

YARRA VALLEY EDUCATIONAL PRECINCT COMMITTEE

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Inquiry by the House Standing Committee on Education and Employment

Dear Committee Members

The Yarra Valley Educational Precinct Committee, which is a new body arising from the Outer Eastern Planning Committee, represents the concerns of residents, businesses, schools and community groups of Melbourne's Outer East with regard to the level of provision of higher education and training within our region. These concerns have arisen from the recent announcement of the closure of the Lilydale Campus of Swinburne University of Technology which we believe will exacerbate the already low participation rates in higher education and training in the outer east.

The original intent of the Swinburne legislation (1996) was to establish a tertiary education institution in the outer east to address high level of schools discontinuation and lower levels of higher education participation. This action was also a response to industry growth in the region and the consequent demand for skilled labour across the region. It was also a response to the recorded levels of social disadvantage and higher levels of welfare dependency, in part influenced by issues of geographic isolation.

The Outer Eastern Metropolitan region contains low socio economic pockets, significant population of young Indigenous people, high levels of student disengagement and low levels of tertiary and vocational education. The availability of tertiary and vocational education at Lilydale has acted as a positive incentive for many disadvantaged people to continue their education. The members of the Committee are concerned about the opportunities for those people who have accessed further education at Lilydale to continue their education in 2013/14.

Swinburne's decisions will have significant impacts on their staff, students and wider community. They claim to be working to ensure that both their TAFE and higher education students at Lilydale have continuity in their studies. However, given the geographic location of the community in the Yarra Ranges, the Committee is concerned that the indigenous programs, and other programs such as those for disabled students and those for women wishing to return to the work force, will no longer be easily accessible for this community.

Organisations such as the LLEN have been working to improve outcomes for young people in the Outer East and data over the past five years reflects improvement in engagement, aspiration and achievement. During this time, VET enrolment numbers of young people from Yarra Ranges has risen from 1379 to 1689. Local education provision and opportunities for students to gain entry level local employment supported by further training is critical to the future of the region. In the On-Track Reports over the past 5 years many young people in the Outer East have identified travel distance as a barrier to further education. The presence of the facility at Lilydale was a key factor in improved engagement in the past five years. However, with the closure of the Lilydale Campus and the transfer of Vocational Educational and Training facilities to Wantirna, Croydon or Hawthorne distance for some is now once again an issue and for many travelling to these areas is just not an option. These students are being deprived of the opportunity for further education and training.

Schools in the region, Government, Catholic and Independent, have all relied upon Swinburne at Lilydale for the provision of some VET programs. The closure of these facilities has had a very significant impact upon the availability and cost of these programs, limiting the access of students to these programs.

In 2013 addressing these issues remains a priority across the region. There is a sense of urgency with the imminent closure of the University/TAFE Centre as there will then be no higher education provision located for these students in the outer east.

The first priority is therefore to secure the existing site for educational purposes and then, with the land secured, it is essential that appropriate governance is established to ensure the ongoing provision of these essential services. We recognise that innovative forms of higher education and training will need to be considered including a variety of forms of cooperation between various educational institutions, industry groups and the community.

The Committee has been working very closely with the Yarra Ranges Council and we understand that Box Hill Institute has expressed some interest in making use of this site through the provision of VET Programs, Secondary School programs, Adult Further Education programs and Higher Education university cluster programs involving Deakin University, Latrobe University and Australian Catholic University. These providers will require some support to establish operations on site and for a period of time that will be required to increase enrolments once again to viable numbers. The Council, which still owns part of the land, has developed a plan for mixed use of the site for educational, community and commercial purposes. The Committee has endorsed this plan.

We urgently seek your support and commitment to the retention of the provision of higher education and training at the Swinburne site in Lilydale to enable a smooth transition to ongoing delivery for all levels of higher education and training by 2014.

Yours sincerely

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