

## **Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities**

NE TRACKS Local Learning & Employment Network covers the local government areas of Benalla, Mansfield and Wangaratta in North-East Victoria.

Our work in this area has been informed by the report of the Victorian Parliamentary Committee for Education and Training 'Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education' and by our work directly with young people in education. In addition we are currently involved in a longitudinal study of university deferrers to discover what proportion takes up their deferred study and also to understand the barriers for those who do not. The study tracks regional deferrers from the 2006 Year 12 cohort. The report is titled 'Deferring a University Offer in Regional Victoria, May 2009', with research conducted by Melbourne University and supported by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria.

Key findings from the University Deferment Study include:

- A trend of increasing regional disadvantage is evident in the pattern of rising rates of deferral amongst regional school completers
- Approximately three in 10 (30.1%) do not take up a place at university after one year
- Deferrers from regional areas were less likely to take up a university place than others
- Financial barriers remained prominent among the reasons given by young people for having not taken up a place in education or training
- Students working long hours while at university were more likely to have dropped out of their course.

Whilst we acknowledge that there are many benefits in the proposed Youth Allowance changes, particularly for very low income families, we would like to emphasise three key issues that we believe have not been adequately addressed:

- 1 For many rural and regional students, the costs of living away from home will remain prohibitive. These costs are the primary reason for deferring university as identified by participants in the deferral study. Rural and regional students defer their university placement at more than double the rate of their metropolitan counterparts and reject their university offer at nearly double the rate of metropolitan students. Even if students opt to work 30 hours a week for 18 months, the lack availability of constant work in rural and regional areas is a key issue. In addition, some courses only allow a single year of deferment. Student who are required to work excessive hours to meet their costs of living have reported a negative impact on their wellbeing and on their academic achievement and there is an increased risk of disengagement.

*Additional levels of accommodation support, particularly in on-campus accommodation, would assist in addressing this issue. Consideration should also be given to priority for regional and rural students in on-campus accommodation.*

*Youth Allowance payments should better reflect the real student costs of living.*

- 2 There is an issue of lack of aspiration amongst students and families. Lower (than metropolitan) completion rates and academic achievement levels attest to this, along with feedback from our schools and from young people themselves.

*An increased level of university/school partnerships would assist in addressing this, with a particular focus on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.*

*Consideration of particular strategies to address aspiration issues amongst Indigenous students is required.*

- 3 The introduction of the new Youth Allowance rules includes the failure to grandfather the previous earning rule for the one year. This is quite unfair as many students who have deferred in good faith will now be unable to access the Youth Allowance through their earnings by the change to the rules in the middle of this year.

*Consideration should be given to honoring the expectations of those students who deferred and have worked in 2009 towards achieving Independent Youth Allowance*

Danny O'Donoghue  
Chair