18 June 2010

Ms Kym Peake
Deputy Secretary
Skills Victoria
Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development
GPO Box 266
Melbourne 3001

Dear Ms Peake,

**Stronger Futures for All Young Victorians: Discussion Paper on the Youth Transition System**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the discussion paper *Stronger Futures for All Young Victorians*, issued jointly by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Victorian Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development.

La Trobe University strongly supports the objectives of the discussion paper. In particular, we strongly support the focus on increasing the number of students making the successful transition from secondary school to higher education, particularly those from low SES, regional and rural backgrounds.

La Trobe University is committed to providing a quality higher education opportunity in northern metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria. The University has the largest number of low SES and regional students of any Victorian University.

The University is committed to:

- increasing undergraduate domestic enrolments at La Trobe by at least 30 percent between 2009 and 2015. This will focus on increased low SES participation.
- increasing taught postgraduate enrolments by 50 percent. This will focus on building the advanced skills needed by the Victorian and National economies.
- developing Curriculum Bridges and Schools Partnerships to ensure that school study is supported and linked to the La Trobe curriculum and that levels of school achievement and aspiration for higher education are raised, particularly amongst students from a low SES background.
- improving regional access by further developing the Bendigo Campus as a regional hub that offers contemporary teaching and learning facilities and enables substantial growth in the student population.
In response to specific questions in the discussion paper:

**What form should the proposed literacy and numeracy standards take?** (page 15)

La Trobe University supports the objective of increasing competency in language, literacy and numeracy and the benchmarking of these skills at year 9 provided the benchmarking process does not have a negative influence on funding. The University believes that it is important for the Government to fund compulsory and post compulsory education, in line with other high performing OECD countries.

**Will a career plan strengthen young people’s engagement with education..?** (page 18):

La Trobe University considers that the career planning process is important for strengthening engagement in education provided it:

- is integrated into the school curriculum;
- starts in the early years of secondary school;
- allows for a comprehensive assessment of students’ interests and capabilities;
- includes some one-to-one sessions in years 9 – 12 with properly trained careers teachers and advisors; and
- is fully resourced to enable every student to develop a plan that is meaningful and useful to them.

**How can student transition to the VET sector, higher education and full-time employment be improved?**

**What other steps are required to assist schools’ connection to the world of work?**

**What other initiatives would improve school to tertiary education articulation and support young people to take advantage of the expansion of these sectors?**

This section of the response articulates La Trobe University’s position in relation to questions in the discussion paper, page 29, and highlights the mission and strategies of La Trobe University.

The discussion paper notes the need to broaden access to higher education. In particular, the need for selection processes which complement the ENTER, such as aptitude testing and interviews is highlighted, and argues for local articulation partnerships to be forged between universities and schools.

La Trobe University acknowledges the importance of diversifying assessment and entry pathways. The University also believes that a focus on improved preparation and achievement of school students is equally important. The DEEWR report ‘Interventions early in school as a means to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantaged (particularly low SES) students’, highlights the need not only to raise aspirations and improve access, but also to raise achievement (Gale, Sellars et al: 2009:6).
We believe that the development of regional education plans in collaboration with industry and community members and funded by the Government would assist schools to connect with the world of work. Such plans would also contribute to ensuring that course provision and skill development in secondary and tertiary education was relevant to the regions needs, particularly in regional Victoria.

La Trobe University is broadening access through alternative pathways, and is also working closely with schools to develop new curriculum and pedagogy to improve achievement.

In the first instance, we intend to expand access to higher education through the introduction of alternative entry pathways. In particular, the University is currently developing discipline-based diplomas in each Faculty, targeted at students who have not received an ENTER which is sufficient to enable them to enrol in their course of first preference. These programs will enable successful diploma students to transition into the second year of a wide range of courses depending on performance.

Additionally, all diploma students will receive substantial educational scaffolding, with academic support embedded in each diploma program.

Finally, Design for Learning, La Trobe’s ambitious curriculum reform program, will ensure that all La Trobe students are assessed against identified and measurable graduate capabilities. This assessment will begin with diagnostic testing in the early weeks of enrolment, and will continue through cornerstone and capstone subjects within each undergraduate program of study. La Trobe will be able to clearly measure and articulate the capabilities required for tertiary success, based on these graduate capabilities, and this will also assist the development of direct entry pathways for school students.

The pathways providing expanded access are closely linked to the broader agenda of school and university collaboration. The University will be using Design for Learning to work with partner schools to develop curriculum matched to explicit graduate capabilities. The process of collaborating with schools to develop curriculum will begin with a project entitled Curriculum Bridges.

The Curriculum Bridges Project will develop themed Year 12 study programs (‘curriculum bridges’) that articulate to La Trobe University undergraduate degrees, initially in the Faculty of Science, Technology and Engineering (FSTE). These will be offered to schools within the region around La Trobe University’s metropolitan (Bundoora) and regional campuses (Bendigo, Mildura, Shepparton and Wodonga) which are under-resourced in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects. Many of the students at these schools are from low SES families. The Curriculum Bridges project is based on the ‘high challenge/high support’ approach to teaching and learning.

The project is grounded in Professor Richard Teese’s research into educational inequality. It aims to improve low SES students’ engagement with learning and progress to higher education through direct intervention within the curriculum.
By directly improving students’ preparation for tertiary study (not just aspiration), the project addresses:

- low attainment in outer metropolitan and regional Victorian schools
- poor access to some areas of curriculum in these schools, particularly the sciences, advanced mathematics and quantitative social sciences
- low participation rates in higher education

Students in the selected under-resourced schools will study the curriculum bridges as part of their VCE studies. The curriculum bridges will be constructed from existing VCE units and assessed as part of the school-based VCE assessment. Students will sit the general examinations for the units they study. The curriculum bridges will be structured around a ‘social theme’ such as heart disease, bushfire, or third world poverty.

Curriculum Bridges conforms to the model recommended in the DEEWR report Interventions early in school as a means to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantaged (particularly low SES) students, which highlights elements of a successful program as including:

- Recognition of difference: premised on the perspective that disadvantaged students bring a range of knowledge and learning capacities to formal education that should be recognised and valued as assets.
- Enhanced academic curriculum: (including pedagogy) designed to sustain the ongoing quality of everyday lessons throughout schooling and to prepare students for further or higher education.
- Research-driven interventions: that engage the research capacities of the university to inform program design, implementation and evaluation, and to support the production and dissemination of knowledge about effective intervention strategies (Gale, Sells et al: 2009:6)

The Curriculum Bridges Project includes each of these elements and will be research-based, longitudinal, focussed on curriculum reform, and developed through a close and genuine partnership between La Trobe University and selected equity schools. The University believes that projects focussed on raising school achievement are central to improving equity outcomes in higher education. Inequity in Victoria is systemic and to be successful, La Trobe University believes that programs to improve participation in higher education will need to be collaborative, longitudinal, and supported by both State and Commonwealth governments.

Should efforts to improve VET to higher education articulation and credit arrangements focus on particular occupational pathways and skill priority areas, for example in engineering and nursing?
How can governments ensure that reforms to the VET and higher education sector address both skill needs and student demand for particular qualifications?
How can governments improve provision and articulation arrangements to better support young people, especially in regional and rural areas, to access tertiary qualifications without needing to re-locate?
What other actions should be contemplated by institutions and government?

This section addresses the questions above (page 33 of the discussion paper).

La Trobe University believes that governments can play a substantial role in facilitating greater collaboration between the sectors. The barriers to collaboration are well documented, and include dual regulatory and reporting requirements, dual curriculum frameworks, and dual funding arrangements.

Specifically, La Trobe believes that investment in the development of flexible approaches to course delivery, particularly in courses which could be jointly offered between both the TAFE and La Trobe University, would enhance access to education in regional areas. La Trobe University is either co-located or located nearby TAFE’s at each of its campuses in Bendigo, Wodonga, Shepparton and Mildura and is developing programs with TAFE providers to improve access to higher in these regional areas.

While the discussion paper highlights inconsistencies in articulation agreements (page 31), La Trobe University believes that some apparent inconsistencies are inevitable and simply reflect different course offerings across institutions in both sectors. Moreover, those universities which have developed strong articulation agreements hold a clear competitive advantage, in that they are able to access and attract a growing TAFE cohort. It is already in each university’s interest to improve articulations with TAFEs in order to increase student enrolments. The major impediments to consistency and collaboration are therefore structural rather than the result of a lack of institutional will.

Similarly, while the discussion paper argues that the four Victorian dual sector institutions have a natural advantage and superiority in the area of articulation (page 32), La Trobe University does not believe this advantage to be natural, and indeed notes that some stand-alone universities have articulation arrangements at least as strong as some dual sector institutions.

Specifically, governments could increase the existing competitive advantage of effective universities by providing greater incentives for collaboration. This could include structures and rewards to encourage TAFE and/or joint delivery of University programs on a network partnership basis, particularly in regional markets.

La Trobe University does not, however, support the unilateral expansion of TAFE offerings in higher education. TAFE providers have a clear mission to provide high quality vocational education, and this role is crucial to the state’s development of skills and productivity. The inclusion of TAFE providers in the higher education sector risks detracting from the core business of TAFEs and undermining their mission.

Furthermore, there are clear resource and staffing implications in any attempt by TAFEs to duplicate the role of higher education institutions, particularly in relation to the qualifications of TAFE teachers. La Trobe does believe that TAFEs can play an important role in
collaboration with universities to develop and operate higher education programs, but the University also maintains that any role should be developed in partnership with universities rather than in competition.

Victoria has a strong and globally competitive university sector, and that sector is the most appropriate place for the delivery of most higher education courses.

I hope that these comments will contribute to the achievement of stronger futures for young Victorians. Please do not hesitate to let me know if you would like to discuss these matters further.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Professor Paul Johnson
Vice-Chancellor