

**SENATE RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND  
TRANSPORT AND REFERENCES COMMITTEE**

**SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO RURAL AND  
REGIONAL ACCESS TO SECONDARY AND TERTIARY  
EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES**

**Submitted by:**

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## Background

The Northern Mallee Local Learning and Employment Network is one of 31 LLENs established in Victoria since 2001 to improve the post-compulsory participation of young people in education, training and employment.

The Local Learning and Employment Networks' core role is the creation and development of sustainable relationships, partnerships and the brokering of initiatives between local education providers, industry and the community.

The purpose of these partnerships is to:

- Provide integrated planning which identifies gaps and articulates priorities and strategies including input into the following planning processes:
  - Department of Education and Early Childhood Development regional plans
  - Office of Training and Tertiary Education, TAFE Study Area Group
  - Adult, Community and Further Education regional plans
- Expand pathways to further education, training and employment and coordinate support on offer at the local level for young people, linked to local employment opportunity and skill needs.
- Provide a local platform for implementing, integrating and linking Government initiatives including the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, VET in Schools programs, Youth Training Guarantee, Managed Individual Pathways and the Youth transition Support Workers initiative.
- Provide advice on gaps in the local provision of the Youth Guarantee; and
- Provide advice on state-wide policy and program issues to VSC to improve local service delivery.

The Northern Mallee Local Learning and Employment Network's region includes the Mildura Rural City Council LGA area and the Robinvale Statistical Local Area (from the Swan Hill Rural City Council LGA). NMLLEN is located in the major regional centre of Mildura. The region covered by the NMLLEN is approximately 22,198 sq. kms with a population of 53,800 (ABS 2006) of which 15-19 year olds comprise 7.3%.

Mildura is 550km North West of Melbourne, 400 kms North East of Adelaide and 1080 kms West of Sydney.

Within the NMLLEN region there are six Government Secondary Colleges and three P-12 Schools; one Catholic Secondary School and two Independent P-10 Schools. The region also has the Mildura Campus of La Trobe University ,Sunraysia Institute of TAFE and a number of RTO’s providing post compulsory education offerings.

### Access to University Opportunities

Typically for this region, most Year 12 students who apply and are offered places at university relocate to Melbourne to undertake their studies. However in the last four years, there has been increasing numbers of students who apply for and relocate to Adelaide (SA) to undertake their university studies.

The establishment of the Mildura Campus of La Trobe University in Mildura in 1996 has seen its enrolments grow to 382 students (2009) across eight undergraduate courses with an intake of approximately 110 students into first year programs. This has been particularly attractive for students who do not wish to relocate away from the district. About 65% of the intake each year is VCE/Year 12 students.

The opportunity to undertake higher education locally has improved the region’s participation in higher education by young people but it still lags behind the Victorian average (NMLLEN 39%, Vic. 47.4% *Source: 2007 On Track Data*).

### Trend in Increasing Regional Disadvantage

There is a pattern of rising rates of deferral amongst regional school completers. In 2007, 15.7% of regional Victorian school completers deferred a place at university, two and a half times the rate of deferral found amongst metropolitan students. Moreover, cost related factors and financial barriers are prominent in the reasons given by these young people for deferring a place at university. Furthermore, non-metropolitan deferrers are much more likely to be from low socio-economic status background than deferrers generally across Victoria. In fact 82.8% are in the two lowest quartiles of socio-economic status (*Source: Deferring a University Offer in Regional Victoria, John Polesol, Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Melbourne, Unpublished Report*)

This pattern is also reflected in our region where increasing numbers of students defer their university studies in order to qualify for the Independent Living Allowance. The table below indicates rising deferral rates for schools in the NMLLEN region. By far the most important reason given by these students for their deferral are: “financial reasons/qualify for Independent Living Allowance”.

Deferred (%)						
	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/9
Mildura Senior College	6	7	11	21	20	26
St. Joseph's College	2	4	17	23	22	22
Red Cliffs Secondary College	6	0	14	n.a.	15	25
Robinvale Secondary College	0	0	10	6	0	30
Ouyen Secondary College	n.a.	0	7	0	15	6

*(Source: OnTrack Survey Data)*

These trends are of great concern when considered in the light of the Commonwealth Government's intention to increase the numbers of students with undergraduate qualifications, particularly regional and rural students and those from and low socio-economic backgrounds, as stated in the recent Bradley Review (Review of Higher Education, 2008) which contained the following recommendations:

**Recommendation 2**

*The Australian Government set a national target of at least 40% of 25 to 34 year olds having attained a qualification at Bachelor level or above by 2020.*

**Recommendation 4**

*That the Australian Government set a target that by 2020, 20 per cent of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level are people from low socio-economic status backgrounds.*

One strategy is to increase the range of local opportunities for higher education. La Trobe University's Mildura Campus provides such access in our region but like all regional campuses of Universities, does not receive sufficient recurrent funding to sustain, let alone expand their regional offerings.

The Bradley Review points to the need to addressing this matter through its following recommendation:

**Recommendation 16**

*That, after further consideration of current problems with regional provision, the Australian Government provides an additional \$80 million per year from 2012 in funding for sustainable higher education provision in regional areas to replace the existing regional loading. This should include funding to develop innovative local solutions through a range of flexible and collaborative delivery arrangements in partnership with other providers such as TAFE.*

However, one of the Bradley Review recommendations leading to the development of the proposed Commonwealth Government legislation is the following recommendation:

**Recommendation 5**

*That the Australian Government introduces the following package of reforms to the student income support system: Change to eligibility conditions for independence – Remove the workforce participation criteria for independence of:*

- (a) Working part-time for at least 15 hours per week for at least 2 years; and*
- (b) Earning a specified amount in an 18 month period since leaving school.*

The focus of the Commonwealth Government's proposed legislation is to address issues around the use of student income support funds by city based students living at home who qualify for the Independent Living Allowance (ILA) via the above criteria. However, the removal of this criterion by

the proposed legislation will severely impact on regional and rural students who relocate away from their home to undertake tertiary studies.

Regional and rural students are faced with the additional costs of relocation and obtaining rental accommodation (on campus or off campus) and living costs that urban based students are not. These costs range between \$15,000-\$20,000 per year.

The remaining criteria for qualifying for ILA of two years of 30 hours per week, is totally unrealistic for prospective students to consider. Firstly, Universities do not provide two year deferral of their courses hence the students will be forced into re-applying for their course again with no surety of being made an offer.

Secondly, students are not interested in undertaking a two year gap before commencing their university studies (recent feedback from 30 students in our region currently on their gap year via the *On Track Connect* program confirms this view).

Thirdly, the prospect of obtaining 30 hours employment in rural communities is extremely difficult, almost impossible in the current economic climate and drought affected regions.

It is recognised that the Commonwealth Government has attempted to address the removal of the ILA qualification by introducing a range of other income support and grant measures eg relocation grant. However, these measures, when packaged together do not provide sufficient support when compared to the existing ILA arrangements. The tapering of income support quickly reduces the benefit for many families due to their combined incomes. Many families on modest or middle incomes and with two or three children potentially pursuing tertiary studies away from their home, will not be able to afford such opportunities for their children even with the proposed support.

**It is the view of the NMLLEN Board that if such legislation is enacted, the impact on regional and rural students will be extremely disadvantageous and will result in a decline in the number such students from pursuing higher education studies.**

The NMLLEN Board wishes to draw the Senate Committees' attention to following recommendations from the recent Victorian Government Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education to which the NMLLEN made submission based on the experience of students and families in our region.

*"Furthermore, the Committee views with concern the Australian Government's announcement that from 2010 it is tightening the workforce participation criteria so that only those young people who have worked for a minimum of 30 hours per week for 18 months will be eligible for Youth Allowance under the criteria for independence. While acknowledging that some students from relatively wealthy families have been accessing Youth Allowance via the existing workforce participating routes, the Committee believes the removal of the main workforce participation route will have a disastrous effect on young people in rural and regional areas" (p.178).*

*"The Committee therefore recommend that the Victorian Government advocate to the Australian government that all young people who are required to locate for their studies be eligible to receive Youth Allowance" (p. 179).*

*“The Committee agrees that adequate income support system is fundamental to ensuring that interested and capable individuals have the opportunity to benefit from higher education. It therefore believes that increasing the level of support should be a priority consideration in any further reform of Australian student income support arrangement” (p.181).*

### **NMLLEN Board Recommendations to the Senate Inquiry**

The Northern Mallee Local Learning and Employment Network (NMLLEN) recommends that immediate action is taken to address regional disadvantage for those seeking post compulsory education in locations away from their usual place of residence.

This could be achieved by:

- (a) Redefining the criteria for independence as it relates to the Independent Youth Allowance.
- (b) Adjustment to parental income thresholds to take in to consideration the costs associated with supporting a child living a significant distance away from home in order to study .
- (c) As currently occurs for Apprentices and Trainees, allow young people to obtain income support (including rental assistance) if they are required to travel away from home to study.

Additionally, NMLLEN recommends that this Senate Inquiry

- (a) Ensure that the proposed changes to the Independent Youth Allowance be reframed to give due consideration to ‘rurality’ as a separate equity group.
- (b) Repeals the retrospectivity of these proposed changes to reduce the impact on students who are currently on their gap year in order to qualify for the Independent Living Allowance

**Fiona Harley**  
**Chair**  
**Northern Mallee LLEN Inc.**