I fear that the changes to the Youth Allowance will have an impact on kids' ability to go on to university. Already it had an impact before the changes in that more rural and regional young people deferred. Of those who defer, quite a number do not take up their place. They lose the spark or get used to the job that they are in or decide that they might as well continue in it and so enrol in a TAFE course or form a relationship and start a family. There are lots of reasons. Craig Ingram, our state member, and I have had this conversation a few times. He has actually quoted a figure that something like one in three do not complete their degrees. I would hate to be quoted in *Hansard* on that. I just have been, I suppose!

**Senator BACK**—You gave yourself the out; it is all right.

**Mr Ireland**—It is certainly a very high number that drop out. The reasons for that drop-out rate is what we used to call homesickness. It is because they do not have the support that they have in their small country community. It is certainly something we as a family took into consideration with our two children. My daughter, who is much more outgoing, went down and set up a house with a group of friends that she went to school with. My son, who was much more of a loner, we put into the halls of residence so that he would have that support around him. Otherwise, he would have been home by now; I am sure of it. That has been identified as a factor.

Fewer of them aspire to university, fewer of them take up the first option without doing a gap year, fewer of them go back after the gap year, and fewer of them complete their degree. So there are a number of factors there. What the government can do about all of those I do not know. But lot of it does come down to economics. The gap year is certainly an economic issue. You have

probably heard all these figures before. The estimate is \$15,000 to \$20,000 per student, which, if I do the sums quickly, I think is \$150,000—it is a lot of money anyway—over the course of a degree.

**CHAIR**—Just on that, there has been some suggestion from witnesses that there should be a separate tertiary access allowance to target the extra costs for rural and regional students simply because they have to travel away to university compared to metropolitan students who can live at home and in those support networks. If that something you would consider?

**Mr Ireland**—Absolutely, yes. I do not know what the distance should be. It is not for me to determine, but it should probably be something that requires more than an hour or an hour and a half to travel or is outside immediate public transport. It would also have to take into account that if you lived in Morwell, for instance, you could go to Monash Gippsland but if you lived in Bairnsdale Monash Gippsland may as well be Monash Clayton. It is no easier to get to. In fact, almost every campus in the country only serves the towns that is—

**CHAIR**—The immediate town, yes.

**Mr Ireland**—So kids have to have cars. And that is another economic question. The cars can be unreliable, there are restrictions on how many passengers they can have and all those sorts of things which come into it as well. There have been some experiments in Bairnsdale which I have noted have worked a bit. RMIT was running the first and second years, I think—certainly the first year—of their business studies course through the TAFE college in Bairnsdale. So kids could enrol in a tertiary institution and do their first year and then move into their second year down in Melbourne. That was a bit of a transition for some young people to the big, bad city. They are really frightened, quite often, of the city. They are terrified. In fact, lots of adults I know are terrified of the city.

**CHAIR**—Yes!

**Mr Ireland**—They are.

**CHAIR**—It is true. I am only laughing because of my own—

**Mr Ireland**—Even very competent people. My ex-boss, who is one of the most competent, confident women I know, would drive straight into the city, follow the freeway, park under the arts centre and get out and get taxis. She would not drive in the city.

**CHAIR**—It is the whole ‘go left, turn right’ thing.

**Mr Ireland**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—Sorry to be flippant. It is very daunting for students—

**Mr Ireland**—Yes, absolutely.

**CHAIR**—to uproot from a regional community that is very supportive.

**Senator BACK**—I think we need a wider ranging discussion with you because of your background. Can you tell me how big a town or city Bairnsdale is in population?

**Mr Ireland**—It is 15,000 to 20, 000, I think. It serves the whole of East Gippsland. It is the service centre for everywhere in the pointy end of Victoria. Everywhere east of Bairnsdale looks there for their central policing, human services, Centrelink.

**Senator BACK**—But it does not have a campus.

**Mr Ireland**—It has a TAFE college, it does not have a campus of a university there. There are 40,000 people in East Gippsland of whom about 15,000 to 20,000 are in Bairnsdale.

**Senator BACK**—Just remind me where it is in relation to Maffra.

**Mr Ireland**—It is another hour's drive east from Maffra.

**Senator BACK**—Did your children go straight to university from school?

**Mr Ireland**—No, both of them took a gap year.

**Senator BACK**—Why?

**Mr Ireland**—Finance. I have worked in the youth sector for far too long to have any money! It was an unwritten thing. They realised that we were not sitting around at the end of every year saying, 'What will we do with this spare \$20,000?' They knew that if they were relying on us, we might be able to pay the rent but they would not be eating much. Both of them took jobs. I actually think a gap year is not a bad thing as long as the kids do not lose the fire. When I was a country secondary student I went straight to university. I started university broke and I was broke until I left. At least my kids have had a year's work. They had some money in the bank when they started and they qualified by about midway through the year for youth allowance. Now with work over summer, they are managing okay.

**Senator BACK**—Could you explain the changes in the provisions now? From your observation, what is the impact of those?

**Mr Ireland**—I must admit I am not completely across them. I have never seen them all written down at once. I do not know what the new rules are exactly but I believe—and I will stand corrected on any of them—that it is a longer period of time to qualify. Young people have to work for longer hours in a week and the amount of money that is available will vary downwards for most young people. I have also heard Julia Gillard say that more money will be going to more young people. That is why I think I could be wrong, I do not know. Already a 12-month gap is creating a dropout rate, so a longer period, a two-year gap, would probably increase that dropout rate.

**Senator BACK**—You made the observation earlier about the desirability of kids local to an area coming back to it as professionals. Can you give me some idea again from your experience in the health and education sector what sort of incentives could be put in place, be it federal



government, local government, businesses and industries in an area, to get young people today to come back as professionals once educated?

**Mr Ireland**—I guess the obvious one is money. Once again when I was a student they had teaching studentships. I believe there is something about nursing. If you go to remote locations, there is an extra allowance. That sort of remote location allowance might encourage young people to come back. I hate to turn to money as the answer to everything. I think plain old encouragement. People look at things like our health service which employs 250-odd people and think health is doctors and nurses and they do not want to be a doctor or a nurse, but there are 40 different roles. There are all the allied health roles and the allied health assistants, there are the community health people and then there are people like myself in youth work and other people in aged care. There are the men's sheds. There are hundreds of different jobs in health and to actually get that information out is important. That is one of the things that our personnel people are focusing on whenever there is an opportunity to go and wave the flag and say, 'There are all these things that you can do.'

**Senator BACK**—Are young people concerned about the likelihood of employment after they graduate? Or do they not consider that at the time that they kick off their tertiary studies?

**Mr Ireland**—I think that varies. Just looking at my two kids, my son has no idea what he wants to do and my daughter is thinking about it all the time. She keeps changing her mind but she is thinking about how she can turn what she does into a living. Seeing as there is not a lot of living for a concert pianist, she is looking at ways that she can use her music degree in areas other than as a performer.

**Senator BACK**—We were told by a panel of vice-chancellors this morning that the participation rate in tertiary education by young women in Victoria, particularly those from lower socioeconomic areas, is very much higher than it is for young men—in fact, it is already meeting the Commonwealth government targets. Is that your observation from your area?

**Mr Ireland**—I do not have statistics but I am not surprised. In East Gippsland, although we have a lower than state average uptake of university, we have a higher than state average uptake of apprenticeships and traineeships—and a lot of those are young men; a lot of those are traditional trade apprenticeships.

**Senator BACK**—So it could be that some of the young men are going into trades while their sisters are going into university?

**Mr Ireland**—Yes, indeed. In fact, an observation I have made and discussed with a few people is that young people who do not take up their tertiary place but then go and take a TAFE place are displacing the next level down to casual work. Young people who aspire to a TAFE place cannot get one because of that.

**Senator BACK**—So there is a flow-on effect?

**Mr Ireland**—Yes. Everyone drops down. So it is having an effect on those people. But, compensating for our lower university uptake, we have a higher TAFE and apprenticeship uptake.

**Senator BACK**—You said you work in the youth health service. Where is the link between the education system and the youth health side of things in your rural community?

**Mr Ireland**—The School Focused Youth Service was set up 11 years ago as a response to the youth suicide task force, so it is effectively a mental health service. It was tendered out, and approximately one-third of the tenders were taken up by health services, about one-third were taken up by local government and about one-third were taken up by charitable organisations such as the Good Shepherd, the Brophy Foundation and Berry Street. The youth service provision is fairly heavily embedded in the health system right across the state.

**Senator BACK**—To what extent does failure in the education system reflect itself in some of the difficulties you are finding with mental health among young people?

**Mr Ireland**—Mental health is all about self-esteem, success and achieving what you want to achieve. Depression sets in when those things do not happen. So it is very closely linked. There is no question about that.

**Senator BACK**—Rather than saying that the education system is failing, can you identify where it could be better resourced? Our inquiry relates to secondary and tertiary.

**Mr Ireland**—I think the support services in education could certainly have their resource level increased. Those people are there to identify kids who are dropping out, and there is certainly a resource factor there. There is also a resource factor generally in rural communities around generalist youth services. Most of us in rural areas who are involved in youth work have clearly defined targets. My target is 10- to 18-year-old young people at risk of mental health problems because of a certain list of factors. There is a bit of flexibility in that, but that is really what I have to do. Other people deal with other issues—for example, housing. In East Gippsland—and in most rural areas—we do not have a youth worker, we do not have someone who is just there to do stuff for the main mass of young people, because it is funded through local government and our local government is not very well off.

One of my colleagues from the School Focused Youth Service disappeared. He was from the outer suburbs of Melbourne. I bumped into him a while later and I said, ‘What are you doing now?’ He said: ‘I’ve moved on. I’m the team leader of youth services.’ I thought: ‘That means there are at least two of you. That is more than we have got for the shire in East Gippsland.’ You cannot be a team leader if there is only one person, so there must be at least two, or more. We do not have anyone, and never have. That is certainly an area where there is a lack of resources.

The schools are not failing the kids. I do not think that is the issue. I think that kids often need some help in schools, but it is how the system gets those kids from where they are to where they want to be. It is the transitions that are the important bit, I think.

**Senator BACK**—Sure. I guess that feeds into this whole gap thing.

**Mr Ireland**—Also, are you aware of this publication? It is *Deferring a university offer in regional Victoria*.

**Senator BACK**—No.

**Mr Ireland**—It was launched just two weeks ago. It was produced by the Local Learning and Employment Network, the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria and a guy called John Polesel, who is a University of Melbourne researcher, and it is about just those issues of the kids who drop out because they took the gap year and fitted into another niche, with some statistics. I will leave that with you, if you like.

**CHAIR**—If we could have that, that would be great.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Mr Ireland, would you be surprised if I told you that, although we have had many TAFE bodies give evidence before us, none of them to my recollection have suggested that their places are being compressed by those who forgo a university education to go to TAFE?

**Mr Ireland**—I am a bit.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—So where did you hear it?

**Mr Ireland**—I was told that by two or three people in Bairnsdale who were sitting around a table and said, 'Yes, that's true.'

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Okay. One of the things we have noticed in this inquiry is that there is an element of urban myth in the stories that circulate about the educational opportunities arising from, for example, youth allowance changes and the like. The other thing that surprised me in your evidence was that you had a perception that there was less money available to students, that the amount of money available was reducing, when in fact the changes propose to increase the parental income thresholds and reduce the taper rate so that benefits are available, firstly, at a full level at a higher rate and, secondly, perhaps even more importantly, at a reducing rate right out to a much higher parental income threshold.

**Mr Ireland**—Okay, but as I said I have not actually seen what the changes are. I have gathered them in bits and pieces from here and there; I have never actually seen a document that outlines them. That is a comfort, if that happens. I had understood that there—

**Senator O'BRIEN**—I am not saying that there are not criticisms of things within the package, but, in a general sense—

**Mr Ireland**—There will be more—

**Senator O'BRIEN**—that is what the package, on its face, does.

**Mr Ireland**—The majority of young people—or more young people—will be receiving a higher allowance?

**Senator O'BRIEN**—That is what the department have told us—that there will be 60-something thousand more people eligible for a benefit and 30-odd thousand people eligible for a higher benefit. I think those predictions cannot be based on the next year of applications because you cannot possibly know at this time what parental incomes will be of each applicant, but that is the sort of evidence that we have. Also, because of higher thresholds, it may well be that many

students will not need to take a gap year, that they will be eligible for benefit as a dependant rather than needing to establish independence to arrive at a benefit.

**Mr Ireland**—Okay.

**CHAIR**—It is determining the crossover point at which the \$371.40 becomes better than the new youth allowance as the threshold is ramped up. It is really complicated.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—It is.

**CHAIR**—We are still trying to get it clear to us.

**Mr Ireland**—Well, as I said, I have only ever got it in bits and pieces and mainly from the press, which is probably not the most reliable source.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Do you mind letting us in, roughly, on what sort of parental income your two kids would have to look at if they were now applying?

**Mr Ireland**—What our family income is?

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Yes.

**Mr Ireland**—Certainly under \$100,000; probably closer to \$80,000.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Okay. I think it is fair to say that your two children at university would be eligible for a dependant benefit at a reduced rate; would be eligible for a scholarship of \$2,254 per annum on top of that; would, in their first year, have been eligible for \$4,000 living away allowance and, in subsequent years, \$1,000; and would also have been eligible for rental assistance. What should we do to get this information better understood? I understand it is difficult for departments to disseminate information before legislation has been passed, but how should we get this information out there so that kids can be advised what their options are?

**Mr Ireland**—It certainly needs to go out to schools, to the careers advisers in schools or to the VCE coordinators in schools. It certainly needs to go out to agencies so that people who are advising parents are aware of it. It needs to be some level of official document—which, as I said, I have not seen at this stage—that is not the full legislation, at which most people would glaze over and keep walking, but something sort of simple.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Clearly you have not been made aware that there is significant information on the departmental website about this.

**Mr Ireland**—I have not had a reason to look, quite frankly.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Is there someone in your organisation that is focusing on this issue of the impact of youth allowance changes and what the rights of young people in the Gippsland area to youth allowance are?

**Mr Ireland**—Frankly, no. There are two of us in the organisation who deal directly with young people, out of a staff of 240. The other person is in a reconnect program, which is about family reunion and family breakdown. We deal with different aspects, but both of us would at times come up against these issues and need that information. If I could get the information I would certainly have the networks to distribute it and make sure it got out to the agencies and the people who were going to be advising young people. I think that is important.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—At this stage, the information that is available on the website is predicated on the passage of legislation that has not yet passed, so to that extent advice is conditional.

**Mr Ireland**—Yes, of course.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—But it would be good for people to have the information so they could assess their circumstances.

**Mr Ireland**—You have probably guessed by looking at my age that the web is not the first place I would go for information! It does not mean I do not go there; it is not the first place I think of.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Yes, I am seeing more and more that our generation by necessity are becoming more adept at using technology and will become even more so, even though we will lag behind the younger generations.

**Mr Ireland**—Yes, but I guess it is where you go first. With the woman I share an office with, the other youth worker, I know that, if a question comes up, I will reach up to a shelf; she will google it. It is obvious; the two of us are 20 years apart.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—We will have to send you to a re-education campaign! Thank you for that information.

**CHAIR**—Mr Ireland, thank you very much for appearing here today.

**Mr Ireland**—Thank you.

**CHAIR**—We are very grateful that you have given us the time to be here and give us your evidence today. Thank you very much.

**Mr Ireland**—It is a pleasure. I presume that you have seen the two state government documents that have been released this year?

**CHAIR**—The inquiry? Yes, we certainly have.

**Mr Ireland**—I did not think I would bother bringing those along!

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much, Mr Ireland.

[3.04 pm]

**BOYER, Ms Kim, Board Chair, Tasmanian Academy**

*Evidence was taken by teleconference—*

**CHAIR**—Welcome. We have got you appearing first and Mr Barnett appearing shortly. You are the only one on the line at this point, and probably will be for our discussion with you. You have lodged a submission with us. Do you want to make any amendments or alterations to that?

**Ms Boyer**—No amendments. I am happy to expand on the submission.

**CHAIR**—Which is my next point: would you like to make an opening statement before we go to questions?

**Ms Boyer**—I was not going to make a detailed opening statement, but I will make a couple of comments among. For those of you on the committee who are not aware of the changes in Tasmania and also the way in which secondary education is structured here, the Tasmanian education system runs with years 7 to 10 being high school and years 11 and 12 being managed through previously what were known as secondary colleges but have now been split into two areas. One are is applied learning, which is called the polytechnic, and one is based on pathways to universities which is based in the Academy, which I chair.

Years 11 and 12 have seldom been available in rural schools. There are some schools with year 11, and I will talk about some of those later and the role of the Academy in terms of providing academic options for those young people. We are operating in Tasmania in a level of very low retention rates to university and also a low rate of skills per head of population. So the restructure of years 11 and 12 has been designed specifically to provide enriched and different pathways to try to improve that skill level and also improve retention to university.

The reforms are fairly controversial at the moment, as any of you who have read the Tasmanian media would know, but we believe that ultimately they will be enormously important. For those young people in an academic pathway we are already indicating some very positive results in our work with the university. One of the reasons we have made a joint submission with the university is because of the innovative work we are doing through the University of Tasmania College and the Academy together where we have got numbers of young people—about 200 at the moment—who are actually undertaking through their year 12 program their actual university year 1 qualifications. That is particularly important in the regional areas. We pointed out in our submission about the north-west coast having a really very low retention rate and many families never having had experience of university education. For us, having those young people actually getting university skills before they actually leave year 12 means that university becomes less scary for them and perhaps a little bit more on the radar for their families and parents who might not have thought of that initiative before.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much, and thank you for your excellent submission.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Thank you, Ms Boyer. This is Kerry O'Brien.

**Ms Boyer**—Kerry, hi, how are you?

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Good. I will ask you about your horses later.

**Ms Boyer**—I wouldn't actually do that.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Okay. In terms of the problems with families who do not have that in-depth educational experience and in an attempt to build a culture to get better outcomes for their kids, can you describe in more detail how it is intended to go about that?

**Ms Boyer**—This is an enormously long and challenging area within the Tasmanian education system. I do not want to sound like I am making a submission on behalf of the Tasmanian government, because I am not, but the restructuring of year 11 and 12 is only part of the major impetus of improving literacy and numeracy within the schooling system. There is also a zero to four-year-old Launching into Learning program in low socioeconomic areas, which has been also very important. I think we are in our third year of that now. I am certainly no expert on that, but I just think that it is important to see our initiatives as part of a major initiative to raise the level of importance of education within the community.

Going back to your specific question, I think it is for us an issue of working back within communities and trying to provide different sorts of options and ranges of opportunities for young people. I come from a background as a senior health bureaucrat in the state. I was particularly involved in the recruitment of general practitioners to rural areas. Senators on the committee would know that there have been a number of important Commonwealth initiatives under both governments to try to improve the retention and recruitment rates of rural GPs in Australia. Frankly, we see many of the same problems emerging with highly qualified and skilled teachers who can provide the level of support required in rural and regional Australia. Also, there is the old problem of raising the profile of skilled teaching. But it seems to me that we need to seriously consider appropriate incentives to make it worth while for our really high quality teachers to remain in rural and isolated areas.

Next year, we in the academy are launching the start of a major outreach program where academy staff from the major centres will actually go out and work with year 10 and year 11, where year 11 exists at the rural school. We will be working with those teachers and those young people to support them and help up-skill them to be able to teach year 11 subjects at the highest level. We have research in Tasmania showing that if people stay in their home communities at year 11 their chances of success at year 12 when they move to a major centre are much higher. So we are trying to support year 11s at local rural high schools. But this is going to take significant and scarce dollars, because we are obviously going to have teachers who are really doubling up—their numbers will be both working with teachers and with students and it actually will not be able to be a normal teacher/student ratio.

Our CEO and his staff have costed the teaching of a year 11 student at a rural community at being one and a half times the cost of teaching a young person in one of the academy main campuses. I think the university would probably find the same thing in its rural outreach. But, particularly for years 11 and 12, while new technology and flexible learning options are really

important, I believe that you cannot leave young people to learn through flexible learning and ICT facilitated options alone. There has got to be a human content and context in there, particularly if they are successfully going to go on to university, because that is part of smoothing the pathway for those young people and their families who have not had the experience of university before.

**CHAIR**—It has been put to us that there is a place for the online learning and ICT but that it is not a replacement.

**Ms Boyer**—That is quite true. I was involved in health in the very early stages of telehealth initiatives, and that is exactly the same. You need skilled people to support that. It is a facilitator to break down barriers of distance, but it is not a replacement.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—In terms of working with the university, is there a possibility that the university will expand the number of opportunities to stay at home and study? For example, are courses available at the north-west campus or the Launceston campus being expanded?

**Ms Boyer**—You will have to ask Paul Barnett that. For the areas that we are working on with years 11 and 12, our flexible learning indicates that that is really positive when it is supported, but staying at home is not good for years 11 and 12 without the appropriate support of an educational facility and the enrichment that a campus provides. I would have to say that I think nearly half of our flexible learning options are taken up by adults rather than years 11 and 12.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Which means that, if you want young people in north-west Tasmania to get the best benefits, ideally they would have courses available at the campus in Burnie.

**Ms Boyer**—Absolutely. In fact, many of those are, so I think that that campus has expanded enormously. But I think it is important for you to ask Paul Barnett about that in more detail. For our young people—for example, if you look at the west coast or areas like Smithton in the north-west or Scottsdale in the north—we are going to be exploring next year a range of options which would include, for example, a combination of teaching by their normal year 10 teacher with year 11 subjects in their home school. That will be partnered with what you might call summer schools, except they probably will not be in summer, where we bring young people to the main campus—where we have accommodation options—for a week or two to have that on-campus support and for them to become familiar with that before they leave home. For us that is really very important. I have to say that, while it has not been shown yet, I will be very interested to look at the changes in the Youth Allowance system for young people in our campuses in the ensuing years, because the lowering of the threshold for parental income may well help in some of the areas that we are talking about.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Making it more available at higher income levels, yes.

**Ms Boyer**—Yes. Going back to your initial question about the ethos of tertiary study and the low level of that, particularly in rural and regional Tasmania, we see this as a long-term program. The university—UTAS College—and Academy partnership, with those young people being able to study uni-type subjects while they are doing year 11 and 12, certainly demystifies university for a number of those people. The Claremont example that we have used in the submission is also really clear about not only providing support at university but about there being support at



the facility—like the Academy—once people have started university if they are feeling nervous or out of place.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—You talked about additional cost. Is this new system significantly more expensive than what it is replacing?

**Ms Boyer**—If we are going to do the rural stuff properly, it is going to be more expensive. The new system is not more expensive; it will ultimately change eight separate institutions into two state-wide ones with campuses that have the capacity to expand because of their being state-wide. It will break down some of the internal rivalries and the competition that has existed between them in the past. A different source of capacity is needed depending on whether we would have the old system or the new system expanding appropriately into pre-university study in rural Tasmania, which is relatively isolated and has fairly small establishments. Our state-wide capacity will give us more skills to build on to do that, but it is going to be more expensive to do it properly.

**Senator BACK**—You were making the observation that the colleges have now been divided into polytechnics, the applied learning stream and the Academy. Could you give me some idea of the point where the students are identified in one or the other and what the social impact is on that activity?

**Ms Boyer**—Sure. At this stage we are only halfway through the reform, so of the eight campuses that were previously colleges only four have gone across this year. This is our first year. Next year another one will go across, and then in 2011 the remaining three will go across. The Polytechnic has also involved the breaking down and splitting up of TAFE. TAFE has become both the Polytechnic and a Skills Institute. The Skills Institute is responsible primarily for training for those people already in work. But I will focus on the Academy and Polytechnic to answer your question. The young people have been involved in pathway planning from year 8, so part of their decision making at year 10 is on which area they will enrol in. It happens at year 10, so we have enrolments occurring across our campuses now.

That does not mean to say that young people are stuck with that decision. In the same way as university enrolments have people who change faculties or change campuses or change programs within their time, we recognise that young people as they move into year 11 might not always make the right decision. It is also that there are some young people who want to combine some areas of applied learning with academic learning, and that is really important too. I think we would also probably find that in rural areas in particular people will opt for the applied learning first but we would want to see that in many ways where you have got young people with a capacity to move into university or higher education to be able to move back and across that.

Of the four campuses that have gone across, there are polytech and academy students on the same campus. The campuses are in one case geographically a bit divided but they share facilities. They are doing drama together, they share library facilities and they share student support facilities. So there is still a capacity for students to enrol in one but do subjects at the other and also to move across if they have decided that they have taken the wrong pathway.

**Senator BACK**—And are gender differences showing up at the moment between those selecting those two pathways?

**Ms Boyer**—It is interesting. I think this has been a recent history in Tasmania, and I am certainly not an expert on this but I have been advised that the number of young women choosing the academic pathway is higher than that of young guys. But that was so in the colleges. I think that is reflected in university enrolments too. If that continues to show up, and we are very early days yet, we are going to have to do some appropriate work about that. In my very early days I was involved in girls in education and young women moving into non-traditional pathways, and we may have to actually look at that in reverse.

**Senator BACK**—Yes. The Claremont College case study I am interested in also, but I will wait for Mr Barnett. Would it be more appropriate to ask him the questions?

**Ms Boyer**—Yes, it probably would. I can answer some of them because I am certainly aware of the Claremont model and it is one that we may well be looking at using for our rural outreach. Claremont will be one of the colleges which will come across to us in 2011.

**CHAIR**—Ms Boyer, thank you very much for giving us your time this afternoon and for your submission. It has been a very really interesting perspective on what we are doing to get that Tasmanian experience. So thank you very much for your time this afternoon and for the submission.

[3.24 pm]

**BARNETT, Mr Paul, Executive Director, Planning and Development, University of Tasmania**

*Evidence was taken via teleconference—*

**CHAIR**—Welcome. Thank you very much for joining us this afternoon.

**Mr Barnett**—Thank you for allowing me the time.

**CHAIR**—Did you want to make any amendments or alterations to the submission you have lodged?

**Mr Barnett**—No, thank you.

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

**Mr Barnett**—Thank you. I will just make a few brief comments. Clearly from our submission we are indicating that this is a multifaceted issue that requires significant social and cultural change. One of the things that we really want to focus on is the need to support and develop regional communities—some of the solutions to access to higher education that might involve, say, students from the north-west coast in Tasmania all getting places in Hobart do not actually address those issues within the communities because many students who move away from home do not return to those communities. We are really keen to focus on links back into those communities—work placements, practicum placements and whatever else within our programs helps to maintain that connection.

One of the initiatives we outlined in our submission was the approach of allowing students to commence some higher education study while they are still in their home community during their year 12 year of study—potentially being able to do some first year university units in their home community, where they can develop confidence in their ability to do university study. One of the issues is that providing support for students to travel to university does not necessarily give them the confidence to take up those opportunities. So we think it is really important to do work in their home community so they can develop that confidence where they can be studying in a supported environment and where the offerings are not just online but also through cross-sectoral collaboration. I understand that Kim Boyer may have talked to you about the kind of initiatives we are putting in place to support students getting access to university study in their home community.

One of the big issues that we highlighted in our submission as well is the clear lack of family history of higher education in some regional areas. We need to do a lot more to encourage those aspirations. I think our view is that government policy settings are giving a good signal in terms of the direction we need to move in. I just wanted to highlight a couple of qualifications that were picked up in our submission. The higher ed policy settings need to be supported at the

secondary and senior secondary level as well, even going back to private school I think, in terms of developing those longer-term aspirations.

I am also a little concerned about the focus on graduates in the 25- to 34-year-old cohort to the exclusion of others. Again in those regional communities we think it is important that we encourage older people to take on higher education study. There are many people who work in those communities who have industry and business experience that would allow them to gain recognition of prior learning and undertake postgraduate qualifications as well. It is really important to set up those arrangements in the communities so there are mentors and supporters of younger people to undertake higher education.

We are also a little worried about the focus simply on people getting undergraduate qualifications. As we grow the number of undergraduate students we think it is really important to keep a balanced profile as well and maintain reasonable numbers of students doing postgraduate coursework degrees and research higher degrees, particularly in some of the professional areas like teaching. Again our submission makes it clear how important we think ongoing professional development of teachers is and how important teachers can be in raising those aspirations and we hope in our system actually supporting students who do some first-year university study while they are still in year 12. So the relationship we are developing with the Tasmanian academy I think is really important in that regard.

Another quick point I would like to make is that a number of the problems we need to deal with in regional communities are systemic problems anyway, but they have a much greater impact on students from regional communities. One of the issues we raised in our submission is students making a false start in a degree course and needing to change direction. Clearly, that has significantly greater cost implications for students from regional communities. We need to work at fixing those issues systemically in order to provide greater opportunities in regional centres.

The last point I would like to make is the point we make at the end of our submission. We think the government policies are moving in the right direction, but it is important for universities to be able to make longer-term investments in the kinds of initiatives we have talked about, to have long-term planning and to have a long-term budget horizon in relation to the developments because many of the initiatives need significant investment upfront. It may be five years down the track before the universities nationally would actually generate significant income to justify those investments. If we do not have a long-term horizon, that makes those kinds of investments difficult.

**CHAIR**—Thank you, Mr Barnett. Thank you very much for the submission, for which we thank Ms Boyer as well. The points you have raised are interesting. We are starting to get some recurring themes right cross the country. Earlier you touched on the issue of how we support and develop regional communities. You also touched on the issue of how we ensure that aspiration is there and the opportunities are provided for students. That is really important, and it is coming out very clearly.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—My office is in Launceston, so I am a little familiar with the regional provision of university education by UTAS. Is it the intention to expand the number of courses available at regional campuses in the context of developing opportunities, particularly in Northern Tasmania?

**Mr Barnett**—That is certainly the case. I think we have a very strong record in that area. You are probably aware that we established the Cradle Coast campus maybe 10 years ago. Over that period, the number of students on the campus has grown from about 140 full-time students to over 400 full-time students. The other impact of that—and I think it reinforces the point about establishing aspirations in that community—is that, on top of the enrolments at the Cradle Coast campus, we have also virtually doubled the number of students from that region who are now studying at other campuses of the university. In 2000, there were about 1,000 students from that region studying at Launceston or Hobart, but now we have almost 2,000 students in that situation. A number of those students developed their initial confidence through doing their first year at the Cradle Coast campus and then they moved on. I think just our being involved in the community has increased the aspirations in that area.

We are also looking to develop a range of other programs at the Launceston campus. One that I might mention, which is still in the planning stages, is a physiotherapy program. That is important across Tasmania because it is very difficult to recruit physiotherapists and physiotherapist programs are quite expensive to run. We are looking to establish a program in Launceston that builds on the Bachelor of Health Science program that we run there at the moment. With a link to a mainland university, that will allow students to do a postgraduate qualification in physiotherapy.

Normally students would need to go interstate for two years, even to do a masters program. The real attraction of the arrangement we are negotiating is that this particular university will only require the students to attend one 13-week semester to do a range of core units. We will be looking at delivering some of the units ourselves and some online, and all of the practicum placements to support the program will be offered in Tasmania as well. There will be a couple of intensive periods of one or two weeks where students will need to travel interstate. Even though that can be awkward, it is much easier to cope with than moving interstate for two years. This is a good model of the approach we are taking. We are really grateful to our university partner for making those opportunities available to Tasmania.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—When will that be available?

**Mr Barnett**—It is in the final stages of negotiation. We would hope that, if those negotiations proceed effectively, we would be able to announce that after next year. That will involve students doing the Bachelor of Health Science in Launceston and then, at the end of that degree, being able to transfer to a master's at the end of the three-year program. We would hope to commence that from the beginning of next year.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—There are a number of courses available at UTAS that you can commence in your regional campuses, but you need to complete them in Hobart. Is there any intention to increase access to those courses in full in the regional campuses?

**Mr Barnett**—Again, there are a number of programs that are very expensive to run and it is difficult to run them at a range of campuses. In a number of areas we have already moved in that direction. For example, at the Cradle Coast campus, we have started teaching a full four-year Bachelor of Education. We started off teaching the first year there and we have gradually progressed to the point where we now have sufficient students to provide the full program in Burnie, and we are always open to those opportunities. It always comes back to an issue of how

many people engage in those programs and how expensive it is to put those programs on in multiple locations. It is certainly something we are open to. We are increasingly looking at ways of reducing the amount of time people need to spend away from home to do those courses—providing units online and providing more intensive programs to limit the amount of time that people need to spend away from home in doing those degrees.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—My final question is: can you give us some idea of the cost of developing the new technology opportunities, the online courses, podcasts et cetera, that will fit into the courses that you deliver regionally now and in the future?

**Mr Barnett**—It is a bit hard to say. Broadly, it costs us about \$30,000 to put an existing unit online in a form that is attractive to students. That will vary between discipline areas. Some disciplines are much more difficult to do. Broadly it is about \$30,000 to develop a unit initially. That might seem not very expensive, but those units do need to be maintained, so there are ongoing costs in maintaining and updating them. We are progressively putting more and more of our unit offerings online. Again, we are responding to demand by focusing on the units that have got the highest level of demand and getting them online first.

**Senator O'BRIEN**—Thank you. I am hoping that Senator Back will ask some questions about the Claremont program.

**Senator BACK**—Yes, I will. Thank you, Mr Barnett. I was particularly interested in the Claremont College case study and I was hoping you might give us some background to it. According to the notes, it was planned to extend over five years from 2006-10. Could you expand on that? I am very interested to know to what extent at this stage, a year out, it is meeting or has met its objectives. Obviously the stats were very interesting: 49 per cent of year 11s are socially disadvantaged against a state average of 21 per cent, and 12 per cent qualified for university entrance against a state average of close to 50 per cent. I am very interested to know how it has evolved and what the future holds. In particular, can you demonstrate any significant improvements yet?

**Mr Barnett**—Thank you for the question. That has been a really important initiative for us. I think the simple response in terms of its success is that when we started the program there were only four or five students who were moving from Claremont College to study at university. In the current year we have around 60 students. From our point of view, that is a really good result, but we want to build further on that initiative. It originally arose out of discussions between university staff and the principal. We made an agreement to each invest some money to support the program. The essential element of it is that we have a student counsellor at Claremont College who spends one day a week on our campus to meet with and support new students who transfer from Claremont College. Again, it is part of the initiative of providing a much more supportive environment.

The Claremont College initiative is an interesting example of the kind of systematic issues I talked about. They do not necessarily just affect regional communities. Claremont College is probably only 10 or 12 kilometres from the university, but because it is in a relatively low SES area, students have not developed those aspirations. We are finding that the support of the familiar face at the university is also helping in terms of retaining students. If they feel a bit out on a limb in their first semester they have got someone that they know well that they can contact,

and that person has good links back into the university because of the long-term arrangement we have had in place. So it makes it possible to solve any problems that arise relatively quickly.

We have been talking to Claremont about developing some other programs to support greater transfer of students to university. I am not sure if you are aware, but generally the choices of students who come from families without a higher ed background are to move into areas like education, teaching and nursing. It just seems to be a normal approach that that is the next level of attainment that people from those families aspire to. We are talking with Claremont College about developing some programs to support and prepare students for nursing programs. They are quite interested in tailoring some their courses to provide appropriate prerequisite knowledge and confidence in students who might want to go on to nursing. Our School of Nursing is looking at organising regular visits to their simulation laboratories and providing access to academic staff, again to establish the relationship with the students and to encourage them to consider that as a longer term career option.

**Senator BACK**—In terms of those numbers—four students in 2006 and 60 in 2009—can you give us some idea in percentage terms what that four or that 60 represent?

**Mr Barnett**—In percentage from the school itself?

**Senator BACK**—Yes. Four out of how many actually went to UTAS in 2006 and 60 out of how many went in 2009? If you cannot tell me now, perhaps you could take it on notice. I would be very interested to know what that number represents in percentage terms as well.

**Mr Barnett**—I have not got those figures in front of me. The program commenced in 2003, I think, not 2006. That was when we had the four students enrol initially. I can provide you with some details of the proportion of the student population. I would imagine at least 400 students attend that college. I will get the figures and send them through to you.

**Senator BACK**—I would be most appreciative. I will ask you in a minute whether you are going to extend that to other areas of Tasmania which have a similar socioeconomic background. One thing I would be intrigued to know is, when these programs go on, is there any attempt to invite families to the university campus in Hobart to have a look at the campus or participate in any orientation or social activities at Sandy Bay?

**Mr Barnett**—Absolutely. It is a very good point you make and it is something we have recognised for a long time. It picks up the point I made earlier as well—in many of those communities, the parents do not have experience of higher education. We do have sessions specifically for parents, or for parents and student, to come along together and become familiar with the university. We encourage parents to think about studying at university as well. They are the key influencers of student choice. It is one of the reasons I made the point earlier about the need to encourage older people in regional communities and not just have the focus on the 25 to 34 age cohort. We need people of 40-plus years who are interested in gaining university qualifications to participate as well because that will feed back into support within their community.

**Senator BACK**—My other question was whether you are going to extend this now to other colleges in lower socioeconomic areas.

**Mr Barnett**—We are looking at a range of other initiatives. The UTAS college proposal was outlined in our submission. It involves working with all of the year 11 and 12 colleges within the state and looking at providing opportunities for students within those schools and colleges to get a head start on university study—to undertake a university unit in year 12 if they have the capacity and to be supported in that work by the teachers in the schools. It has been a pilot program for a couple of years and we are finding it is turning out to be very successful.

One of the key elements of that program is providing ongoing professional development for the teachers so that the teachers in the colleges can feel confident about supporting first-year university study. The normal approach to providing that kind of opportunity is to provide units online but, where they are not supported and there is not a teacher or some other person available to encourage the student and help sort out problems, that is not quite as successful. We are finding that lots of the college teachers around the state are quite keen to engage in that program. We think that has longer term benefits as well in that students in those regional communities can complete one or more units while they are in year 12. We are even open to the idea that they do a kind of year 13 in the college but do two or three university units in their home base in order to develop confidence.

A lot of this comes back to student confidence. We see, every year, students with quite high entry scores who are still not confident that they can cope with university study and, if a family is going to make a significant investment to send them to Hobart or Launceston or wherever to study, they really need to have the opportunity to develop that confidence. This other initiative is broadening out on what we have been doing at Claremont. It is more difficult to arrange for teachers from other colleges to come on to our campus because, obviously, teachers from schools on, say, the north-west coast cannot easily spend time on our campus. But we are open to all kinds of initiatives along those lines to support students in making that transition.

**Senator BACK**—Thank you very much.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much, Mr Barnett. We really do appreciate the submission. I was saying earlier to Ms Boyer that it is great to get that sort of perspective from Tasmania. It has been very, very useful. We thank you for your time this afternoon.

**Committee adjourned at 3.49 pm**