Regional youth migration and the influence of tertiary institutions

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a quantitative study, the objective of which was to gain insight and understanding about migration patterns of young adults as they move through tertiary education. The project comprised focus groups and in-depth interviews, and had a particular focus on the outcomes of regional and metropolitan locational choices. Those who chose to study in the country often wanted to maintain proximity to family and friends. Others faced constrained choices due to financial considerations or their tertiary entrance score not being high enough to get into a Melbourne-based university. This latter reason was also a factor for Melbourne residents who moved to regional universities. A desire for city life and its excitement was a driving factor for those moving to the city to study at university. Many also perceived Melbourne to have superior educational facilities and career opportunities. Moving to the city was viewed as a significant part of the growing up process and attainment of independence. Although many of those at regional universities felt that the quality of education may have been better in the city, they were compensated by smaller class sizes and greater interaction with lecturers. For those who moved to Melbourne, the degree to which their lives became established in their new place of residence often influenced their decision to stay, as did the desire to pursue career objectives. Nevertheless, many indicated they would move back to the country when they were ready to raise a family. Interestingly, a number of students who chose to study at a regional university were ready to make a move to the city as graduates. This was found to be particularly important for those studying nursing where the desire for further study and experience of specialist fields made Melbourne a more attractive option than regional Victoria.

Keywords

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1.   Introduction

1.1   Migration in Victoria – the regional-metropolitan relationship

People are most mobile in their early adult years. This mobility applies to all geographical scales: within a local area or region; to or from Melbourne; interstate or overseas. Within regional Victoria there are distinct patterns of age-specific movement. Young adults have consistent patterns of net migration loss from regional areas as many move to Melbourne for education and employment. However, regional Victoria gains population from Melbourne in older age groups. Figure 1 shows these net effects of age specific migration between regional Victoria and Melbourne.

Figure 1: Net migration between regional Victoria and Melbourne between 2001 and 2006, by age.
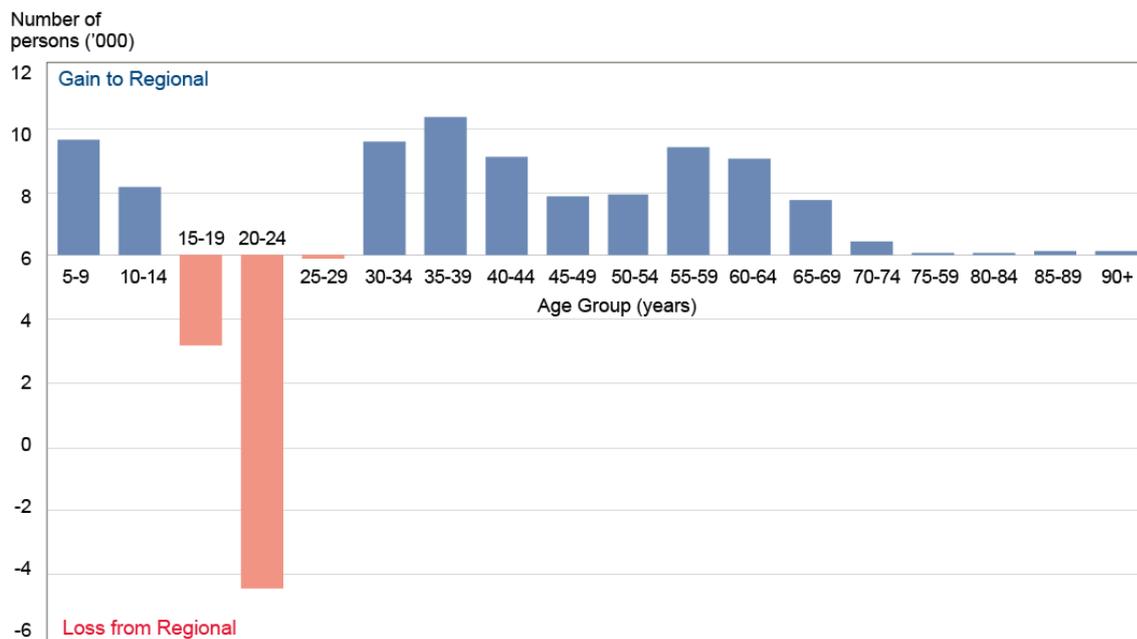
Source: ABS Census 2006

Net migration losses of young adults result in large gaps in this age group (figure 2). Small and medium sized towns in regional Victoria share the youth 'gap seen in rural areas, however the severity of this gap lessens with increasing town size reflecting the broad range of economic and social opportunities in larger centres. Regional cities have much greater youth retention and Melbourne in particular has a high proportion of young adults (table 1). Central Melbourne shows the most extreme pattern with nearly a quarter of its population aged 20 to 24 years. This concentration of young people becomes its own point of attraction for others particularly as social and entertainment activities catering for young adults develop and concentrate in the same location.

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Figure 2: Age structure by settlement size, Victoria 2006
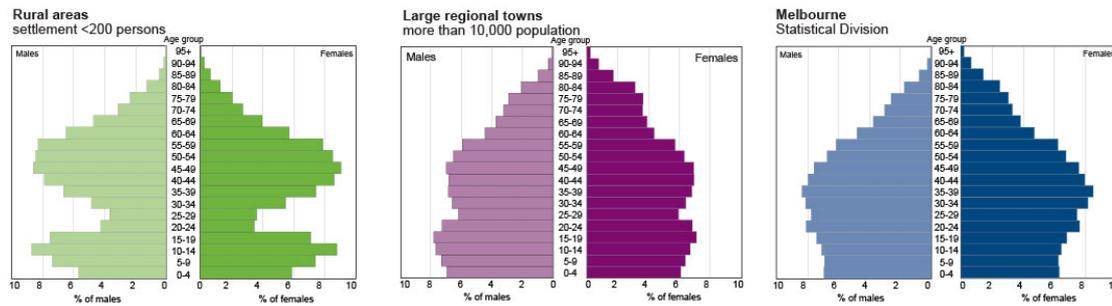
Source: ABS Census 2006, enumerated population

Table 1: Proportion of people in young adult age groups, selected geographical areas, 2006

Area	Proportion of total population (%) aged:		
	15–19	20–24	25–29
Regional Victoria	7.2%	5.7%	5.2%
Melbourne (Statistical Division)	6.6%	7.8%	7.7%
Central Melbourne (City of Melbourne LGA)	8.5%	24.2%	18.4%

Source: ABS Census 2006

1.2 The role of universities in the migration decisions of young adults

For many secondary school students in regional Victoria, the decision to continue studies beyond Year 12 means making a decision about moving to a new location – either to a regional city or to a metropolitan centre like Melbourne. Hence the decision to go to university is often accompanied by a migration decision (Eversole 2001, p.91). While some regional cities will have university campuses (figure 3), the range of courses offered there is usually more limited than that offered at the metropolitan campuses (Hillman and Rothman, 2007, p.3). This is particularly the case for professional degree courses such as medicine, law or engineering.

Figure 3: Location of universities in Victoria
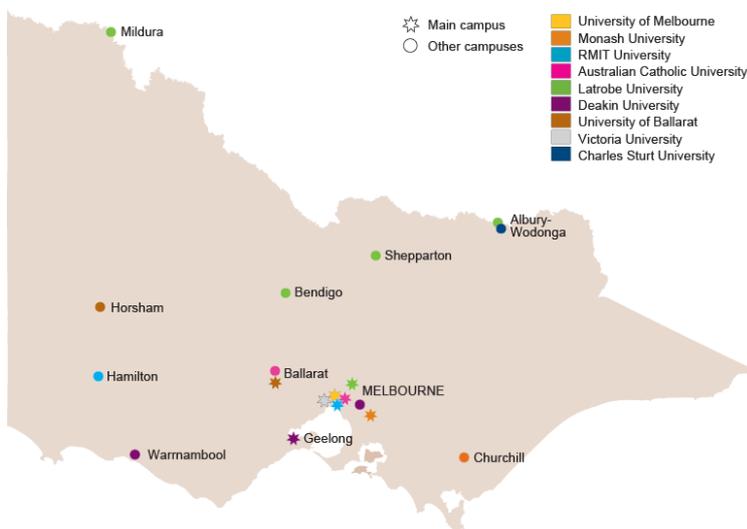
Source: Parliament of Victoria 2009, p. 133

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Even where a suitable course is available locally, many regional students will still take the opportunity to move to Melbourne for social and lifestyle reasons (Eacott and Sonn 2006, p. 199; Hillman and Rothman 2007, p. 3) or for the 'prestige' of a city-based university which may be seen to enhance career prospects. For many it is a 'rite of passage' towards an independent adult life (Monash University 2006, p.1). Although some will return at a later date to a regional area, many will remain in the city to pursue employment after university studies. Using longitudinal data over a seven year period Hillman and Rothman (2007, p. v) found that:

> Although there was 'return migration', the level was not nearly equal to the number of young people who had moved to the cities. Approximately 30 per cent of young people who had relocated from a non-metropolitan area to a major city in the years following secondary school went on to experience a further move back to a non-metropolitan area within the observed time period.

Research undertaken by Monash University at its regional Churchill campus gives some insight into the return-migration process:

> The primary factor that influences young people in deciding to return to the rural communities … is appropriate employment. Other factors include education opportunities for their children; the desire to be closer to family; and the preference for a *rural lifestyle* vs [sic] the pressures of living in a city…
> Monash University 2006, p. 2

There is some evidence that those who study at universities outside urban areas are more likely to stay in regional areas after they graduate (Corcoran *et al* 2009). Nevertheless, there is overall net loss of young people to metropolitan areas through the years of university study and graduate employment (this trend is further discussed in section 5.3 of this paper).

1.3   The role of universities in regional development

The establishment of universities in regional locations has been driven by demographics (large regional cities are big enough to have viable university facilities) as well as regional development objectives. This latter reason has various facets but, put simply, it is based on the idea that universities have flow on effects to the communities in which they are located. Such benefits may be social or economic, tangible (money spent locally) or intangible (enhancing cultural capital and knowledge benefits) (Victorian Government 2006, p.215 Sect 6.45). A significant assumption, in the Australian context, is that regional universities can play a role in retaining and attracting young adults and expanding the local professional community (Victorian Government 2006, p. 211). Nevertheless, this view is not universal with some commentators questioning the extent of economic development engendered by universities:

> *Although there have been some economic spin-offs deriving from the [UNE] University's presence, economic progress is not an inevitable outcome … (Teather & Teather 1999, p. 478)*

Additionally, there is recent work which adds a more complex layer to the factors in regional migration of university graduates (Faggian and McCann, 2006). This work shows that in the British context, the importance of London as an economic hub acts as a major attractor for professionals, including recent graduates. Because Australia is characterised by urban primacy (State capitals have a major share of population and commercial activity), then the interplay of settlement hierarchy can be seen as having an impact on patterns of movement to and from universities.

In particular, the relative size of regional universities compared to Melbourne campuses makes it very difficult for regional campuses to offer a broad range of courses. While some campuses have

particular specialities which can be seen to make them competitive, the complexity of youth migration decisions around social motivations for moving (the 'rite of passage' process) place Melbourne at an advantage in terms of attracting young people.

2. The research study

2.1 Background

The Spatial Analysis and Research (SAR) Branch of DPCD has an ongoing research interest in regional migration. While ABS Census data provides quantitative evidence of migration patterns, it cannot provide the insights into migration behaviours and preferences. For this reason, qualitative research methods were used to gain a deeper understanding of the migration decisions of young adults.

Young adults are the most mobile group in the population, and therefore their migration decisions are significant in determining population outcomes. There is a long standing trend of young adult migration from regional Victoria to Melbourne, usually for the purposes of education, employment or for social reasons. At a sub-regional level there are also patterns of movement from rural areas to regional cities and from one regional centre to another for similar reasons. The locational decisions related to education and employment are significant in terms of spatial outcomes of regional-metropolitan movement.

Gaining insight into migration patterns is significant for both demographic research and regional policy. Understanding the motivations, perceptions and aspirations that lie beneath migration decisions of young adults is fundamental in order to enable the development of informed population projections. A better understanding of the role universities play in influencing young people's migration decisions will be of broader interest to policy makers seeking to enhance the attractiveness of regional areas for investment and population growth.

2.2 Research objectives

The key objective of this research was to gain insight and understanding about migration patterns of young adults as they move through tertiary education, with particular focus on the role of regional and metropolitan locational choices.

More specific research objectives were to:

- Understand the series of decisions involved in the migration process and identify barriers that may prevent migration to particular locations;
- Provide insight into the motivations and aspirations that lie beneath the decision to move;
- Understand the role and impact of educational and career opportunities in both regional Victorian cities and metropolitan cities on migrations patterns;
- Explore the experience of university alumni;
- Determine whether original migration intentions were realised or whether intervening factors affected decisions around selecting metropolitan or regional locations after university studies were completed; and,
- Determine the role of university experience in influencing those subsequent decisions.

2.3   Methodology

This project comprised two stages:

• A series of 11 focus groups with students currently attending university in regional or metropolitan locations
• A series of 30 in-depth interviews with alumni of universities (who had graduated within the past 5 years).

For each stage of the project, three groups of participants were sought:

1. Those who had grown up in regional Victoria and studied in regional Victoria
2. Those who had grown up in regional Victoria and studied in Melbourne, and
3. Those who had grown up in Melbourne and studied in regional Victoria

The sampling process also sought representation from both vocational courses (nursing and primary teaching) and professional courses (law, science and engineering). The research was undertaken between January and June 2009 and was conducted by Sweeney Research.

The following section will outline findings from those students who studied at a regional university (segments 1 and 3 listed above), while section 4 will review the experience of those who studied at a Melbourne-based university (segment 2).

3.   The attraction of attending a regional university

3.1   Growing up in a regional location

Students' experience of growing up in a regional location was overwhelmingly positive, regardless of whether they then chose to stay or leave to attend university. The freedom of country life and the security of close-knit communities were seen as highly positive especially in early childhood years. Such memories were important in forming views about where these young adults might eventually settle down or raise children.

> *"I think seeing a familiar face is a comfort. You know everyone. You'll walk into a shop and you'll know the owner, whereas in Melbourne, it's hard to strike up a conversation."*

Another positive aspect of growing up in the country was the feeling of a more relaxed way of life, and being more in touch with nature.

> *"There isn't much to do as a kid, but you have the space and freedom to explore."*

3.2   Choosing to study at a regional university

For those who chose to study at a regional university, key influences in their choice were:

• *Familiarity with the university*. Students were most inclined to attend the university closest to home, as it was the one they knew most about.

• *Practical experience*. Students considered the amount of contact hours as well as the level of practical experience that their course would entail.

• *Living costs*. Students weighed up potential out of home living costs (in both regional and metropolitan locations) versus commuting to university and remaining at home.

- *Course reputation*. Faculty and course reputations at different universities were a consideration.

- *Atmosphere*. The look and feel of the university was somewhat of a consideration, as was the friendliness of the staff.

Those who had grown up in a regional setting and chose to attend a regional university generally saw no reason to move from their comfortable and familiar hometowns to Melbourne for university. – many have a job, their friends and family are close by, and they are able to live at home, save money and live in a community they are familiar with.

> *"I didn't choose to go here because it was regional; it's more about it being close to home."*

For some, moving away from home was considered very to be daunting.

> *"I chose to stay in regional Vic because my friends and family are here. I guess it's a comfort thing. I was quite young and still living at home."*

Those attending university in their home town felt the switch in their academic pursuits was a natural transition in life. Strong connections to their roots, pressure from family, financial pressures and feeling too young to move away all played a key role in choosing their home town university. This in turn meant their course selection was limited to the options available at their place of study.

Feelings of not being ready for the city also resonated among this group, who perhaps felt a bit too young, or still attached to their parents, or maybe just lacking maturity or a sense of 'worldliness'. The move to another regional centre allowed for the university experience, without the pressures evident in a move to the city.

Whilst to some degree there was an element of not being ready for the city life (or an outright rejection of it), convenience was key to this group. They wanted to get a qualification, without the hassle of being uprooted from their established life in the country.

Many of the respondents from Monash University at Churchill were the first of their family to attend university. For these respondents, there was no pressure regarding which university to attend – just attending a university was enough to make their parents and teachers proud.

Those who made the move from one regional Victorian town to attend university in another expressed that moving regionally gave them the opportunity to gain independence from Mum and Dad and start afresh – they emphasised that they didn't have to go to Melbourne to achieve independence.

Most of the students studying at a regional university acknowledged the prestige placed on Melbourne-based universities, but didn't feel that there was much advantage to be gained from this prestige. Many of them placed more emphasis on the individual course reputation at particular campuses – for example, engineering at Deakin University's Geelong campus was said to be well regarded by students and employers and Monash Churchill was reported as having a good name for nursing. There was a general consensus that for vocational courses, regional campuses and institutions were on par with Melbourne-based universities.

Furthermore, there was a strong belief that regardless of campus, everyone comes out with the same degree at the end of the course. This was particularly evident for the LaTrobe Bendigo and Geelong Deakin campuses, where lectures from the Melbourne campuses are streamed live to the regional campuses.

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For a select few, their chosen degree was specialised and therefore only offered regionally. An example of this is Rural Health Nursing, which is only offered at Monash Churchill.

Quite a few simply had no desire to be in the city. In such cases, the city was often described in negative terms. Melbourne was perceived to be 'busy' 'fast-paced' and 'stressful', and the people were regarded as 'cold' and 'impersonal.' Although Melbourne was recognised as having benefits such as shopping, events and public transport, these elements weren't considered tempting enough to warrant a move to Melbourne.

In contrast, attending a regional university often meant being able to enjoy a friendly, safe and relaxed atmosphere that many considered to be non-intimidating.

> "Being from a small town means you can be frightened of the big smoke. I didn't want to go to Melbourne. All my uni choices were in the country and I wanted to go to Monash Churchill and all my other preferences were in rural areas. I never applied to Melbourne and never felt ready and thought I'd get lost."

While most of the students and alumni expressed positive attitudes to regional universities, their choice had sometimes been determined by constraints of money or entrance score.

The expense of Melbourne living made moving to Melbourne unfeasible and unattainable. Some respondents mentioned having friends who took gap years to save to be able to afford a Melbourne lifestyle, while others spoke about friends who had moved to Melbourne but were forced to move home because of the expense. This issue of university costs is one which has been highlighted as a particular issue for regional students, many of whom have to relocate in order to pursue their education. Thus they face living costs as well as tuition costs. A number of government inquiries have specifically focussed on this issue (Parliament of Victoria 2009, Australian Government 2009).

> "There was some pressure from my parents to stay at home. It was more the financial pressure. They couldn't afford for me to move away whereas I would have liked that experience. I did consider it, but I wasn't eligible for AusStudy at the time. It was easier to stay in Geelong."

A few members of this group also admitted that they didn't achieve the ENTER score required to attend a Melbourne university. Some of these students are using a regional campus as a launching pad to get accepted into a Melbourne campus, as it is commonly perceived that once you are registered with the University, transferring campuses and courses is easy.

The sample of students who had grown up in Melbourne and attended university in a regional location had different motivations than those who had grown up in regional Victoria. In most cases it was not a choice – rather they had no other option if they wanted a university education. These respondents reported that, during their high school years in Melbourne, there had been a great deal of expectation to attend university. Because of this pressure, the majority of respondents felt that they had to attend university, even if it meant moving regionally to do so. An insufficient ENTER score to be accepted into a Melbourne institution was the most common driver to attend a regional campus. For a select few respondents in this segment, their course was only available at regional campuses. For others, they chose a regional campus for a change of scenery and a new lifestyle.

> "I wanted to leave Melbourne. I've always loved the country so this gives me a good excuse to leave."

With the majority of this segment feeling that they had no other option but to attend a regional campus, few factors were considered when selecting a university. However, some had considered the perceived 'countryness' of the town in which the university was located. For them, the degree of

'countryness' was an indicator of how hard they felt it would be for them to adjust to their new setting. In this vein, Geelong was considered to be a happy medium – it is not as large as Melbourne but not as 'country' as Bendigo or Churchill.

3.3   The university experience in a regional location

Regionally-based students were keen to advocate the academic and work-related benefits of attending a regional campus. These benefits were seen to include smaller class sizes and a feeling of being valued. Respondents claimed to have a better student-teacher relationship with more personalised teaching methods and flexibility.

> *"My sister's at Melbourne Uni and she said she will sit next to a different person everyday. It's hard to get to know people. If I was in a room of twenty or forty people I wouldn't talk."*

The experience of a regional university was highlighted as being very much community oriented. No matter what the reason for being there, a real sense of belonging was inherent – whether the course of choice was a first choice or not. This close-knit community feeling was felt through the lecturers too, with a greater sense of being in contact with them, resulting in a greater support network. Close contact with lecturers often translated into good quality work placements.

> *"The advantages of the country are more lecturer-student interface. And probably more understanding from the lecturers because they are so approachable."*

Other benefits to completing a degree regionally were seen to be educational scholarships from regional employers (in return for contracted employment on degree completion) and government incentives for regional employment.

Those who moved from another country area (often smaller) felt they had more of the university experience. Living in halls of residence, there is a sense that the move to another country region was a way of preparing for the next move, without the worry or the added financial pressure of moving to Melbourne. There was still a sense of exploration and excitement about moving to another regional centre. A typical university social life is more apparent in this segment, with an emphasis on the friendship groups that were established.

> *"I've got a lot better social network than my friends who have studied in the city."*

Financially, gaining the experience through a regional town environment was more affordable than moving to the city for university. Nevertheless, for some who had moved to a regional university (either from another regional location or Melbourne), it proved to be expensive. Parents of these students had become the life lines, supporting them financially. There was a sense of pressure for these respondents to succeed academically and make their parents proud to compensate for their financial burden.

A particular strength of the country was the focus of the vocational courses – nursing in particular. The hands on practical experience through specially designed wards and work placement options based around the region allowed for a positive experience, particularly if the desire was to work in the country after university.

While the majority of students in this segment feel that campus location doesn't impact on the quality of the degree itself, they felt that there were some ways in which they were disadvantaged by attending a regional campus. There was acknowledgement that the regional universities are less equipped than their Melbourne alternatives in a number of areas such as:

- fewer resources;
- lower quality of teaching;
- fewer subjects and less course diversity; and,
- lower quality facilities.

While this was considered inevitable due to smaller size, there were particular issues with the way courses were sometimes taught at the regional campuses. For example, there was a strong feeling that city universities (particularly LaTrobe Bundoora and Monash Clayton) saw their regional counterparts as inferior. An example of this was perceived to be the fact that for some subjects, regional students receive their lectures in the form of live streams of lectures taking place in the city campuses.

Although live streamed or pre-recorded lectures confirmed to regional students that they were receiving equivalent course material to city students, it was recognised that the quality of teaching was in no way equal, despite having to pay the same amount per subject as city students. The lectures were proclaimed to be difficult to hear and interaction with lecturers is reportedly impossible. Most students felt that this was highly unfair.

> *"It's hard to hear the lectures and we're still paying $1500 for a subject. They want everyone to have the same standard of education, but it's not the same."*

A similar finding was made by Eversole (2001 p. 94) in her study of rural university students in the south-west region of Western Australia:

> The few students who had experienced lectures delivered via videoconferencing characterised these as 'dreadful' or 'ineffective' due to the poor quality of delivery … and lack of two-way communication.

Cancelling subjects at regional campuses due to lack of resources was revealed to be a frequent occurrence. This resulted in students having to take up subjects that were not relevant to their degrees, or commuting to Melbourne to continue their original subjects. Some students also expressed disappointment as to the number of practical classes that had recently been cancelled.

> *"They cancelled the subject then made us do Pharmacy subjects which have nothing to do with Applied Science degrees."*

> *"They take our classes away and they just think that if we have a problem with it we should transfer to Bundoora."*

It was also revealed that a number of degrees cannot be completed at a regional campus, forcing students to transfer to the city campus to complete their degree. It was suggested that this will become increasingly frequent as universities continue to struggle with resourcing issues.

> *"We do 2 years in Bendigo and one at Bundoora. It's because they don't have the numbers and the staff."*

Evidence presented to the "Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities" confirmed this pattern of "gradual 'drift' of subjects, and ultimately courses, from regional areas to metropolitan campuses when the university has a metropolitan base" (Parliament of Victoria 2006, p. 213 sect. 6.41).

For the group of respondents who had grown up in Melbourne and attended university in regional Victoria, the benefits of attending a regional campus were generally only recognised and acknowledged after the students began attending the university. Such benefits included:

- smaller class sizes
- more placements and hands-on experience
- scholarships and employment opportunities
- peaceful atmosphere

Another reported benefit was the gaining of independence. Quite a few respondents reported feeling genuine excitement once they had made the decision to relocate regionally – even those who were initially reluctant to attend a regional university.

> *"I decided to make a change because I was so dependent so I thought this was a good way to start earning my independence so I decided to stay here."*

The majority of Geelong students were very happy about the lifestyle change they had made, however a number of Bendigo students felt very differently. There was a sense of resentment towards their friends in Melbourne who were still able to live at home whist they attended university. They compared their struggling financial situation to their Melbourne friends, proclaiming that they 'had it easy.' Students living in Bendigo spoke of difficulty in obtaining a part time job to fund their new independent lifestyle. It seems that the influx of new university students to Bendigo each year seeking part time and casual employment creates oversupply. In addition, the city does not have many job opportunities outside of normal trading hours making it difficult for students to find jobs outside their university commitments.

> *"… because restaurants aren't open that late they don't need that many staff. I only got a job after a year because my friend recommended me."*

3.4 Looking back at the regional university experience

Among those alumni interviewed who had studied at a regional university, all subsequently gained jobs in their desired field. Their reflection on the regional university experience and the quality of the courses provided was generally positive – much the same sentiments as those who studied in the city. There was only one instance where the university experience was particularly negative (very small classes combined with part time lecturers resulted in a claim of poor quality education in this instance).

That said, there was still a feeling that throughout their university course, they were missing out on something that the regional universities couldn't offer. Stories about better facilities, higher quality lecturers and an exciting social life infiltrated perceptions of their own university life, and whilst still a positive experience, had the situation been different – no pressure to stay, financially better off, for example – there would be a definite advantage of moving to the city.

> *"There is a lot more to offer in Melbourne. A lot more course wise and lecture wise; there are a lot more resourceful people."*

Professionals in particular reflected on their experience as fine, but there was a general feeling that they were missing out on the experiences and educational benefits they could gain through a city based university.

> *"If you are loaded and have all the resources in the world then go to Melbourne. I think the level or standard of education there and the opportunities for a higher level of education are greater."*

4. The lure of moving to Melbourne for university

4.1 Teenage years in a regional location

For those growing up in a regional location, teenage years often marked a turning point in their views about life in a small town or regional centre. While some participants continued to feel content with country living throughout their teens, there were some who began to get bored or feel somewhat claustrophobic. The comfort of local community life was contrasted with a growing need for exploration and self expression. The larger cities, especially the capital city became attractive to many as they were drawn to its wide range of social activities and economic opportunities.

> *"I think in your teen years, you don't appreciate the quietness, you just want to go to the bigger towns and go to the parties."*

> *"You can be whoever you want to be. I love that about Melbourne."*

Not all young people wanted to make this move, but interestingly some who attended a regional university then moved on to Melbourne for exactly these social and economic advantages – their decision to move was delayed rather than avoided.

Having a lack of things to do in the small Victorian towns tended to become a real issue for some, leading them to look for a way out, and this in turn led them to begin thinking about moving to the city. And, as they progressed through their secondary schooling years, there also became a greater focus on the lack of resources and facilities available to them, especially in regard to such things as careers and entertainment options.

> *"There's not much to do. Definitely as a teenager, after you have got the bus into the mall and gone to the movies, that was it."*

Many commented about the lack of a multi-cultural society in regional areas, when compared to Melbourne, and this was invariably perceived to be a drawback of country life. At the same time, in other studies surrounding this issue, we have sometimes heard complaints by regional dwellers that an increase in the numbers of 'foreigners' can create other unwanted tensions and raise fears about safety because of in-fighting between different nationalities.

4.2 Choosing to study at a Melbourne-based university

While there was no report of extreme pressure on Year 12 students to attend a specific university or campus, there was a definite expectation from teachers and parents that the student should attend a Melbourne university if financial circumstances and academic performance makes this possible.

> *"They don't openly pressure you but you can just feel the pressure."*

Some respondents who grew up in the Geelong region were faced with a constant 'aim higher' mentality. Several (particularly those in professional degrees) were heavily encouraged by teachers and parents to attend a Melbourne campus over the Geelong Deakin campus, and most had friends or family who went to university in Melbourne. Furthermore, Geelong's proximity to Melbourne means that it is possible for students to commute to university, thus removing some of the financial barriers associated with moving to Melbourne.

There was a degree of scepticism surrounding teacher's motives for encouraging students to attend Melbourne campuses, with some respondents suggesting that this comes from a desire to boost the reputation of the school (through claims of the number of students attending Melbourne universities).

For many young people who grew up in in Melbourne, attending university is an expectation. While TAFE and apprenticeships appear to be equally regarded options in regional Victoria, they appear to be of an inferior status to tertiary education in Melbourne. Furthermore, it was acknowledged that it is virtually unheard of to voluntarily choose a regional university.

Students who wanted to move to Melbourne for university were generally more sensitive to the perceptions of 'prestige' surrounding Melbourne-based universities, specifically Melbourne and Monash University. This was particularly the case for those undertaking professional degrees.

> *"It was thought that if you were a high achiever then you'd go to Melbourne."*

There was a genuine belief amongst professional students who had moved to the city from regional Victoria that attending a more prestigious university would increase their opportunities in terms of networking, work experience and placements, and would increase job prospects upon the completion of their degrees. The quality of lecturers was also anticipated to be superior.

> *"If I wasn't doing law then I'd be open to the other unis but with law, you just get told to go to one of the two or you won't make it."*

> *"I was trying to get into law and I put Geelong, and all the career advisors were saying to me, no go to Melbourne to do law and then I got into Law in Melbourne and changed my mind."*

The Melbourne and Monash brands, particularly in the areas of Law and Commerce, are perceived to have the best reputations and thought to be the most attractive to employers. Schools, parents and peers all impact on this assumption, reinforcing the status of these two universities.

Although recognition of the prestige associated with Melbourne-based universities was still evident, students undergoing vocational degrees in Melbourne appeared less caught up in the 'name' of the university, placing more importance on the reputation of the course at a particular university.

It was also acknowledged that Melbourne's prestige and status has opportunistic benefits for their careers as well. This was the case for both professional and vocational students. Although there was the overriding perception that vocational courses are of equal quality regionally and in the city, it was felt that Melbourne provides superior facilities, increased opportunities for work experience and broader career options following course completion.

This perception of Melbourne-based universities being superior to regional universities is a theme evident in some other studies. In an in-depth study of ten young adults who had moved from rural Victoria to Melbourne, Eacott and Sonn found:

> They perceived that within the community there was an unspoken belief which associated staying at home with failure.
>
> *Eacott and Sonn 2006 p.210*

The Victorian Government Inquiry into *Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities* was presented with similar evidence from Monash University Churchill:

> Of the high school students that we spoke to, probably 90% of those continued to leave the rural areas so that they could pursue study opportunities. Many of them did not see the value of studying in the local region even though there was a university just 20 metres across the road.
>
> *Parliament of Victoria 2006 p. 215 sect 6.47*

In many situations, a move to the city was necessary to be able to undertake their chosen course. In particular, it was those studying law (professional) who were most likely to be required to move to the city to undertake the course and this included those who said they would have preferred to stay regionally had their chosen course been offered at a local university.

> *"There were really limited courses, so to do law you had to go down to Melbourne so the choice was really taken out of my hands."*

Some regional campuses only offer the initial years of some degrees and students wishing to finish the degree must complete it at the Melbourne campus. Most students questioned the benefits of relocating to Melbourne mid-way through their degree and preferred the option of moving pre-degree. They predicted that a few years into the degree, friendships would already be established and they would have to re-familiarise themselves with a new campus, all of which would be disruptive to their already established routine.

While prestige and course selection played an important role in the choice to move to Melbourne, there was a strong view among respondents that the excitement of the city provided 'the whole package' – university plus social life. Many viewed Melbourne as an attractive city with a lot more to offer than regional Victoria.

> *"It was more the allure of living in Melbourne than the specific university that got me here."*

4.3   The university experience in Melbourne

The excitement of the city - the endless exploration of bars and nightclubs and the shopping – was what really appealed to many of these respondents. They claim that there is always something for them to do, and that Melbourne's public transport network makes it easy for them to get around the city. Most importantly, Melbourne offers them the chance to broaden their horizons and gain their independence from Mum and Dad. Many had experienced a sense of 'growing out' of their regional hometown.

> *"[Melbourne] was a more exciting place, more options. All sorts of things – university courses, places to live, culture, food restaurants, nightclubs. All those things were new; that was what I wanted at that stage."*

Melbourne University in particular was praised for its location in the heart of the city. This was a major drawcard for this university, and something that allows this group of respondents to fulfil their desire to absorb all Melbourne has to offer. Melbourne University was also recognised as having the

best on-campus atmosphere. University colleges also have reputations which assist students in choosing a university to suit their needs. The University of Melbourne colleges have a reputation for being the most fun, and are therefore a clear winner for most first year undergraduates. RMIT University and ACU- East Melbourne campus would also share this locational advantage.

> *"I don't really care about the uni itself, I just care about the social aspect."*

Many students who made the move to Melbourne felt that living on campus in a university college or hall of residence was a highlight of their Melbourne experience. Living on campus acts as a buffer zone, helping students in the transition from country life to city life. It provides them with a support network of people – all of whom don't know anyone, are of similar age, and are predominately from the country and new to Melbourne. Their fellow college inmates become instant family and instant friends.

> *"College is up there with being one of the greatest times in my life! Moving from the country you meet 200+ people and it alleviates the pressure of finding friends during the first weeks."*

Those without this transitional buffer struggled to settle a little more, despite looking back at the experience as a positive one in terms of gaining independence.

> *"The first four to five months were hard. You have to find your feet. I didn't have my family with me. They were only a phone call away, but until you establish a real friendship group, it's a bit hard."*

For those at college, the lifestyle is not necessarily chosen as a long term option with many students moving out into share houses after their first year of university is complete. Once they start living away from the comfort of the college community, the students really begin to establish their lives in Melbourne.

A close family bond and connection to home town ensured regular visits back to the country for some students. Having a part time job or playing local sport in the country were other reasons for return. This regular connection also made the transition in to city life a more gradual and acceptable process. However, this was only an option for those who had less of a commute whereas those needing to travel long distance to see their families found it more difficult. For others, city activities, parties and nightlife quite often meant going home would be low on the agenda.

> *"I didn't go home often enough. Birthdays are a good reason. I had 21sts and my friends had weddings and I would go back then. I was the oldest and I missed out watching my little brother grow up."*

As social networks in Melbourne became stronger, trips home on the weekends became less frequent. Jobs, social networks, weekend sport and Melbourne's never ending festivals and events meant increasing reasons to stay.

City life was also an expensive option and this meant they always faced a compromise as they juggled the books. Rent and socialising consumed a vast amount of money, something that was in short supply through-out the university days.

> *"Had I exchanged the party lifestyle for living with mum and dad for a few more years, I wouldn't have had such a big HECS debt and not had to shell out rent. You make the choice – be poor but enjoy the lifestyle."*

4.4 Looking back at the university experience in Melbourne

Looking back, the time spent at a city university was an important time in their life. It was an opportunity to grow, to become independent and to mature – many grasped this opportunity with both hands.

Suddenly finding a plethora of opportunities available, the 'culture' of the nightlife, restaurants, cafes, events and concerts was an exciting experience. Further, all of these new experiences were readily available at any time – the 24/7 nature of Melbourne assured this.

> *"It was to be independent, a way to meet new friends, meet people and go out to new places."*

Such findings are supported within the migration literature:

> Despite the obvious pulls of education and career aspirations, other research suggests that there is more going on behind the desertion of rural areas by young people, and that economic factors are only one influence on migration from rural areas. … Other factors, such as a desire for different life experiences or to fulfil one's aspirations, are also at play in the move of many young people away from regional and remote areas
>
> *James et al., cited in Hillman and Rothman 2007, p. 4*

Many of those who had made the move to Melbourne were proud of themselves for having successfully taken up the challenge of moving to the big smoke – a step which has changed the direction of their lives.

Also evident is a feeling of smugness that they are better off for making the move to Melbourne. They viewed their friends back home who are yet to move out as 'naïve' and 'narrow-minded'. They reported that these friends have different priorities now; they are settling down, saving for houses and thinking about marriage. The group reported that although their friends aren't resentful of them, they predict that there are feelings of jealousy towards their lifestyle.

> *"I think moving away makes you grow and develop as a person. Many of my friends still live back home and still seem very naïve because it's such a sheltered environment."*

> *"The ones who stayed down there have sort of stagnated professionally or socially; they haven't gone off and challenged themselves. I've got mates still working at the same Safeway that we worked together at when we were 15."*

Whilst living in the city definitely had its perks, looking back, many still had a craving for the country lifestyle. No matter how close to home this segment felt, there was still that innate desire for the country life. Fresh air and relaxation were in demand throughout the university days, if only on the weekend before returning to the bright lights of Melbourne.

5. Life after university

5.1 Regional living

Most of those who grew up in regional Victoria indicated that once they reach their thirties they will settle down in regional Victoria to raise children of their own. They want their kids to have a similar upbringing to themselves – the freedom, space, a sense of community spirit, a perception of greater safety and the maintaining of innocence they feel they were lucky enough to have. They are not

necessarily committed to living in their original hometowns; rather they are willing to relocate to a new regional area or a regional city.

> "If children were on the agenda, I would put their safety ahead of my choice in lifestyle. I would bring them up in the country. There is a greater sense of community, the schools are really nice. We would see the teachers at the pool or out and I think that's really good for the kids."

A few students who had studied in Melbourne claimed that they would find it very difficult to re-adjust to the country lifestyle, believing that Melbourne's leafy outer-suburbs or a large regional town like Geelong would give them the best of both worlds. Likewise, many from small country towns intended to relocate to a medium-sized or larger country town such as Bendigo or Geelong. This way, the benefits of the country could be appreciated, without the constraints of a very small town.

Students in vocational disciplines are generally more willing to put their lifestyle preference before their career. Overall, they understood that their occupation could take them anywhere in Australia, which means that they can be more flexible in where they choose to reside.

Respondents who had moved from Melbourne to regional Victoria purely to attend university were most likely to move home to Melbourne. However, after experiencing the slower-paced country lifestyle, a few claimed that they would consider moving to outer-Melbourne suburbs as well. A small number who consciously wanted a change of lifestyle said they could envisage spending the rest of their lives in the country – if not in the university town, then in another town of a similar size.

5.2   Living in Melbourne

It is interesting that the factor of 'lifestyle' which is often raised in relation to factors to living in a regional location, is commonly cited as a reason for living and working in Melbourne. Those loving the life and lights of the city could see themselves remaining there in the long term, career options permitting. Suddenly, the country was considered an option further down the track when settling down, having children or retiring – not for young people looking to get the most out of life.

Apart from the city lifestyle, work experience and career opportunities were critical factors leading to people staying in or moving to Melbourne after their university studies. Salary levels provide some compensation for higher living costs and the range and number of available jobs in the city provides both choice and opportunity for graduates.

On the whole, students from regional backgrounds who had undertaken a professional degree are more willing to live in the city than vocational students, despite personal preferences to reside regionally. They recognise that the city is where the majority of job and career opportunities are and they are willing to move where the jobs are. The few that ended up in their home towns (or larger towns close to home) now regard themselves as very fortunate to have got their jobs, because of the relative scarcity of professional positions in regional areas.

> "Career drives location more than location driving career."

> "I'd love to live in the country but job prospects aren't good. But I'd rather live in the country."

Interestingly, regional students who had attended a regional university, often appeared willing to make a move to Melbourne after completion of their undergraduate studies. The possibility of completing further study was a common theme and all were under the impression that Honours, Masters and Doctorate degrees can only be completed in metropolitan universities. Also, some who

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had felt intimidated by the sheer size of Melbourne prior to university, now felt ready to make the move to the city for the benefit of their careers.

> *"It would be silly to just stay here the whole time."*

This is an important finding in that it may explain some of the young adult migration trends in regional Victoria. Some regional university towns gain people in their early adult years but then lose people in their late twenties. This pattern was seen in Ballarat between 2001 and 2006 during which time the centre had a net gain of in-migrants aged 15 to 24 (+1380) but a net loss of those aged 25 to 30 (-190) (DPCD 2009). These data suggest that regional universities can be a 'staging post' for some students rather than a locational end-point.

5.3   Net losses of young adults from regional Victoria

This study was qualitative in nature and thus does not provide a quantitative assessment of net gains or losses of young adults between regional Victoria and Melbourne. However, based on existing knowledge about youth migration flows, the qualitative evidence can highlight some important elements affecting the choices of young people as they make such migration decisions.

Research of graduate destinations undertaken by the University of Ballarat provides data on the employment location of graduates in the April following completion of the degree. A total of 3,009 student records were used covering years between 1998 and 2005. The data reveal a connection between the original location of students and their employment location. Eighty four percent of graduates in the survey had originated from a regional location and 79% of the sample was subsequently employed in a regional location. Sixteen percent originated from a metropolitan location and 24% of the sample was ultimately employed in a metropolitan location. These data therefore show a small overall loss of regional students to metropolitan locations following studies at the University of Ballarat (Western Research Institute 2007, p. 10).

A similar pattern was outlined by the ACU in Ballarat in their evidence to the Victorian Parliamentary *Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education* (ACU 2008, p. 3). Likewise the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth found that, through the process of migration associated with university study, around thirty percent of those originating in regional areas and moving to a major city had returned to a regional location within seven years of the initial move (Hillman and Rothman 2007, p. v).

Perhaps of most interest in the University of Ballarat study was the locational pattern of nursing graduates over time. While most courses showed level or upward trend in regional retention of graduates, the School of Nursing was the only faculty which sustained a statistically significant decline in graduates working regionally between 1998 and 2005 (Western Research Institute 2007, p. 26). This trend is of some concern given the policy aims of improving health skills availability in regional areas.

In recent years, investment has been made in regional health education opportunities. This has occurred in response to regional skills shortages across a range of health professions. While such investment allows greater access to training for regional Victorians, there appears to be a counter-trend affecting the nursing profession which places a premium on post-graduate employment experience and professional development. This is where Melbourne seems to have an advantage simply due to its size.

> *"It's good to see how the bigger hospitals [in Melbourne] run. They have a ward that's as big as the surgical and medical wards combined in Shepparton."*

"Everyone I know that does nursing says to definitely do your placement [in Melbourne] or work there for a year or so, because you see a lot more different kinds of things."

Changing service delivery in areas such as emergency medicine, and the increasing role of technology in medical treatment can place smaller settlements at a disadvantage in terms of facilities and subsequently opportunities for professional development. As one nursing student colourfully described the "advantages" of gaining city experience:

"When the shit really hits the fan [patients] go to Melbourne, so if you want to see the really bad stuff you have to go there."

Absence of specialist wards and staff leads to the seriously unwell patients to be sent to Melbourne, which, in turn, encourages graduates to work in Melbourne for greater experience.

According to participants, those opting not to become a specialised nurse could potentially be at a serious disadvantage in terms of career progression. The ability to study further courses is readily available through the larger metropolitan hospitals and these courses are typically offered through Melbourne-based universities or through the hospital's own program. These extra qualifications mean that nurses can become specialised and so work in particular wards and increase their career options towards managerial and educational positions.

"You can't do any extra courses in Shepparton – there's nothing available."

"Further education was a big thing. Having the opportunity to keep learning. Maybe it was going to the hospital in Melbourne and doing the courses through the hospitals and them encouraging you. I think in Melbourne there are a lot more opportunities to further your study."

The smaller regional hospitals rarely offer these courses; typically they don't have the necessary specialised wards for specialised nurses to work in.

For both vocational and professional students who studied in Melbourne, contentedness with their metropolitan lifestyle was another factor influencing most of this segment to remain in Melbourne, despite earlier intentions. Many felt that after years of university in Melbourne, they were settled – they had their friendship networks, many had partners and were familiar with their surroundings.

"The longer I stay, the harder it is to move."

Despite employment opportunities and the degree to which their lives had become established, post university intentions were sometimes interrupted by other factors, particularly relationships. It was frequently mentioned that a partner became a reason to relocate or stay irrespective of original post-university intentions. Some even admitted they had to give up dreams for the sake of their relationships, and others were glad for the influence.

"My fiancée was in Melbourne and didn't want to move to Wangaratta so I moved to Melbourne. For him it was going to be too big a sacrifice."

"If it weren't for my husband and his job I'd be moving to the country."

"I never thought I would have ended up with a surfie living on a beach, but that's where I am. And it's great. I am surprised it took me to be swept off my feet to change."

"The only reason I left Melbourne was because my now husband wanted to live with me, but he said he couldn't live in the city."

While retirement is a very long way off for those in the study, there was unanimous agreement among alumni who had grown up in the country that retirement is definitely not the time to be living in the city. Almost all pictured an idyllic seaside lifestyle – possibly interstate or, within Victoria, the coastal towns of Lorne, Anglesea, and Torquay appear to be popular – far enough away from the hustle and bustle yet still within easy reach of the medical facilities of Geelong or Melbourne. This tends to support the perception of many born and raised in a regional area that Melbourne has many advantages – but equally only for a certain stage in life and that there is a time when they need to move elsewhere. Surprisingly, only a handful intend to retire in their regional hometown.

6. Discussion

Victorian government policy has expressed the aim of attracting people to regional Victoria:

The Victorian Government recognises the importance of growing Provincial Victoria. .. such growth will:

- contribute to a more balanced distribution of population growth across Victoria, thus easing population pressures on Melbourne;
- stimulate additional regional economic growth, investment and employment opportunities;
- address regional skills shortages;
- develop the critical mass required to maintain and improve services in regional areas; and,
- result in more diverse and vibrant local communities.

Victorian Government 2004, p. 27

Provincial Victoria … faces the challenge of maintaining productivity levels with an ageing workforce. The … Government will take new action to attract skilled younger workers to regional areas by investing … in a *Make Your Career Happen in Provincial Victoria* campaign. The campaign will aim to attract young professionals and their families to provincial Victoria, as well as making secondary and tertiary students and graduates aware of study, employment and lifestyle opportunities in provincial Victoria.

Victorian Government 2005, p. 38

The research study, in both the student focus groups and alumni interviews, took the opportunity to ask participants whether there were any opportunities to increase retention and attraction of young people in regional Victoria. Some of their responses reflect the types of initiatives that government is already undertaking which perhaps indicates the need for wider promotion of existing programs and opportunities.

In summary the responses included:

- increase regional job opportunities for professionals by encouraging corporations, departments and agencies to re-locate or establish offices in regional areas (e.g. Mars in Ballarat, State Revenue Office in Ballarat, the Transport Accident Commission in Geelong);
- provide employer-funded scholarships and government grants for working regionally;
- require Melbourne-based students to undergo placements in regional and rural Victoria to give them a taste for different lifestyles and career prospects;
- provide funding to enable regional universities to teach courses from beginning to end;
- provide bonuses and grants to entice people to work regionally;
- sell the benefits of the country lifestyle, especially lower living costs, cleaner environment and better work-life balance;

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- make improvements and additions to specialist hospitals in regional areas in order to encourage specialised staff to work there; and,
- make greater use of regional firms in large engineering projects.

Other suggestions reflect the inherent difficulties in trying to recreate the attractions of Melbourne in a regional setting, for example offering higher salaries and a greater range of entertainment and social opportunities:

- increase regional employment opportunities;
- increase the size of regional universities;
- increase the number of courses offered by regional campuses;
- offer a greater range of post graduate courses at regional universities;
- broaden the specialised streams within regional university courses to prevent too many graduates with the same degree in one location (which then creates the need for many to leave the area);
- create university 'hubs' in regional Victoria; and,
- upgrade entertainment facilities and increase the number of events in regional Victoria

While some suggestions were perhaps unrealistic:

> *"I wouldn't care if I went to the ACU in Ballarat, as long as it had the social life that Melbourne does."*

Other respondents saw the inherent problem of trying to recreate Melbourne in the country:

> *"It's a catch 22, because to have more opportunities in the country, more unis and more shops, they need more people."*

Furthermore, many of the features of smaller sized cities (community feel; quiet and peaceful) act as both pull and push factors. Locational choice based on 'lifestyle' means different things to different people and can change over time and at different stages of life.

Ultimately, this research aimed to highlight such personal perspectives in understanding migration decisions. The sum of all these individual decisions still leaves regional Victoria with a net loss of young people. It is therefore important for policy makers to better understand whether regional universities can:

- help to *retain* young adults in regional Victoria
- *attract* young adults to regional Victoria

Findings from this research study indicate that regional universities can provide an important choice for regional students, particularly if they are located in a university town. Avoiding the expense of leaving home provides the same opportunity that most Melbourne-based students have. Nevertheless, the settlement geography of Victoria makes this option of limited value to those living beyond commuting distance of regional centres. Furthermore, students wanting to undertake specific studies may need to relocate to another regional centre, if not Melbourne.

Importantly, the decision to relocate is more than just a question of logistics. The timing of a move to university coincides for many with the timing of seeking independence and new experiences beyond the family and home town. For some this occurs as an undergraduate, for others it occurs after initial study at a local university. In the latter case, the 'retention' facilitated by the regional university is not a permanent one.

With the aim of retention being difficult to attain, the role of regional universities in attracting young adults should be considered. There is little doubt that regional universities act as attractors for

regional students, but their attractiveness to Melbourne-based students seems limited. With the exception of specialist, region-specific courses (for example, marine and freshwater science offered at the coastal city of Warrnambool or mining engineering at the University of Ballarat), there is an enduring perception among many that universities in Melbourne are superior, especially for professional education. These perceptions are often reinforced by school careers advisors, teachers and parents.

The role of ENTER scores is another factor in the perceptions and judgements made about regional universities. Students in the research study actually varied in their understanding of how ENTER scores are calculated. Those attending regional campuses understood that ENTER scores are based on course demand, and it seemed obvious to them that regional campuses would have lower ENTER scores, as regional towns have vastly smaller populations than Melbourne. On the other hand, the majority of students who had moved to Melbourne for tertiary education believed that ENTER scores were an indicator of degree quality. There is also an assumption that through lower ENTER scores the quality of the degree is lower and therefore it does not look as good on a resume. For this reason, somehow studying in the country seems less of an achievement.

While small campus size can affect ENTER scores, it can also affect the overall economic feasibility of a tertiary institution. Latrobe University in its submission to the *Victorian Government Inquiry into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities* (La Trobe University 2006) highlighted two key challenges facing its regional campuses:

- meeting the cost of provision in regional areas; and
- weak student demand locally.

The university estimated that the costs of regional university provision were around 25% higher than for its Melbourne-based campus. The University of Ballarat has suggested a figure closer to 30-35% (Skills Victoria 2008, p.28). At the same time, weaker local demand limits the selection of courses on offer and this further weakens local demand. In response to these issues of low demand, the University of Melbourne in 2004 divested itself of several regional campuses specialising in agricultural sciences – Longerenong, Glenormiston and MacMillan (University of Melbourne 2004).

Despite the negative aspects associated with smaller size, many students report the educational and social advantages of regional campuses – smaller classes, more attention to students, peaceful and work-friendly (fewer distractions) than city campuses. These advantages provide regional universities with a point of difference which can be highlighted and promoted to regional and metropolitan students alike.

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