



## ***EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING COMMITTEE***

**Members present:**

Ms KE Richards MP—Chair  
Mr JP Lister MP  
Mr MA Boothman MP  
Mr N Dametto MP  
Mr BL O'Rourke MP  
Mr JA Sullivan MP

**Staff present:**

Mr R Hansen—Committee Secretary  
Ms H Koorockin—Committee Support Officer

### **PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO THE DELIVERY OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE QUEENSLAND AND THE CAIRNS TAFE UPGRADE PROJECT**

#### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**Friday, 14 July 2023**

**Brisbane**

## FRIDAY, 14 JULY 2023

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### **The committee met at 12.30 pm.**

**CHAIR:** Good afternoon. I declare this public hearing open. I am Kim Richards, the member for Redlands and chair of the Education, Employment and Training Committee. I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. We are very fortunate in this country to live with two of the world's oldest continuing living cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whose lands, winds and waters we all now share.

I would like to welcome everybody here today and I thank you for a great turnout in supporting our committee's work. With me here today are: Mr James Lister, the member for Southern Downs and deputy chair; Mr Mark Boothman is an apology for this part of the hearing but he will be joining us later; Mr Nick Dametto, the member for Hinchinbrook; Mr Barry O'Rourke, the member for Rockhampton; and Mr Jimmy Sullivan, the member for Stafford.

Today's hearing forms part of the committee's work on two inquiries: the delivery of vocational education and training in regional, rural and remote Queensland, and also the Cairns TAFE upgrade project. The committee has chosen to undertake these inquiries because vocational education and training is critically important in driving economic opportunity, growth and employment across Queensland, especially in our regional, rural and remote communities. We are very pleased to have the chance to hear directly from a variety of stakeholders today. We have just returned from visiting the communities of Cairns and Thursday Island. We could not make it to Roma yesterday. I will put on the record that we sincerely apologise to the community of Roma for having to cancel yesterday, but Qantas flights were extraordinarily unpredictable and caused us all to be very displaced yesterday.

This meeting of the committee is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and as such is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind you that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. We have a very big agenda with a lot of submitters today, so we will try to manage time as tightly as we can.

### **HILLBERG, Mr Paul, Chair, Apprentice Employment Network**

### **WESTWOOD, Mr Craig, Executive Officer, Apprentice Employment Network**

**CHAIR:** I welcome our first witnesses from the Apprentice Employment Network. I invite you to make a brief opening statement and then the committee will have some questions for you.

**Mr Westwood:** Thank you, Chair and committee, for the invitation to appear before you this afternoon. If I may, I seek leave to table two documents that we submitted through to the committee secretary recently. One is a summary document of our member survey which was recently undertaken, and the other is a covering letter which includes some recommendations for the committee's consideration.

**CHAIR:** There being no objection, leave is granted.

**Mr Westwood:** By way of introduction, the Apprentice Employment Network is the representative industry association for Queensland and the Northern Territory's registered group training organisations. The association is funded 50 per cent by member fees and 50 per cent under forms of service agreement with the Department of Youth Justice, Employment, Small Business and Training. Our annual survey piece is a contracted activity on behalf of the department. It is a way that the collective employers, group training organisations, can feed back to the department and government features, themes and market intelligence that can feed into government policy and also for funding.

Fortuitously and for no other reason, we chose this year to include access to funded training, delivery and assessment from our network of employers as a part of our survey. When the opportunity came to appear before you today, the good idea was to put our findings into a summary document which might also serve your purposes, noting it is already a funded activity from the department anyway. That is why it was not in the January submission and is a late inclusion.

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Many Queensland group training organisations have been registered as group training organisations for close to 40 years. Group training is a concept that basically involves an employment intermediary acting as an employer of an apprentice or trainee and placing that apprentice or trainee with a host employer who has the appropriate range and scope of work, supervision and facilities to support the training of that apprentice or trainee. There is quite a significant network of employers. The data is rich because it is uncommon to have a collective of employer views which are able to be aggregated as it is with GTOs. At the moment, national data has it that Queensland's registered group training organisations employ five per cent of all the apprentices and trainees in Queensland, so it is not an insignificant number.

The first document that I tabled was the survey results. The first part of the document provides for the committee an overview of group training organisations and the markets they operate in, their operational structures and some of the themes for the market, which is more general advice and general information. If committee members would like to view it, we have included some data from page 18 which was the experience of our group training organisations of publicly funded training particularly in regional areas. We have deliberately asked them what their experience is about accessing publicly funded training for their apprentices and trainees in those regional areas where they operate.

The survey results at heading No. 2 are broken into two areas. We asked our members to consider that there are also metropolitan regions within regional areas. For example, we asked them to think about their experience in Toowoomba as opposed to perhaps Roma, Chinchilla or further out, noting that there were some access and equity issues that might be very different in both. The graphics show—and this is perhaps something the committee might consider later—some of the common themes that our GTO employers face when accessing publicly funded training. This includes a range of things—such as, whether a government contracted supervising registered training organisation may choose not to deliver to an apprentice or trainee for a variety of operational or other reasons. It notes whether the GTO is experiencing that—yes or no—and it also provides commentary in the graphics as to the degree of the impact on apprentices and trainees. These graphics are broken into two areas: are they experiencing the problem prior to engaging the apprentice or trainee, or are they subsequently experiencing the problem after engaging an apprentice or trainee—that is, they have commenced the engagement or employment and subsequently a publicly funded training provider in a regional area has chosen to disengage. It also talks about the reasons that drive that and the degree of the impact.

The graphics themselves do not show much of a difference between experiences from metro to regional areas, noting the metro areas within a region. It shows that in some instances—and you will probably hear this—issues around access to trainers and assessors in regional areas drives things like they had to disengage from training because there was not a local trainer or a training facility et cetera. They were the predominant reasons. Paul, is there anything you would add to that?

**Mr Hillberg:** No.

**Mr Westwood:** The second part of the document states that there are, as the committee will know, some mandatory processes that take place for an employer to engage an apprentice or trainee, noting that almost all apprentices and trainees are engaged in Queensland not through a GTO but through either a large or small employer. The system itself can be somewhat difficult to navigate. What we have placed in here is the average length it takes for GTOs, noting that they are quite advanced employers, to get through some of those employment processes in regional areas. These employment processes are mandated and required before an apprenticeship or traineeship can be registered and they often need to be completed before the delivery of training. Again, in terms of operational reasons, some of them are staffing. Some of these processes, given our buoyancy in the economy, are drawn out. We have taken the approach of: how long has it taken for these processes to be completed, and if it is a difficulty how many of your apprentices and trainees are being impacted by those processes being drawn out?

What we are alluding to is that we are finding at the moment that it is not infrequent for the registration of an apprenticeship or traineeship to take up to six to nine months. In many instances, the clock should not start until an Australian Apprenticeship Support Network member has met the apprentice or trainee—noting there is still the ability for an employer to take on an apprentice or trainee and perhaps have missed the opportunity to commence the paperwork, which can naturally push out the timelines for getting those processes done. That can sometimes manifest in an apprentice or trainee not being booked in to do some training with their training provider until deep into the first year of their apprenticeship. Policy would have suggested it should be otherwise, but the reality of getting the process done is quite difficult in a regional area at the moment.

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The covering letter that we put in with the survey highlighted from our perspective a couple of recommendations for the committee to consider. It summarises the results and also provides the association's recommendations in respect to access and equity for publicly funded training in regional areas. The first recommendation is that perhaps there be some reconsideration of the regional loadings that are paid to supervising registered training organisations, noting that in some regions there are even mini regions. Again, there is the analogy that you might have two areas within a region which might receive the same loading, yet there might be a physical distance in between those locations which might make one have an equity issue and the other not.

The second recommendation is that new and prospective providers should be required to show evidence of their capacity to deliver in a regional area, rather than just be considered as a contractor to government. If they are a new provider to the system and they are delivering regionally, they need to show evidence of their ability and capability to do so before forming a contract. Some providers do need to require special fees or conditions or use blended delivery. There perhaps is an opportunity for that asymmetric delivery model to be noted on the Queensland Training Information Service to enable user choice. For operational reasons, sometimes a blended approach is required in a region, but that information should be present somewhere so someone can be informed of it.

The third recommendation is that consideration be given to the establishment of a model for the fair computation of provider employer contribution fees. There is a lot of information on student contribution fees. At the moment, there are sometimes employer contribution fees, even for publicly funded training. We are not disagreeing with that, but we do find that in thin markets or in particular regional areas where the public provider especially is not present—that is, there might be a couple of smaller private providers—the fees seem to be somewhat exorbitant and they seem to be quite similar between providers. Perhaps the government could set some form of model for setting the fees or making the fees seem fair in line with public expectation.

The next recommendation is that, where a provider requires an apprentice or trainee to travel away from their primary location to attend training, perhaps the provider should assist in the identification, arrangement and administration of travel and accommodation. This is a separate consideration from where employers are required to do it. Some industrial instruments will require that the employer is responsible for administration and setting up the training for an apprentice or trainee. This would be in instances where, due to some operational reasons, the provider required the apprentice or trainee to travel further and perhaps that provider should then assist with the administration of the travel and accommodation.

The next recommendation is that the rates of travel and accommodation allowance paid to apprentices and trainees be reviewed. We have had some new rates for travel and accommodation which have been released from 1 July. There is probably still some consideration from government around, if an apprentice or trainee is required to travel, what is the contemporary cost of things like cheap accommodation and meals in the location, noting that, yes, we accept that for operational reasons apprentices and trainees will need to travel but when they need to do so they can be accommodated adequately and fed.

Recommendation 7 is a large one—and we still see it. When it comes to the practise of setting minimum class sizes in regional areas, you will never be able to form a minimum class size of apprentices and trainees in some regions of Queensland. That goes back to my earlier point about, if there is an asymmetric delivery model, perhaps that is published on the Queensland Training Information Service website to inform choice so people know up-front if they are going to be required to travel or do some component online or perhaps link up with multiple classes across multiple institutes to get through the delivery of their training.

The second to last recommendation is that, where there are no contracted registered training organisations in some thin markets or a provider has notified government that they cannot or are not willing to provide that, perhaps there is a market mechanism for a registered training organisation that is on the national register to effectively fill in for a temporary appointment or for the same fees. We often do find that in thin markets where there are no supervising registered training organisations there are sometimes registered training organisations willing to take on that work but they cannot access the public funding to do so. It may be a way to audition potential new suppliers, especially in regions, by allowing that facility.

The last recommendation we have on this subject is that, where providers were experiencing apprenticeship and traineeship registration process backlogs, there could be some consideration by government where large employers or group training organisations that present lower risk—that is, they are either specialised in apprenticeship and traineeship engagement and employment or they present low risk to government because they are shown to be high-performing employers—parts of Brisbane

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those registration processes could be taken on themselves or via online or via email so they are not held up from conducting and delivering training. That ends the covering letter submission and the survey.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mr Westwood. Deputy Chair, do you have any questions?

**Mr LISTER:** I have no questions. Thank you very much.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Thank you very much for your very detailed submission and in fronting the committee today. Can you talk about the benefits to the employer and the employee in ensuring that training is delivered locally, in your experience?

**Mr Westwood:** My experience is that I am an ex-tradesperson. I did my trade in the Australian Army. I am an ex-chief executive officer of a GTO. I have been in vocational education for 25 years and now head the association. My perspective on that is that with apprenticeships and traineeships you are always looking for range and scope of work, local supervision and local suitability of the training delivery to support either the current skills needs or the emerging skills needs in an area. It sometimes goes back to the old analogy that it takes a village to raise a child.

If the local context, say, for renewables is that everyone from the local bakery all the way to the local TAFE is thinking renewables then that becomes the dialogue—it becomes something that schools focus on, the public focus on, the parents focus on. If the community does not get to see the experience of moving into new or emerging markets then the community never gets that knowledge and it never gets rusted on.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Thank you very much for that answer.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** My question is in regard to recommendation 6 around travel, particularly for regional and remote people. Do you have any recommendations that would improve the way travel allowances are paid when they are administered by the department?

**Mr Westwood:** I think first and foremost would be publishing that if that is a requirement. We are quite practical. Registration processes take a while. It is a by-product of having a buoyant economy and so much activity in the market. If there is a requirement to travel, as far as practicable that should be public knowledge and published up-front from the get-go so that, when the employer and the apprentice or trainee are engaging first and foremost, the knowledge that there is going to be a travel requirement is there. Then some of the process can commence from that point.

Even when I looked at the current website—again, I have been around for 25 years—there was a bit of ambiguity as to who applies: when do I apply, when am I notified to apply and when will I get my money? Sometimes it is a case of when do I tell someone I am going to drive a car versus trying to catch a flight? Already in the system we have ambiguity in the rules and regulations around that, so this is just another layer of it.

It goes back to my other recommendation. I recall—my recollection may be wrong; I have been around for a while—that training providers used to at some point take a more active role in the administration of that. If you go back 25 years ago, we may not be able to practically do it now but there was knowledge around local share accommodation or billet opportunities or backpackers or community groups that offered cheaper meals. The training providers had that knowledge.

**CHAIR:** You do not hear the word 'billet' very often these days, do you?

**Mr Westwood:** No. That is ex-ex-Army, Chair. I think it is more of a naval term though. Having said that, there is a willingness there for people to say, 'If it is a requirement that we aggregate that information then we will do so.' At the moment if you look at the rates of travel and accommodation—and I did look at it—around the Acacia Ridge area, there is some question around whether the rates for accommodation would cover even the local backpackers, which tonight is \$110 a night.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Thank you for your submission and recommendations. We could talk for an hour on them, but suffice to say we will give them proper consideration. I want to ask a question about your submission in relation to I think you called it the delay in paperwork—whether that could be the cause of the delay at one end or the other. When you say that perhaps it could be delayed by six to nine months, what is the effect on the apprentice or trainee when it does get done? Do they still get credit for that time served effectively? Is there an ability to backdate it effectively?

**Mr Westwood:** There is but with consequence. As I put in the submission, there is a connection between these processes and employer obligations—employer obligations to the apprentice or trainee or employer obligations to the employee. The more that that is pushed back—

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you are correct—it might be acknowledged time, but it might be how much time is left for that employer to make sure the apprentice or trainee is engaged in training in their first year before they, from an industrial relations perspective, move into second year and then that causes a range of workplace issues. Ideally you would not want it to happen in the first place.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** There is also responsibility for workplace health and safety and all of those other employer responsibilities, I assume.

**Mr Westwood:** Our chair suffers. Paul, do you want to comment on that?

**Mr Hillberg:** The responsibilities from the employer stay the same. It really comes down to the time served by the apprentice that is the issue. The largest issue we see is a first-year apprentice being paid far less being a first-year apprentice, so moving into a second year is quite important. Being able to leverage the skills that have been trained in the workplace then gives value to the employer to then pay that second-year allowance or that second-year rate. The delays impact both the employer and the apprentice in that way—where the employer does not see as much of a contribution back into the business and where the apprentice does not feel the same value that they are getting out of their time served.

**CHAIR:** Thank you both very much for your contributions today. We are very grateful for your time.

**BLACK, Ms Jennifer, Chief Executive Officer, Queensland Alliance for Mental Health**

**CHILDS, Ms Sarah, Director, Sector Engagement and Development, Queensland Alliance for Mental Health**

**CHAIR:** I welcome from the Queensland Alliance for Mental Health Ms Jennifer Black, CEO, and Ms Sarah Childs, Director, Sector Engagement and Development. Thank you very much for joining us today. I invite you to make an opening statement.

**Ms Black:** Thank you very much for having us. To give some context for the committee, Queensland Alliance for Mental Health is the peak body for the community mental health sector. They are the non-government organisations that deliver grassroots care across the whole of Queensland. They really support people to live their lives well in the community. We are not talking about the clinical system here.

As you will all be aware, there was a parliamentary select committee review into mental health in Queensland. As a direct result of that, we welcome the levy that was put in place to invest in mental health. I think the biggest issue our sector faces across the board is workforce. We are going to concentrate not on the clinical workforce because they have very clear pathways in how they train their workforce.

Our members who are in regional and remote locations in particular find it really hard to find a ready skilled workforce. They might find people with the right values and they might have other sorts of qualifications. People do not really come into the community mental health sector from school. People are not thinking, 'This is where I want to do go to,' but they have some kind of life experiences and that probably makes them really good to work in our sector.

We know that there are thin markets across Queensland. Our members are screaming out for ways to develop their workforces locally so that they can build the skills within their own communities. We also know that there is a need for greater diversity for First Nations, multicultural and refugee communities. The emerging or growing workforce in mental health is peer workforce—so people with a lived experience of either mental distress or a family member that has experienced that. We know that people come with a range of life experiences to our sector and a range of qualifications. They may have a first degree in arts or science or something else and they have the right kind of attitude and skill set. The qualifications that are currently available to them are the Certificate IV in Mental Health and the Certificate IV in Mental Health Peer Work.

We have over 100 members. Most of those are organisations that are battling every day to think about how they are going to grow their workforce. What they tell us is that there is a disconnect between the course content and industry, that it is not necessarily contemporary and that students, in particular, are not necessarily well supported. They often have to find their own placements in organisations that are struggling to meet the demands of the people in front of them, so they do not necessarily have the resources to support a student placement.

We know that there are low completion rates of those courses. That is a concern and that might be linked to the disconnect between the industry and those courses. We also know from some of the work that we have done—and we can talk to you a bit more about that—that people with a lived experience in particular might need different supports to get through a TAFE cert IV than other people. We have been involved in a mentoring project where we have had some success at helping people through that.

One of the other pieces of work we have been asked to do by Queensland Health is to develop a workforce strategy for our sector in particular. We have consulted with over 200 people so far around the state in relation to that. There is a swelling of support for something like a traineeship for both the mental health qualification and the peer work qualification. It would solve a number of problems in terms of local communities in regional and remote Queensland being able to build a workforce within their community where they could learn on the job and then be involved with a TAFE or a training provider to get the academic element of that. I think one of the barriers is obviously the level of support from employers. That is why we think some kind of funded traineeship would go a long way to helping to build a really skilled mental health workforce outside of that clinical system.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Black. Are the majority of organisations that fall under your banner funded by the NDIS?

**Ms Black:** No. There is probably a range of things. They will either be funded directly by state government delivering care to people at the more severe end of the mental health system or be funded through PHNs—so Commonwealth funding coming through PHNs—and also the NDIS. Many of our organisations are probably doing a bit of everything.

**Mr LISTER:** Thank you very much, ladies, for coming in. It is quite interesting that you raise some of these things because when the committee was in Cairns earlier this week, we had a number of people come before us. One was a lady who has a Certificate IV in Mental Health Peer—

**Ms Black:** Peer work.

**Mr LISTER:** Peer work, yes. She said that she has seen that mental health delivery services are using really low entry programs such as certificate I or certificate II which are not employment ready and using the funding gap for those people to fund their mental health organisations and deliver lower-than-expected certificates. In fairness to you, do you have something that you would like to say in response to that statement?

**Ms Black:** Sorry, I do not quite understand. She is saying that the—

**Mr LISTER:** My understanding of it was that the providers of mental health services are engaging people and training them up to certificate I or II and then using the gap cost for progressing to certificate IV to offset other costs in their organisation.

**Ms Black:** Most of our members would not be training providers to be able to provide training. There may be some, but most of them would not.

**CHAIR:** I think that was in regards to their employees, though, engaging them as employees whilst they are in that training process.

**Mr LISTER:** I think you are right, Chair, yes. The implication was that there are perhaps perverse incentives in the system which leads some people to be used as a milk cow for the organisation so that the primary focus is not on training them; there is an ulterior motive.

**Ms Black:** I would be surprised about that, to be perfectly honest, but I do think our organisations struggle to get people who are trained, so they actually put a lot of resources into training people on the job themselves. Did you have anything you want to add to that?

**Ms Childs:** Absolutely. Once they find the person with the right values and fit for their organisation, they can employ them and then support them to enrol in the certificate IV qualifications. I think that does happen with one of our training providers and members.

**Ms Black:** There are no mandatory qualifications to get into the sector—people can come with no qualifications—and that is one of the issues which is about getting some really skilled people in those roles.

**CHAIR:** Mental health is a very complex space. I think everybody in here has been touched by it in some way, shape or form, and the extremes of what that can look like are quite variable.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Ladies, I would also like to echo the deputy chair and the chair's response in saying we really appreciate you coming today to submit to the committee. My question is around ensuring we get better completion rates within the sector. Do you have any tips or ideas that you believe could be implemented to ensure that we are having more successful people going through the training organisations that can help us with mental health here in Queensland?

**Ms Black:** We do. We think traineeships would help that because you have the people with the right values and skills, but we have done some work and I will hand over to Sarah to talk about that.

**Ms Childs:** We have been quite solution focused and embarked on some projects which look to fill in the gaps. One of those was a peer mentoring project. It was providing individual and group co-reflection support to students who are enrolled in the Certificate IV Mental Health Peer Work, funded by DESBT. Whilst that was a very short, six-month project, we did see an improvement in completion rates and also a huge increase in the confidence of students who felt that they could go on to complete their study following that. The other strategy that we would use—and we are about to embark on a new project with this—is industry connectors: ensuring that the RTOs are really connected with what is happening out there in service land, what skills and knowledge are required for that workforce, what roles there are following completion of that, and even coming into TAFE and ensuring that there are relevant student placements as well. That mentoring and connecting, I think, would really support the completion rate.

**CHAIR:** Quite a common theme across the inquiry process to date is that, whether it is a public or private RTO provider, the connection to industry is critical, and there seems to be possibly some gaps in how that is occurring between those.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Thank you for your submission. There are two elements to my question in relation to workforce and bringing people in, and one is the experience of students who are studying at university or TAFE, working in mental health while they do that. They may have done a certificate II in health for school, which has had some sort of baseline training, and then do work in NDIS or Brisbane



mental health while they progress their career. That may not just be nursing; it could be social workers or teachers, for that matter, people with those service values, if I could put it that way. Have you had much experience in that space, and is that an effective way to bring more people into the skills shortage in your area?

**Ms Black:** We probably have some stats from our surveys of our own members, but quite a lot of people who come into the sector come in with another qualification. However, you are talking about clinical staff who are in their training, is that what you are referring to?

**Mr SULLIVAN:** I am talking about, say, a 21-year-old who is studying nursing but works in your field while they are studying.

**Ms Childs:** I would say we have a lot of students who are studying allied health or nursing and working in the sector to live and for experience as well. The other matter I was just thinking of is that when we did a consultation in Mount Isa recently, they had a really good gateway-to-school program and our members were thinking that perhaps we could consider looking at targeting school leavers as well and supporting them to gradually get up to completing the certificate IV.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Noting, of course, your providers are busy, so it is a catch-22, is it not?

**Ms Childs:** Absolutely.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** To bring people on, it takes time off to train them up. The other element was the role of micro-credentials, and in particular you mentioned people with lived experience, whether personal or as a family member or carer perhaps. Is that helpful? Have you seen—

**Ms Childs:** We developed a micro-credential with TAFE Queensland and that was again us trying to be solution focused and look at how we could fill the current gaps in knowledge, identified by our sector. We completed that. We had about 363 people access that micro-credential online and it has been well received.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Are there any demographics of who they were? Were they people who had come from a different area with lived experience, or are you not sure?

**Ms Childs:** I only have very high level from TAFE Queensland. We could dig into that.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** That is fine. Thank you.

**Ms Black:** We do advertise it quite widely amongst our members, though, too. It was to try and address that gap in knowledge as people come into the system. I think the other thing to say is that particularly about taking students or allied health or whoever they are, there is a lot of competition and so there is a bit of wariness about training people who are going to leave.

**CHAIR:** Tricky things to navigate. Thank you both very much for your time here today. We are very grateful for your contribution. Thank you.

**THOMPSON, Ms Ruth, Policy Director, AgForce Queensland**

**MORRIS, Mr Rod, Industry Skills Advisor, Primary Industries, Queensland Farmers' Federation**

**CHAIR:** I welcome representatives from AgForce Queensland and Queensland Farmers' Federation. I am sure you would each like to make a starting contribution.

**Ms Thompson:** Thank you for the opportunity to address you all this afternoon. I am sure you have all read the submission, but I wanted to briefly touch on who AgForce are and what we do and what was in the submission. My name is Ruth Thompson. I am a policy director at AgForce and I chair the workforce committee. AgForce is a peak farming organisation. We represent about 6,500 primary producers across Queensland, and that is across sheep wool and goats, cattle, grain and sugar cane.

**CHAIR:** Very diverse.

**Ms Thompson:** We have a fair bunch in there. We are in a very unique position within agriculture in that we do not have enough farm kids to fill farming roles anymore, and we do need to start recruiting from the urban environment which creates a whole unique set of challenges for the industry. When we start recruiting from urban environments, we do not get that ingrained generational knowledge for farming, and it is very difficult to retain those kids who are interested in coming into agriculture. It is a bit of an interesting viewpoint for some of those kids to come out to the bush to have a crack at station hand or to be a jackaroo, or whatever they choose to do. They come out green, and sometimes they have really good experiences and we retain those people; sometimes they do not have such good experiences. That simply comes down to expectation. We want to make sure that whatever VET pathways these kids are getting into and whatever training they are interested in, it gives them a clear understanding of what the industry involves and what the career possibilities are. Ag is a wonderful industry to work in and it offers great opportunity, but we want to make sure that if we are getting these kids in, especially through VET pathways, that they are staying and making the most and completing their training and staying within industry.

We will speak briefly on the submission that was made. The role of public providers in VET delivery in regional, rural and remote Queensland is really critical in agriculture. We find particularly here with our members and from general knowledge within industry that VET pathways are very prevalent in what we call regional communities which is the likes of Toowoomba, Cairns, Townsville, Rocky—those sorts of places—which it is wonderful to have those, but we are really screaming for it in the real bush and we would like to see some delivery of VET into the Longreaches, the Cunnamullas, the Mount Isas, Ayr—those districts. That is where there is a real gap missing for us at the moment.

The other thing is we see a big transition currently into more online pathways for people—online training and VET options. It definitely has its place, but when you are talking about agriculture and delivering workers into a farm situation, that can be difficult if they have never had any farm knowledge. You are delivering pathways through this VET system which really has no contextualisation; they have no idea what it actually means. They are sitting in their house in the suburbs doing an online training course which might be one of these micro-credentials that are on offer for people but which actually have no real-world application or understand what that can mean, and that creates a real safety risk for some of these kids. It gives them a somewhat false sense of security that they have done a ticket online, but they go out to a station to go and do some work and they really do not have much of an idea. That is a really challenging situation. We want to make sure the kids are safe and that the farmers who are hosting these kids can look after them. If these micro-credentials are not paired with some sort of practical knowledge, boots on the ground, it is setting these kids up to fail. That is something that our members here at AgForce really feel strongly about. It is great to have a tick-the-box system, which is what it feels like—it might give them a few practical skills in regards to a safety induction on a farm or something like that—but it does not really provide much knowledge to those people who are going out onto the farm.

The other point we wanted to make is that there are currently some VET pathways, especially through TAFE, which have some valuable agricultural courses in them, but there are some significant gaps within those courses and what is provided. Whether that is because it is outdated or there has not been enough engagement with industry to develop those courses, but it is definitely falling short of where it needs to be. Things seem to be looked at in isolation. I am sure Rod can probably talk on this more, but, for instance, there are subsidised options for Certificate III in Shearing, but there is not for certificate II. These sorts of gaps make no sense when we are trying to get kids through a program, and that is something we would like to see addressed as well.

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Delivery for VET in schools used to be commonplace. I grew up out in Central West New South Wales and went to a very small school, and there was VET delivered quite often and there were a range of courses available. Particularly up here in Queensland, we see that there has been a diminishing of that opportunity, and that simply comes down to funding. Those schools do not necessarily get the funding that is required to deliver VET through school anymore. We do not have a lot of hard infrastructure to send these kids to, but schools do exist and the infrastructure is already there and they have supported learning options, so it could just simply mean a little bit of extra funding for those schools to help deliver some of those VET courses.

Finally, we would like to see more apprenticeships or traineeship opportunities within agriculture as it is a lived experience, getting training under your belt or getting some sort of experience. I think that would be very well received within industry. There is already a framework that exists for these sorts of things. For instance, there is a harvesting and haulage apprenticeship in forestry. We would like to see that potentially adapted into farming for broadacre. That could service things like cotton and sugarcane and also grain production. We would also like to see a traineeship or an apprenticeship into grazier operations, something that could be used for the meat production side as well. That is everything from me.

**CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Morris?

**Mr Morris:** Thanks for this opportunity. I will not repeat a lot of those things but, briefly, the Rural Jobs and Skills Allowance is a group of peak bodies and AgForce is one of the members. I fill the role in that as the industry skills adviser for primary industries so this chance to speak is right up my alley. What I would like to put in front of this committee is an understanding of things. Since we put in the submission there has been a lot of engagement in Western Queensland and some things have become a little bit more apparent such as Ruth raised around the delivery of VET in schools and the issues that deal with that. Recently, I had the opportunity to work in Western Queensland in the sheep industry where they were trying to bring a program that is happening in Southern Queensland into Northern Queensland, the Blue Light Shearing Program. They were going to deliver that out there. I worked with the police, local communities, mayors et cetera in that area and the schools.

The biggest problem we have is that schools have a limitation in what they can and cannot do when they become school RTOs. There is a real gap. To draw back a little from that, and I think the committee could have a relook at this, when we talk about pathways some of those pathways start at the school level but the schools are restrained. I think in regional, rural and remote areas, which this is looking at, the school can have a role to play in this space if we can better resource them to be a partner. We often talk about how these things are industry led and demand driven. The problem is, when we do all those things, we come up against a barrier in the education system. That is not because they do not want to; it is just the way it has been structured.

At the moment a school can use an RTO to deliver training, which sounds good but in regional and remote areas that is limited in itself. A student will only get one go at that funding in a rural area. I am talking about Longreach and Emerald and those sorts of areas where there are those sorts of problems. That then ties them up and for the next delivery they become a school RTO and they do not get access to any of that funding and are still trying to deliver. Schools are well placed. They are bricks and mortar. They have people who know how to teach. They can take on and get a TAE in the delivery of this training, but there is a lack of funding and a lack of coordination that they do not get funding for so their funds are very limited.

There is a big opportunity in this review to investigate where schools can play that first role in the cert II to cert III level and talking about traineeships going out because that is the pathway we are taking. A true pathway is brand, engage, experience, train. We are limited in the fact that schools need certain training to be in place. That is a little bit inflexible. I have talked to a number of schools out in that area. Longreach is a conglomerate of five schools. I have just had a chat to them to reiterate that I am going to speak about this and is this really where we are coming from, and they are happy. If we want to look at that more we can look further at really what are the limitations in VET in schools that do put in a lot of barriers. In our submission we talk about all those barriers that are there but we did not quite realise that schools have a lot of barriers against delivering VET effectively. They have an interest in their students but they are very tied, especially in regional and remote areas, as to what they can and cannot do because not only is it a thin market but everything is thin when you are rural to try to get an RTO et cetera in place.

I do not know if this has been brought up with the committee. I am also working with TAFE on their aquaculture and agriculture tech skills hub, which is happening out at the Whitsundays. They are working in areas where these things can be delivered into remote areas. Again, schools need to

be resourced to be able to work with the TAFE. TAFE has a big role to play in this. They are the major RTO in Queensland so they have a role to play in doing this. There is some work happening in that area. We need to make sure that these things are tied together so that schools have the networks, the connectivity and the resources that they need to be able to do that effectively.

**Mr LISTER:** Thank you very much for your appearance today. My question could be directed to both of you. In your submission you said that there is the absence of a proper mechanism to engage with government over industry needs and assessing what those needs are, and that there are some assumptions there that do not do justice to the industry's needs about the adequacy of certain types of training and so forth and it has a kind of city-centric view. Can you expand on that in the context of what you have said today, please?

**Ms Thompson:** That is a great question. It would appear that there is somewhat of a city-centric view to things simply because you do not know what you do not know. When people are looking at content for courses and requirements of industry, yes, it is a great opportunity for us to make submissions and write letters, but a lot can be said for a sit-down conversation with people and roundtable conversations in the development of course content. That development of course content needs to evolve, especially in the agricultural space.

We all love pastoral colleges. I know that there have been quite a few discussions about that. There is a reason that format did not work anymore and they failed. It is because they did not evolve with what was going on around them. Ag innovation and that tech space in agriculture is incredibly fast moving and fast paced and it needs to be because we have a huge gap in our workforce. We are under no illusions that, all of a sudden, we are going to have a heap of people who can fill those gaps for us. Technology is developing and whatever course content we develop this year can be—even in some of the submissions that we did perhaps two years—almost completely out of date now. It cannot be a set and forget. What we do need is continual conversation around what is coming down that pipeline, what we need to be teaching these kids and what that course content needs to look like.

**CHAIR:** Ag tech has definitely come a very long way. We have the Redlands Research Facility run by DAF in my patch and some of the work there is absolutely phenomenal. It is happening in anything from fruit-picking robotics to how you manage pests.

**Mr Morris:** To add a little to that, we are agricultural centric around this and this probably happens across the board. Not a lot of thought seems to be given—and this is feedback from industry—to people having those soft skills. We call them soft skills, generic skills and liveability skills. That is what we tend to lack when we give consideration to this. In what Ruth is saying, a lot of those things do not change; they just move in context. If we try to push down certain things—with my grandchildren now, by the time they have got there that tech has already changed. It is more the underlying skills that we really want up-front and it is very important that we do not lose track of that.

**CHAIR:** It is really interesting that you say you need to draw workforce from a more urbanised setting. I think that is particularly interesting. Do you have any thoughts on why there are fewer farm kids today than there were in previous generations?

**Ms Thompson:** Certainly there are bigger farming operations now. The scale of operation needs to be bigger for people to make money in farming. With a lot of the small mum-and-dad operations, a lot of people were not adapting and evolving and changing. Unfortunately, those farmers do not survive anymore. We have bigger farms with more area. In a district you might not have 150 farmers with five kids each anymore; you might have 20 farmers with one or two kids each. There is definitely a decrease population wise.

Also, the opportunity in bigger centres is much greater when you talk about medical availability, technology availability and all of those things that you take for granted if you live in an urbanised area. When you have young families or if you have health conditions, staying in remote, regional or rural areas is not really a viable option for a lot of people. There is the social context as to why people have moved away from the bush as well. There are some great leaps and bounds in technology. Some wonderful things have been announced in that technology space now. It would be great to see some more connectivity in the bush, which we always advocate for and hopefully we can close that divide.

Another thing that is really important to recruiting people to come and work in the bush is having the capacity to make a phone call to friends and family. The youth of today—I suppose it has always been true—have a real need to connect with their peers. Bush kids are used to probably not seeing each other for long bouts of time. When we are recruiting people from urban environments, they need that connectivity to connect with their peers and without it they walk away. They might come out to the bush and do three months but realise that they cannot watch Netflix, there is no reception, they

cannot call their mates, they cannot call their mum and then we see a real attrition back to city life for those people. We have come leaps and bounds in a very short amount of time and we hope to improve that recruitability for kids to come out to the bush.

**CHAIR:** It is certainly the case in Far North Queensland and particularly in the more remote regions that that connectivity plays a critical role in how we have evolved in the COVID world in delivering vocational skills in education. Thank you both very much. We are running close to the line, I am sorry. Member for Rockhampton, do you have a question?

**Mr O'ROURKE:** Ms Thompson, my question relates to your submission that the administration requirements for RTOs are a disincentive in smaller rural and remote areas. Could you explain a little about whether there are requirements that we should not be placing on those smaller RTOs in those areas?

**Ms Thompson:** A lot of our farmers at some point—and we actually have quite a few who sit on different boards and committees within AgForce—are registered training organisations. They are a single person who is trying to deliver training to the bush kids. The onerous requirements for paperwork and administration for a sole operator as a registered training organisation really see them almost not renewing. I am sure that the data and the statistics can tell you and I know from the people I have engaged with that they have a very hard time delivering the training as required in those regional and remote communities and, on top of that, there is the onerous paperwork that is required. I am not saying that no paperwork is required because obviously there have to be checks and balances to ensure that those people are compliant and are doing a good job. However, there has to be a way to remove some of red tape and potentially streamline that to ensure that RTOs that exist out in the bush have the capacity to still function and to operate without an overburden of paperwork required by regulators.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Thank you, Madam Chair, and I saw the look. I have limited time so I will be quick with my question. Industry-specific training in the agriculture industry is very important. Can you speak a little more about the importance of also being sector specific? Cane is obviously very different to grain and grain is very different to cattle. Can you talk about that a little?

**Ms Thompson:** There are transferrable skills. A tractor is a tractor, but we still need to make sure that they understand different farming systems and requirements for that. Whilst there are industry-specific requirements and what happens on one farm can be completely different to another, there are still general skills. Everyone needs to know not to walk behind a horse because you are going to get kicked and do not put your arm in the auger because it is going to get ripped off. Those are pretty basic skills that are transferable amongst farms. Tractor operations, biosecurity requirements for properties are all very transferrable skills that would be applicable across all sectors and all gaps—and I will refer to Rod for this one—even if we are talking about aquaculture or whatever. Those are all transferable skills and they are very basic for the most part.

These kids do not need to be agronomists. We are not trying to replace that agronomist component for farming or anything like that. We are talking about boots-on-the-ground workers—the roustabouts, the farmhands—who can definitely have transferrable skills across all sectors.

**Mr Morris:** The key thing is that not all of these jobs are 12 months in length. If we can really drive this, especially with the haulout they are talking about, you can take people out of the wheat haulout in New South Wales and take them into cane and drive those things a lot better.

**CHAIR:** Thank you both very much for your time here today. We are very grateful.

**BRADSHAW, Mrs Kate, Vice-President, Isolated Children's Parents' Association**

**Mrs Bradshaw:** The Isolated Children's and Parents' Association is an apolitical volunteer parent body that advocates for equitable access to quality educational opportunities for children in rural and remote areas. ICPA Queensland represents 45 branches and is comprised over 300 member families throughout the state.

Rural and remote Queensland students have a lot to offer, and they must be provided with every opportunity to follow a VET pathway in their chosen field. Their skills need to cover traditional as well as emerging employment opportunities which will contribute to the liveability, vibrancy and sustainability of rural communities. These students want to remain, and train, in their local regions. Statistics show that for 2021-22, 51 per cent of government funded VET students were rural and remote. When qualified VET teachers exist in the regions VET students can stay in their communities to access the training required to complete their qualifications. For those areas that do not have access to VET teachers, students must learn online. The quality and capability of internet services can make online components of the program difficult to complete.

Country university centres, CUCs, can be a viable solution to this. These campuses, which are emerging in rural and remote areas, are external training campuses that offer fast, reliable internet solutions along with dedicated learning spaces. ICPA Queensland is pleased to see that several campuses have put in submissions and that Duncan Taylor is speaking later today.

Online must not be the only option though. There is nothing like face-to-face learning, especially for those who already lead an isolated life. It is recognised that not all regions have suitably-based training opportunities, and for those students who have to go away to access training the associated expenses can be a barrier to success. To further aid these students, additional funding support which is specifically targeted to meet the significant costs of travel and accommodation would help encourage student retention and course completion. Opportunities for VET students to access affordable accommodation options when undertaking training outside of their regional base is essential to success. ICPA Queensland is watching closely the development of the TAFE Townsville campus and their accommodation options. We have also heard many positive stories from members who have children attending, or who have attended, Tec-NQ, also in Townsville.

Careers advisers and teachers in schools need to be skilled in helping change public perceptions so that seeking a non-tertiary learning pathway is more highly valued and embraced by the wider community. These staff members also need to be well-trained in all aspects of attaining a VET qualification—from working with parents and negotiating with employers to engaging supervised registered training organisations and ASAM providers. This process, which involves several organisations, can be very daunting to students and parents who are not familiar with the process. In smaller rural schools there are often no careers advisers and this role falls to a teacher. They need to be aware and trained and confident in the process. Often students who want to take a VET pathway struggle academically and thrive with hands-on experience, and they must be supported with the administrative side of the process.

This also includes careers advisers at boarding schools. Though some of these schools are based in more populated areas, these students are from rural backgrounds. For a lot of our members it is a necessity to send their children to boarding school due to having no secondary schooling options in their local area. These students need to be guided and supported by school staff, as their parents are hundreds of kilometres away and cannot be there to physically support them, especially with the administration work that is required when signing up to a school-based traineeship or apprenticeship.

RTOs and ASAM providers play an important role in the overall success of VET pathways. These organisations must provide timely and effective support for students and an ability to work with their unique situations and locations. These organisations must have flexible approaches to the way that learning and practical components of courses are completed. These organisations also need to have an understanding of the situation of boarding school students and their limited family support. There also needs to be some accountability—that all stakeholders involved in the VET process are competently completing their roles.

VET teachers are hard to attract to rural areas, and those who reside there must be looked after and receive access to regular professional development and upskilling to ensure their skills and knowledge remain relevant to emerging trends and the demands of business and industry. Some out-of-the-box solutions to access VET teachers may need to be sought. The Big Red Truck, based at Longreach, is a good example of this, where the teacher and hospitality room travels to the students.

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ICPA believes that VET is currently well-placed to support the development of existing and emerging industries through the various programs that government and private providers offer. As I mentioned earlier, statistics are positive for rural and remote students, but we must continue to work with all stakeholders to give these kids every opportunity to complete a VET pathway.

**CHAIR:** Deputy Chair, do you have a question?

**Mr LISTER:** Nothing from me, Chair, but thank you very much for your submission and your appearance today.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Thank you for coming in and addressing the committee today. One thing that I have noticed—I am pretty sure you would have observed it as well—is the difficulty of keeping bush kids in the town. Usually once they have to go to town for a tertiary education we lose them to the bigger cities. What do you believe is a better strategy for retaining some of those kids after they have completed VET or tertiary education?

**Mrs Bradshaw:** I think if we can keep them there and train them there, they do not have to leave the bush at all. They can just stay where they feel at home. They can give back to their communities. I often think some of those kids who do go to boarding school and get a skill might stay away for a few years, but a lot of times they are the kids who return to the bush. They are the ones who start a business there. They are the ones who will follow through and properly train the younger generation in the bush.

**CHAIR:** So coming into a boarding school that might be outside of your region is not necessarily a precursor to the fact that you might not return to the bush.

**Mrs Bradshaw:** No, that is right. I think especially when they follow a VET pathway rather than a university pathway.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** Thank you for being here today. Mrs Bradshaw, in your submission you talk about the need for flexibility and assessment for young people or students with disabilities. What sort of flexibility do you believe students need?

**Mrs Bradshaw:** There was an example in our submission of a family of a student who just struggled with the paperwork side of things and filling that in. The mother felt that, if that child was able to do that orally or if they were able to have a scribe there to get through some of that paperwork, he would have followed through. The hands-on things was what that child was good at, but because he could not get through those initial stages and he did not have the support he could not progress. I think it is also important for those students who have learning support in the classroom that there is some support from RTOs and teachers when they are doing the theory side of their work, because they are normally the kids who struggle academically but really thrive in the working environment.

**CHAIR:** We definitely heard that in the Far North, particularly where you are dealing with students for whom English may not be their first language or they come from islands with different dialects, language and the way you access can be barriers to the enrolment process and actually the final outcome of completion.

**Mrs Bradshaw:** Yes, and we do not want to lose people who are going to be really good at that just because they are not good at that.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** My question was going to be similar to yours. We have just come back from TI and Cairns, where there are a lot of isolated families. Does your organisation have a particular view or advocacy role in terms of isolated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids?

**Mrs Bradshaw:** We do not have a lot of Indigenous members. We do have members in Weipa, Normanton, Burketown, those areas, probably rather than more those coastal TI areas.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Or the cape?

**Mrs Bradshaw:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much for your presentation today, Mrs Bradshaw.

**O'SHANNESSY, Associate Professor Megan, Chief Executive Officer, Rural Medical Education Australia**

**Prof. O'Shannessy:** I am here to talk to you about a rural RTO trying to survive in what is commonly known as a thin market. I can assure you it is not thin: it is Biafran. If you want to be a quality RTO in rural and regional—and I won't even talk about remote, because I do not think it is possible to aspire to be an RTO in a remote community in the current structure—the funding that is available is insufficient. I am speaking for a not-for-profit organisation—and a real fair dinkum not-for-profit organisation. My board is full of doctors and professors who do not really worry about the bottom line all that much, so if you cannot survive when you are a not-for-bankruptcy organisation I have no idea how you would survive if you are running an ethical, quality program. The funding is just not sufficient.

We train in rural Queensland because that is the mission of our company. Our main contract is from Griffith University with their Rural Clinical School. That is the bulk of our funding. We share our trainers and educators—

**CHAIR:** Is that coming through the federal government?

**Prof. O'Shannessy:** It is. It is under the RHMT program. It is good funding—it is cream; we all know that—but it is also about the only thing that is making any impact on the rural medical workforce at this stage. From a rural RTO perspective, the funding that is available just will not cut it anymore. We run only health programs. We do health service support, allied health assistance and we will start doing Aboriginal health practitioner next year.

The allied health staff, since the advent of the NDIS, are becoming more and more difficult to recruit and retain. The hourly rate has gone from \$110 an hour to \$150 an hour. We have very small classes. We have small classes because we have a small cohort. We do not want classes of 40 or 50: we want classes of 10 and 12. We want to run our classes at Chinchilla, Stanthorpe, Warwick, Roma and Kingaroy, but it is becoming more and more obvious to us that the aspiration of training in regional areas is fast disappearing from us. We know that, if you can keep training a rural kid at home, they will probably stay at home.

We also know that in rural communities there is a workforce of people who left school, had no academic success, went truck driving or roo shooting, are probably in their 40s and 50s now, and their backs are [REDACTED]. They do need to find another career path. Theoretically, a certificate in allied health assistance or health service assistance is perfect for them; however, they need to be supported. They need to be able to access funding to undertake that training and re-skill, retrain, stay in Chinchilla and get a job with the nursing home.

I do not know whether you have been reading the papers, but throughout regional Australia and in regional Queensland in particular the residential aged-care facilities are in a staffing crisis.

**CHAIR:** It would be fair to say that that is the case across the nation.

**Prof. O'Shannessy:** You certainly can. It is only escalating and it is escalating more quickly. In Queensland the state government used to have the fallback of the rural hospital. As an old matron from a rural hospital, I can tell you that that fallback no longer exists. Most of the rural hospitals that used to have 40 beds now have 20 beds. Some of them have 12 beds. They do not have the capacity to take in the residents when the local residential aged-care facility has closed. What we are trying to do is build a local rural workforce in your rural community.

**Mr LISTER:** Thank you very much, Professor O'Shannessy. It is good to see you again.

**Prof. O'Shannessy:** You too.

**Mr LISTER:** You mentioned ethical training delivery. In your submission you talk about a need for the enforcement of KPIs for Skills Assure Suppliers. Can you elaborate on that?

**Prof. O'Shannessy:** We have been trying to get Skills Assure Supplier status for three years now and have been refused each round. In the last round they did not even open up SAS. Even though I could demonstrate that we are in a thin market, that there were no other RTOs where we are and that there is nobody else delivering the training that we are doing, still the department has refused us for three years. What we do see is RTOs that obviously got contracts back in the day when contracts were easier to acquire come into town, go to the local school, sign a lot of kids on to a cert III and then they disappear. The notion that a young person can do any sort of training really—just to let you know, we teach at a university level. We teach at a masters level. My educators are pie-eyed about what is required for an RTO.



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It is not easy. It is a complex beast. It is amazing when you get people coming—we say they turn up with their crappy course and their EFTPOS machine—and they sign up the kids. There are no repercussions if kids do not graduate. I cannot understand how we have a system that lets people sign up, get paid and do not deliver. We have an 82 per cent graduation rate. We run with the old marines—nobody gets left behind. If you have not put your assessment in, you get texts and calls from me or I ring your mother!

**CHAIR:** There are a few people chuckling in the back row.

**Prof. O'Shannessy:** It works. It is the only thing that does work. Each one of our students—they are all expected to graduate. I think we should have a system where you do not get paid until a student completes. I do not understand why that is seen as rocket science. When you have a VET system that has 47 per cent graduation rate—that is public money—it makes no sense to me.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Thank you for addressing the committee. Are you having trouble signing up young people or people in general to training?

**Prof. O'Shannessy:** No.

**Mr DAMETTO:** That is good to hear.

**Prof. O'Shannessy:** We have schools asking us to do training. The trouble is that they have to self-fund. I do not understand why a family at Moggill puts their child through without paying anything, while I am asking a family at Chinchilla to pay \$4,000 for the same qualification.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** In your submission you raise some concerns about the quality of online learning available to students in regional and rural areas and your concerns about the outcomes with that sort of model. Could you expand on that?

**Prof. O'Shannessy:** Being an old matron, for me, training people in health is really important. My apologies to everybody else. I know everyone else is important too. I do not mean that to sound like you have to be on a mission, but you really do have to care about people. You have to be able to be trained in a way—I am teaching showering at the moment. You have to be able to talk to a group—they are normally young girls—about how to shower an old fellow and what happens. You need industry experts to keep you interested, to make sure it is not so scary and to know that it is achievable. I do not believe that you could teach this online.

You asked me about the quality of training. The other big thing with RTO work is industry placement. I cannot understand how RTOs do not organise industry placement. We organise all our own industry placements. I can tell you the top six nursing homes and hospitals in southern and western Queensland and I can tell you the bottom six as well. We only send our students where I know they will get a great experience in the industry. They never go unless we go with them as well. One of our educators pops around. We take morning tea—all those good things happen. We make sure that the student has a great learning experience and a great placement experience.

**CHAIR:** It is great to hear that as an RTO you are engaging with industry and providers of those employment opportunities. I think that is a very big connecting space. Thank you very much for your time, Professor O'Shannessy.

**TAYLOR, Mr Duncan, Founder, Country Universities Centre**

**CHAIR:** I welcome from Country Universities Centre Mr Duncan Taylor, the Founder.

**Mr Taylor:** Thank you for the opportunity to present to you today. The Country Universities Centre is a relatively new model, which I think in truth is still evolving to reach its potential. It started in 2013 in a single location and for five years proved itself before in 2018 moving to a second location. Since that time it is now in 23 different communities, including five in Queensland. The first Queensland facility opened in 2021. In Queensland, as you might know, we are working in Balonne, St George, Dirranbandi and Roma. I understand that the committee might have the opportunity after yesterday still, I hope—

**CHAIR:** If Qantas can be trusted!

**Mr Taylor:**—if Qantas can be trusted, fingers crossed—to visit the facility in Roma and speak to both Balonne and Maranoa. On Monday we also formally opened a centre up in Cooktown to service the Cape York region, and we have been funded by the Commonwealth to open a centre in Mount Isa.

We are finding there is a lot of appetite across Queensland for the model and we are talking to a lot more local governments about the opportunity to open up centres. We are very hopeful that out of the Universities Accord process the Regional University Centres program will be provided further funding. I think there is great potential, particularly in the smaller communities, to deepen the model to better facilitate vocational delivery in those communities as well as higher education. I think that is a win for the Country Universities Centre because that will increase the activity in those centres, particularly in the smaller communities where there might not be great numbers of university students. It is a win for the community and I hope it is a win for the Queensland government if there is potential to use the CUC platform as a base from which to facilitate the delivery of vocational education.

Within that Queensland activity at the moment, as you will note, we go from Mount Isa, which I understand is around 18,000 people, to Dirranbandi, which is 600. That has been a conscious decision from us to be able to pilot the model in different size locations, scale the model and get the model right. As we see it, if we can get the model right in that range of population then there is great potential to keep working across Queensland. We are really excited about the potential in Queensland for this model.

The model originated as a community driven response to living in a region which was too small to attract university investment. They are the populations I think which are of interest. In Australia that often means communities which are under 20,000 people. If we can get the model right to facilitate this type of delivery in communities of 600 or 1,000 or 3,000 up to 10,000 or 15,000, then there is a real strength. It is one of those models where the sum of the whole is greater than the parts. We have found that as we have expanded there is more university interest and there is more government interest because there is greater impact across a larger slice of the regional population.

I do not want to speak too specifically about Balonne and Maranoa because I do not want to steal their thunder. They have the opportunity to present directly to you. Rather I want to demonstrate or indicate the vision and our appetite to work across Queensland, to keep expanding the model to the extent that we can—we are working closely with the Universities Accord panel—but also to broaden and deepen the model into areas like vocational delivery.

Importantly I think, our centres are all locally governed and run by local community boards. The chair noted before questions around industry engagement with vocational delivery. I think it is also true in higher education. Hopefully those community boards ensure that these centres are driven by community need, not by university need or vocational provider need—but that they have the perspective of the community and the community's demand for vocational training as well as higher education and that they can drive the centres in a direction that best facilitates that.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Taylor.

**Mr LISTER:** Have you been to the Queensland College of Wine Tourism in Stanthorpe? If you would like to come at some stage, I would love to sit down with you and talk with you and introduce you to the leaders in the University of Southern Queensland, the Department of Education and the local industry.

**Mr Taylor:** I would love to come. I have talked to the University of Southern Queensland about their Stanthorpe activity. It would be great to get to Stanthorpe and have an understanding of what is happening there. I will take you up on that invitation.

**Mr LISTER:** I take this opportunity to acknowledge Steve Koch, who is here in the room, and thank the department for their ongoing support for that particular campus.

**CHAIR:** It is an outstanding campus.

**Mr LISTER:** We have to go there, Chair.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** Having just been up in the Torres Strait, I want to ask how many of your students are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent?

**Mr Taylor:** Across the model what we tend to find is that the number of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students matches that of the community. We have about eight per cent across the whole model. That includes New South Wales and Victoria. That matches, as an average, what our communities are. I was delighted to be up in Cooktown on Monday with the opening of the centre. They are only two months old but they have 21 students—six of whom identify as Indigenous. Although they are only small numbers, that is once again reflective of Cooktown and the proportion of area around Cooktown which is Indigenous.

The Commonwealth has funded us for the first time to have Indigenous support officers in both Cooktown and St George. We are hopeful that that will be able to increase engagement with the Indigenous communities in both of those places. We are pleased that, even before that happens, our Indigenous students are reflective of the community in which those centres are established.

**CHAIR:** What sorts of courses have the students in Cooktown taken up through the university?

**Mr Taylor:** That is a very good question and I probably cannot answer that off the top of my head. The interesting thing we find across our centres is pretty generally the major discipline of study is health, the second most discipline of study is education, and the third most is around community services and social work. One of the interesting things from discussions we have had with the New South Wales government and with our New South Wales centres is that they are often areas of study where the state government is the major employer. So the majority of those students will work with the state government or alongside it. There are two aspects of working together with the state government: one is around regional development and facilitating the delivery of education and training, and the second one is the state government as an employer. In regards to those locations where it is difficult to recruit in education, health and other state government services, hopefully we can provide a pipeline of qualifications and knowledge that will be helpful for the state government.

**CHAIR:** In terms of the course delivery, for example, in that health space, presumably a fair portion of that is done online by students in, say, Cooktown. Then do they travel? What are the relationships you have for the practical hands-on experience part of delivering those courses?

**Mr Taylor:** You are right in saying that it is online delivery and sometimes the students have to travel to residential schools. Our students study at any university, and often the choice that the students make in terms of universities is based around what the residential schools are, where they are and how much travel is involved to get to those residential schools. I think there are opportunities to work with some of the university departments of rural health, like Southern Queensland Rural Health and others where they have facilities in locations like Charleville, that we can work in with our students' course of study and provide the opportunity to do practicals without them having to travel too far. Inevitably in some courses where there are practical components in residential schools, travel is involved. Some of the councils—Balonne Shire Council is a great example—have done a lot of fundraising and financial support for students to get away to those practicums because that can be a barrier.

**CHAIR:** Some of those relationships are still to be developed in terms of delivering the academia side of things. In terms of delivering VET, if you were to be looking at that, you would similarly need to establish relationships? When you think about VET training, again much of it is online, but certainly most of them all have some practical component to them. You would be needing to look at establishing those relationships with a TAFE or somewhere that has that?

**Mr Taylor:** Absolutely. I think in terms of vocational delivery, the real low-hanging fruit is the digital component of those courses because for us to support the delivery of that is a very simple expansion from our current set of footprints. When it comes to the practical components, as you say, that will require partnerships with providers and the ability to provide the physical workshops and spaces for the students to do those practical based components of courses.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** In terms of moving into the VET space, have you engaged with TAFE Queensland? You mentioned Mount Isa where there is a TAFE campus. Have you engaged with TAFE as the largest provider in Queensland?

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**Mr Taylor:** We are actually setting up in the TAFE campus in Mount Isa which is a great solution, I think, because there is spare space as there often is in regional TAFE campuses. I think that being physically in the TAFE campus will allow greater partnerships around articulation and so on. We have also engaged with TAFE Queensland in Cooktown, for instance, in delivery, and also in St George in delivery, as well as Roma where a number of TAFE students use our centre as well as the TAFE campus.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Following on from the member for Rockhampton, in terms of demographics of First Nations people, a previous submitter spoke about the notion that within regions you still have metro areas. Cooktown and Mount Isa would both fall into that scenario where Cooktown is effectively the administrative hub for the Cape, and Mount Isa is the administrative hub for up to Mornington Island, Carpentaria—all those sorts of areas. In terms of the percentage of students, do you talk about just Mount Isa or are you talking about the greater north-west when you talk about how many First Nations people the universities engage with?

**Mr Taylor:** I am talking about the proximity to the centre. We find our students will travel half an hour to an hour to a centre, and I am talking about that region surrounding the centre. For instance, in Cooktown, our Indigenous support officer is working in places like Hopevale and Wujal Wujal, but when it gets further afield than that, I think there is probably a need for us to set up a hub-and-spoke model.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mr Taylor. We appreciate your contribution.

**DAVIS, Dr Georgina, Chief Executive Officer, Queensland Water Directorate**

**HOLMES, Mr Neil, Skills Partnership Manager, Queensland Water Directorate**

**CHAIR:** I now welcome representatives from the Queensland Water Directorate. Good afternoon. I invite you to make an opening statement.

**Dr Davis:** Thank you. I would like to start by extending my gratitude to the members of the committee for reviewing our submission and allowing us to participate in today's public hearing. The Queensland Water Directorate is the central advisory body and advocacy body for the urban water industry that is providing drinking water and safe sanitation and sewerage services for all Queenslanders. Our members provide safe, secure and sustainable urban water services to all Queensland communities. Our membership represents all councils—Indigenous, Torres Strait, rural, remote and South-East Queensland. We represent councils and statutory authorities here in South-East Queensland and also state government owned statutory authorities that are located in regional and remote areas of Queensland. Queensland Water also facilitates the Water Skills Partnership which is the only industry-led skills program for Queensland's water industry and is the national leader in strategic water skills development and advocacy.

The National Water Training Package is the main vocational package for the sector, and the Certificate III in Water Industry Operations is the most widely utilised qualification and generally accepted minimum standard for wastewater and water operators in the sector. Our research shows that 95 per cent of Queensland's water treatment plant operators and nearly 80 per cent of wastewater treatment operators hold a qualification from the National Water Training Package, with a certificate III, as I mentioned, being the most commonly held qualification for over 70 per cent of our industry.

In May 2022, TAFE Queensland ceased delivery of the National Water Training Package and all associated units of competency. This means that in Queensland we now have no public provider delivering this critical national training package. There are two private training providers within Queensland who provide the urban water sector with access to that training package, but new providers are currently unable to access the Skills Assure Suppliers, or SAS, platform, and the criticality of that is that new training providers cannot access the skills subsidy on offer for the relevant industry qualifications. This leaves students and water providers paying full fee for service. A lot of those issues about accessing the SAS platform were very well-articulated earlier by the Rural Medical Education Australia presentation.

The limited choice of training providers that we have for the sector and the difficulty in new training delivery accessing those SAS subsidies or skills subsidies is only one contributing factor negatively impacting the ability of the sector to adequately reach trained staffing levels that are required to continue to deliver safe drinking water and sewerage services to our communities throughout Queensland. This is also having a negative impact on the sector's ability not only to deliver those essential services but our ability to attract new entrants and retain staff within our sector as well.

The Queensland Water Directorate welcomes these ongoing efforts of all levels of government to provide accessible and affordable skills and training across Queensland, particularly to those regional, remote and rural areas, and we are committed to this process and continuing to be part of this really important discussion. Thank you.

**Mr DAMETTO:** In regards to there being only two private providers that are now supplying the training, do you believe it is now an option for the public provider to perhaps investigate providing training in this area?

**Mr Holmes:** It is certainly a challenge for our members to only being able to access training through those two providers. We know from data that was part of my submission to the committee here, for the period 2017 to 2021, TAFE were responsible for 60 per cent of the enrolments in the National Water Training Package, so their withdrawal from the market has had a significant impact. The tyranny of distance continues to play out for our members. Much of the training that is required throughout the state is a significant distance away from the south-east corner of the state where one of the RTOs is actually being based; the other RTO is headquartered out of Victoria.

**Mr DAMETTO:** When TAFE was providing the training, where were they based; in Brisbane as well?

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**Mr Holmes:** I think TAFE were providing it throughout the state at their various campuses. So, to reiterate some of the comments that Georgina has made, the removal or the withdrawal of TAFE not only limits access but also reduces the visibility, if you like, for those remote and regional communities to actually understand that the National Water Training Package is a thing and is available to them.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Was there any consultation with the industry before TAFE's withdrawal?

**Mr Holmes:** Not that I am aware of, no.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Do you have any information in terms of the demographics of who is being trained at the moment?

**Mr Holmes:** In my data that was provided for the committee in the submission, there were some demographics there which gave a breakdown of the Indigenous make-up, for example. Are you thinking of age groups and so on?

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Yes.

**Mr Holmes:** I was just going to suggest that. Could we perhaps take that on notice and provide some more detail for you?

**Mr SULLIVAN:** That would be great. I am interested if it is people going on to further education or if it is people coming back to it later in life, that sort of thing.

**Mr Holmes:** Sure. Will do.

**CHAIR:** Thank you both very much for appearing before the committee today. I note that there has been a question taken on notice that you will come back to us with some further information on. The committee would be grateful to receive that by Friday, 21 July 2023. The secretariat will be in contact with you. The details are available in the transcript hopefully later this afternoon or tomorrow morning. Thank you very much again for your time today.

**JONES, Ms Katrina-Lee, Policy Director, Skills and Diversity, Queensland Resources Council**

**CHAIR:** I now welcome Ms Katrina-Lee Jones from the Queensland Resources Council.

**Ms Jones:** Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee. Training in the VET sector is certainly something that is very close to our hearts and an imperative part of what we need for our sector to be functioning. The Queensland Resources Council, as you are most likely aware, is the peak body for the minerals and energy industry in Queensland, representing the interests of the hundreds of companies that do work around our state. We employ directly and indirectly over 450,000 persons, largely in high-paying roles, with a significant proportion of these roles located within rural, remote and regional areas of this state, corresponding, of course, to the location of our energy sources and commodity groups. Currently, 20 per cent of our workforce is female with a goal to reach 30 per cent by 2026, and Indigenous participation is sitting at 5.3 per cent which is higher than the Indigenous population share for Queensland, currently sitting at 4.6 per cent. One in nine Indigenous employees were enrolled in an apprenticeship or traineeship in 2021-2022.

The demand for our resources, both in energy and minerals, has been forecast to increase in coming years with the global demand for both fuels in critical minerals essential for our low-carbon future. Paramount to this demand is the availability of a highly skilled workforce that is educated and trained to meet the technical and digital challenges of our rapidly evolving industry landscape, coupled with favourable policy settings. However, challenges do exist, some of which have already been raised today by the previous speakers.

Our industry is characterised by its remote and regional nature, with at times limited access to training facilities. The geographical isolation and lack of infrastructure can make it very challenging to deliver localised VET programs effectively. Clever solutions, as examined today, are called for to overcome this tyranny of distance, which was also mentioned by the previous speaker. Geographical issues impact on our sector's ability to attract skilled workers in sufficient numbers at a time when there is a severe skills shortage across all industry, which means competition for our labour is fierce. Workforce mobility is an issue with employees moving frequently between different mine sites and regions. This mobility creates challenges in providing consistent and continuous access to localised VET programs as workers may not be present in a specific area for an extended period. Although representing opportunities for the state, added competition for labour will also be compounded by developments through the Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan and the burgeoning hydrogen industry, as evidenced by the Hydrogen Industry Workforce Development Roadmap that was released last year.

New ways of thinking about qualifications and transferability of skills across multiple sectors play into the solutions alongside economies of scale in relation to RTO delivery—something else we have heard this morning as well—as well as the implementation of the QRC resources-wide initiative. This has been made possible through funding that has been provided by the Queensland government through its Workforce Connect Fund. We are very excited about this initiative because it will provide tools to our companies working within the sector in regional or remote locations to assist in the attraction and employment of underrepresented groups such as Indigenous and the culturally and linguistically diverse and veterans.

Something that has not yet been raised today is the lack of knowledge of the employment opportunities and associated VET and professional pathways for school students into our industry. It is an issue in regional and remote communities, as well as in urban areas. Creative efforts to address this have a significant role, such as the work of the Queensland Minerals and Energy Academy, which I will talk about later, as the education arm of QRC, and also clever ways of marketing like a campaign that we have at the moment called Shape Your Future. Innovate Our World which was launched only on Monday. It will go for three months and it will provide efforts to improve careers, knowledge and awareness. There are also fantastic models available which I think the committee might be excited about, such as the Career Navigator, which is a service provided under the Queensland Future Skills Partnership, and I will give you some more detail about that shortly.

Based on technology and environmental industry drivers, such as a leap towards decarbonisation, VET packages such as our own are lagging and require review and updates urgently. As examples, significant skill shifts are needed in the mobile plant technician, automation and electrification. So many of our vehicles now are shifting to electrification and moving away from the diesel component or, in some cases, combining the two. Therefore there is a key role for AUSMASA, the Australian Mining and Automotive Skills Alliance, under the national Jobs and Skills Council, to work with the state government agencies in facilitating these urgent updates to modernise the approach to training and education.

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The VET system is also challenged to respond to some of the high-skill needs of the industry, given the shortage of trainers—again something that has been mentioned today—with the necessary skills and commercial viability of RTOs to deliver these courses. A revised and attractive remuneration system that allows for increased regional incentives, which you have heard about a couple of times now, and higher pay rates could go some way to address this shortage. What we are suggesting is that there could be a complete look at this system and, for instance, recognition of what we are terming ‘master trainers’ who possess considerable experience and exceptional skill levels. This could assist in the transition of highly skilled employees from our industry who are wanting to transition to new training roles. Ongoing skills development of our workers is essential to maintain the risks associated with our sector and to ensure the health and safety of our workers. These skilling requirements also rise out of resource safety legislation.

Training delivery needs to be flexible—another area touched on throughout today. Feedback from our members has indicated that the most successful delivery is a hybrid model, encompassing online training and face-to-face delivery, with hands-on supervised training critical for our regional cohorts, allowing for increased engagement and practical application. This needs to be supported by adequate telecommunications infrastructure and the capacity to support online, particularly in regional and remote areas. To give you an example of that, simulated training is becoming an increasing part of this online delivery, however the equipment has to be there and the services need to be provided.

In some areas the level of training for Indigenous cohorts is low due to training venues not having staff who can identify with this group. There is a level of apprehension to engage with the centres, due to insufficient consultation with the correct groups. For Indigenous cohorts, Train the Trainer within the organisation is a suggestion. Lack of Indigenous participation in the training sector is due to numeracy and literacy levels being low, but mechanical aptitude on the other side is high. Additional support for the few RTO Indigenous trainers undertaking virtual training, including support from company supervisors from our sector, could see these green skill roles transitioning into traineeships or apprenticeships. This would also see an increase in commitment from the companies to develop their workforce planning strategies to include these particular skill sets. Having a high-quality, responsive and flexible training system charged with preparing our current and future workforce encompassing apprentices, trainees, new entrants and existing workers is paramount to the sustainability of our industry.

Previous speakers have recognised the essential role of training providers in regional and remote Queensland, and QRC is no different in identifying that training needs to encompass the provision of high-quality skills; it needs to be flexible; it should be aligned to the needs of our industry; it needs to cater for those challenges of the geographical spread that I mentioned earlier, and cater to the range of students’ skills and abilities, particularly in regard to literacy and numeracy levels; and it needs to plan and design education and training programs accordingly to cater for these needs alongside cultural considerations, whether they be school students, workers upskilling, adult learners, or those re-entering the workforce. High-quality, fit-for-purpose learning, resources and technology consistent with the training required for current and future demand in our industry is needed. In some instances, companies report immense value in the longstanding relationship with the public providers, in particular with the face-to-face delivery which has benefited apprentices in the regions. Improved online models with short skill-based courses needs to be part of this mix; hence the role in the ability of providers to deliver on skill sets and micro-credentials. I will have a really good model to talk to you about this in a second.

**CHAIR:** Do you have much more to make in your opening statement?

**Ms Jones:** I can jump to some of the models.

**CHAIR:** Would you like to table your speech notes? So that you can condense it down, do you want to send us your speech notes?

**Ms Jones:** Yes, I can send you the speech notes. I can jump to some of the models.

**CHAIR:** That would be great, thank you.

**Ms Jones:** The Queensland Minerals and Energy Academy, which is very close to my heart, is the largest, most successful industry-led skills partnership nationally, supported by the Queensland government under the Gateway to Industry Schools Program and funded through the 25 bespoke industry partnerships, the QRC education levy and the valued contribution from the Queensland government under the GIS Program. We work in 95 schools, providing 200 workshops across the course of the year, and it is through the valued work of QMEA that students within those regions are made acutely aware of not only the trade needs within our industry but also the courses that help them get there. These could be workshops, as I have mentioned, but also six-day immersive camps.



**CHAIR:** Does this program speak to what you spoke about earlier where you were saying that there was a shortfall of knowledge within students in high schools understanding what career pathways might look like in the resources sector—this program that you are talking about now and the academy?

**Ms Jones:** It does. We are only in 95 schools at the moment. We have a goal to reach 100 schools by the end of the year, which we will reach, because we have a waiting list. However, more needs to be done in relation to that. We have some great statistics in terms of how successful it has been, but I am happy to pass those on to you at a later date. It is also the vehicle to communicate the relevant certificate qualifications that are of benefit to our industry, like the Certificate II in Engineering Pathways and Certificate II in Autonomous Technologies.

I would briefly like to touch on the Trade to Teach initiative as another model which we see as being very successful. Over the years, QRC has worked with various government ministers to try to get this into place. We were so excited that last year the Trade to Teach initiative was launched. It was championed by Brittany Lauga, but also I have to recognise Minister Farmer and Minister Fentiman as the previous skills minister to get that off the ground. What this means is that now we will have tradespeople who are transitioning into these roles who will be able to communicate to these young students the benefits of being in a trade and familiarise them with the skills that are needed and also again those pathways to get there.

I do have to touch on the Queensland Future Schools partnership. QRC is on the steering group for this, but it is a BMA initiative set up in collaboration with TAFE and CQUniversity. A few people have mentioned the transition to automation and what is occurring there, and how the skills and training might be lacking in that space. It is through this partnership that they have developed the Certificate II in Autonomous Technologies and a range of skill sets and micro-credentials, all with the aim of preparing the workforce for the future. It is adaptable to other industries. The agriculture and aquaculture industries are looking at this as well; they are adapting that qualification for their sector. I understand the aviation industry is interested in it as well.

I will jump to the suggestions that we have. We are putting forward that there does need to be some urgent work between the department, the federal government and the Skills Council regarding that training package. This needs to happen now. The gaps are just too wide. It is contributing to market failure, and we need to fix that quickly.

Let us not forget the role of marketing and what that might mean with digital media marketing campaigns and tapping into the interests of the young cohort, the gen Z, coming through. There are many opportunities for Indigenous role models to be in our schools and training institutions and put forward what is possible to undertake these roles. Subsidised costs have been mentioned by others to allow for face-to-face delivery and various training facilities that could be adapted to be more fit for purpose across the state in those regional and remote areas, the Trade to Teach Internship Program and the expansion of the My Careers Navigator model. That model sits under the Queensland Skills Future Partnership. They have appointed a person whose sole role is to communicate careers advice. It is very different to what is there at the moment. A lot of the career advisers out there are taken up with providing advice on mental health and wellbeing. This is purely careers. Yes, this person is referencing pathways into our sector, but she is also referencing pathways into other industries and providing information on what pathways are available. There is a lot happening. There is a lot of opportunity here. I am very happy to work with the government and private and public training providers to improve our training system.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Deputy Chair?

**Mr LISTER:** I am fine, thank you.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Can I just ask a quick question about the schools program you are running. One of my schools has a student involved in that right now. I am sure he will not mind me saying this, but with his academic history and his ATAR prediction he is going to university. Has there been any reflection on the students that are coming through who are going down the VET path, or is it more targeted to those high-end students who want to be engineers and the—

**Ms Jones:** It is targeted at both. For instance, we run our Tradies for a Day workshop specifically for students who want to choose a career in the vocational space. Last week we held what we call our awesome trades workshop in Mount Isa. It is a six-day immersive experience, but it involves the apprentices coming in from the mine. Not only that, it involves the recruitment people from Glencore watching these students who are participating during that camp over the course of their stay. We have a very strong transition of students who participate in those camps going into apprenticeship roles.

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**CHAIR:** I might follow on from the member for Stafford's question. We have heard throughout the course of this inquiry that there is a bit of a disconnect between—whether it be public or private RTOs—industry and the businesses that are within those industries. You obviously represent quite a significant proportion of businesses that play in that space. What is the connection like in your mind for your sector and how could that be improved?

**Ms Jones:** Both of the public providers have good relationships with a number of our members and do things particularly well.

**CHAIR:** Glencore being an example you have just given there?

**Ms Jones:** I think of CQUniversity and the work it is doing with its skills centre where the apprentices come in for a block of time before they even go out onsite. That is one way of doing it. Also the work that we have been doing around the Certificate II in Autonomous Technologies. That is brilliant. That has brought so many of our companies into that initiative to work together. Not only BMA; there are about 10 companies that are working with that because they can see benefits across the board. We are cognisant that TAFE cannot be everywhere, so that is where the roles of the private providers come in. We have thin markets. One of the suggestions is potentially for some of those private providers to collaborate and work together in providing those qualifications that will meet the needs of our industry.

**CHAIR:** Are there any further questions? Thank you very much for your presentation. We are very grateful. Thanks for sharing all of that knowledge and insight into your sector.

**KLIEVE, Dr Helen, Research and Policy Officer, Queensland Nurses and Midwives' Union**

**PRENTICE, Mr Daniel, Professional Research Officer, Queensland Nurses and Midwives' Union**

**SHEPHERD, Mr Jamie, Professional Officer, Team Leader, Queensland Nurses and Midwives Union**

**CHAIR:** Mr Shepherd, do you want to make an opening statement?

**Mr Shepherd:** Good afternoon, committee members. The Queensland Nurses and Midwives' Union thanks the committee for this opportunity to speak with you today. Before we commence, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land upon which we meet today, the Yagara and Turrbal peoples, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I extend that respect to any First Nations people here today.

We are here representing the interests of 71,000 nurses and midwives who provide health services across Queensland. They work in a variety of settings from single-person operations to large health and non-health institutions in the public, private and aged-care health sectors. Today I will speak on the issues raised in our submission. We commend the committee for progressing this inquiry given that Queensland currently faces significant health and aged-care workforce issues.

**CHAIR:** The nation does.

**Mr Shepherd:** It does. There is a national workforce strategy being worked on at the moment and we need one for Queensland as well. The VET system plays a major role in the career paths of health, aged-care and disability workers from entry level development to further training and career development. The focus on regional, rural and remote workers is of particular importance to the QNMU given the recruitment, retention and staffing issues we see in these areas.

There are a range of constraints and limitations but also opportunities around the VET system for healthcare workers. These limitations and their associated opportunities can be seen at all levels in the system—from recruitment to retention and flexible career opportunities. Regarding recruitment, we need to encourage more young people to enter the health and aged-care system with options from an initial role—for example, as a carer or an assistant in nursing or an enrolled nurse—as well as broader career options achieved through further study within registered VET organisations and approved courses to transition from VET to uni where an enrolled nurse can upskill and become a registered nurse. While the latter appears to be an attractive option, there is quite a bit of work needed to make it a practical option for many students.

Our strong interest in the greater encouragement of First Nations healthcare workers recognises the many benefits this brings to our health and aged-care system. As well as an additional workforce that is familiar with living in regional and remote areas, it also contributes to the capacity to both provide culturally safe workplaces and cultural safety for those seeking health care. Many of the constraints on workers who undertake training are associated with additional costs such as fees and living costs while training. The additional cost of clinical placements—which for an enrolled nurse can be up to 400 hours, during which the student is required to work full time—makes maintaining a part-time job difficult. There is limited or inconsistent recognition of prior experience or prior learning, and we see that as a significant issue impacting on the length and cost of courses. Remote access to learning is important for young people who live in remote areas. Such opportunities could facilitate greater uptake. We would encourage the consideration of incentives to address these aspects.

In this context it is interesting to reflect on some of the approaches taken by other governments across Australia. For example, the Victorian government recently introduced incentives that are targeted to address health workforce limitations. These include: free or subsidised training for nurses and midwives; incentives for graduating nurses to remain in the public hospital system; and mental health incentives through mental health scholarships. Similarly, there are federal and state partnerships such as the recent Fee-Free TAFE initiative to encourage school leavers to undertake training. Within the Queensland system we currently have a range of schemes such as the fee-free VET initiative and the cert III guarantee that you would be aware of. That is a Queensland government subsidy designed to help working age Queenslanders get their first certificate III qualification. There are also increasing links between VET and tertiary systems to assist transitioning between those systems where nurses can upskill from enrolled nurse to registered nurse, but these links need to be deepened further now that universities are competing with the VET sector in providing qualifications.

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The strategies also reflect a growing recognition of the balance between public and private benefits of education and training. There are clearly accepted public benefits from a skilled workforce and there are some incentives that appear justified to encourage students to choose to work in areas such as health and aged care, but for these pathways to be sustainable there needs to be greater consistency and clarity built around strong links between training and education providers and employers along with longer term consideration of future health workforce supply and demand issues, which I am sure the nation and Queensland will be looking at. We need a national cooperative model, not a state-based competitive model.

We look forward to questions and further discussion relating to these issues, in particular ways to progress the issue of safe workplaces, supporting nurses and midwives and the best health outcomes for all Queenslanders. That concludes our opening remarks. We are happy to address any questions the committee might have.

**CHAIR:** I will share with you our experience in Cairns. It was lovely to hear from Principal Houghton, the principal of Bentley Park College. They are working very closely with the health board in North Queensland to get their students on those pathways. It is quite an exciting model that they have embarked on in the last 12 to 18 months.

**Mr Shepherd:** We would really like to see better articulation of the three sets, particularly in healthcare services, between carers and assistants in nursing who are doing a cert III, enrolled nurses doing a diploma, and the registered nurse degree. There is not a clear pathway from one to progress through to the other.

**CHAIR:** Deputy Chair?

**Mr LISTER:** Nothing from me. Thank you very much for your appearance.

**Mr DAMETTO:** I have a quick question around supporting people going through nursing training who have to travel to their placement. For example, if you are a training nurse right now and you are living up in Weipa and you have to go to the other side of the coast to Cairns to do your placement, what sort of support is currently available for someone like that? From your point of view, how could that be improved?

**Mr Shepherd:** It could certainly be improved by more support, particularly if they are doing their course through a public provider such as TAFE. With regard to the private providers, there was a private provider that is based here in Gregory Street in the city and some of their students elected to do almost half of their placement—their enrolled nurse students—at Winton Hospital.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Very good.

**Mr Shepherd:** They reported just an excellent experience of working up there. Some actually said—and I guess it is one of the other issues—that if their partner could get a job in Winton they would go back there tomorrow to work at the Winton Hospital.

**Mr DAMETTO:** There you go.

**Mr Shepherd:** I am not aware of any specific support services. The support services were provided in that example by the Winton Hospital in that the students were able to live in a nurses' home type of facility and they stayed there for the few weeks that they were there, but there was little other support that they could get.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Yes, so no financial support?

**Mr Shepherd:** No.

**Mr DAMETTO:** I did not think so. Thank you.

**Mr Shepherd:** They chose to go there.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Of course.

**Mr Shepherd:** Yes.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** Just further to the chair's comments about our visit to the Cairns high school, there is a similar model in Rockhampton where the five high schools provide through one of the schools so that in the senior years of school you can do your assistant in nursing certificates I, II and III and then depending if they want to go to university afterwards to become a registered nurse it is another 12 months, so it works quite well. The students can work in aged care or NDIS areas and things like that. With that model, I would love to know what your comments or thoughts are of that model of delivery.

**Mr Shepherd:** Yes, getting them the experience when they are young is really good. I think it is a really good and applaudable way that the schools are now entering into this capacity for students to get training in health care, training in aged care and perhaps give them the taste and the desire to go on and do further study and further work all the way, as you say, to a registered nurse. We think the ability to commence that and do that cert III in grade 11 or grade 12 is a really good opportunity to strengthen the workforce that we are going to need into the future. I think of my own experience. In grade 12 I had work experience at a hospital—and it was very guided of course in grade 12—and I have now been a registered nurse for 40 years. It really is commendable to get the students early doing those cert IIIs and giving them a taste of providing health care and how good it is to provide health care.

**CHAIR:** It certainly sets a pathway. I know the youth member for Redlands in the Youth Parliament from Redlands College did her AIN before she completed year 12 last year and was working in an aged-care facility at the same time to do that and is now going on to a career on that medical path, so it is a fantastic initiative.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Just reflecting that we have just come back from TI and some of the feedback we had from teaching and from VET people was particularly in the health space and trying to build the numbers of First Nations people in the health sector, as you have reflected on in your submission and again today. Their point was it is not just about getting the kids through to get their Senior Certificate. It is not just about them going into the health workforce—it is long term—but we need those people to be the future trainers and the future educators which is a cycle that you have to sort of force. Does the union have any thoughts as to how not just in the TI but across Queensland we can better encourage or build a pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to provide health care whether in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health or in the health system more broadly?

**Mr Shepherd:** I think through Queensland Health there could be some advances done there where you can use the people who are experienced, particularly around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health care, to become mentors and to become guides and bring the young ones through. To retain someone in a workforce, they need to feel valued, they need to feel encouraged and they need to feel that they have someone who is looking after them, and that is really important from a cultural perspective not just for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders but for everyone—that you feel as though someone takes an interest in your career—and that is where those mentors can make a big difference.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** It is probably true outside of your profession, too, when you are talking about the administrative staff in Queensland Health or the wardies or allied health or whatever.

**Mr Shepherd:** Yes, it goes across the board, yes. Queensland Health does have some retention and recruitment strategies, but I think one of those retention strategies, particularly for those who are approaching retirement, could be to use those healthcare workers to become mentors and bring the young ones through.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Which from a systemic point of view means that the knowledge does not walk out the door when the—

**Mr Shepherd:** Yes. When the person leaves, you do not want their wisdom to leave with them. I might just lastly mention that one of the significant issues that is a problem at the moment is the recognition of prior learning. There does not seem to be any clear consistency across the RTOs or across the unis. You can have a cert III course that is accredited by Skills Australia, then you have an enrolled nursing diploma of nursing course that is accredited by the nursing accreditation council and then you have the registered nurse course, which is also accredited by the ANMAC, but there is no clear consistency on how recognition of prior learning is provided across those three. You could have one uni that does one thing and one RTO that does another, and that is one of the significant issues as an incentive for someone to go along that pathway.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Yes. On that point, my experience is that that is not even just an inconsistency from sector to sector; it is actually from institution to institution as to what they—

**Mr Shepherd:** Yes, it is institutions as well, yes.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Yes, as to their entry points and all that sort of thing, yes.

**Mr Shepherd:** Yes. Even though their criteria for the training are the same, they have different approaches to recognition of prior learning.

**Mr Prentice:** I was just going to add to that. Certainly our experience, particularly as we are coming out of COVID, is that integration of services of jurisdictional boundaries of roles at both the private and public sector are really important and I think what we have experienced during COVID

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was just how complicated that can be at times, and I am sure you are finding the same thing as we found in other areas. So I think integration is really the key. I am pleased to see that you have seen some good examples of how things might work.

**CHAIR:** Consistency is the key, isn't it?

**Mr Prentice:** Yes. The other thing, too—and we see this a lot in health and aged care—is that motivated people create islands of excellence in a sea of mediocrity.

**CHAIR:** Indeed they do.

**Mr Prentice:** So I think one of the roles of government as the biggest stakeholder in this is about promoting the widening of those islands of excellence and really government is the only body with the resources and the reach to do that. So I think again the lesson from COVID is that we really need to think about how all the pieces fit together. Before COVID everything limped along. COVID came along and widened a lot of the fissures and made them more apparent, so I think the lesson learned out of all of that is focusing on how we can make the systems work better as a lesson learned from the last few years.

**CHAIR:** A lot has been learnt post COVID, that is for sure. Thank you all very much for presenting here today. We are grateful for your contributions. The time for this hearing has now expired. Thank you to everyone for sharing your views and supporting the committee's work today. We are very grateful for all of the contributions. They have been very useful. They have shown us some consistent themes in certain areas and others for consideration. A transcript of these proceedings will be available in due course. I now declare this public hearing closed. The committee will now take a short break before commencing our public briefing with officers from the Department of Youth Justice, Employment, Small Business and Training at 3.15 pm. Thank you very much, everybody, for your time today.

**The committee adjourned at 2.53 pm.**