



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

COMMUNITY FORUM—INQUIRY INTO THE DELIVERY OF VET IN REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE QUEENSLAND

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Tuesday, 11 July 2023

Thursday Island

TUESDAY, 11 JULY 2023

The committee met at 3.39 pm.

CHAIR: I am Kim Richards, the member for Redlands and chair of the Education, Employment and Training Committee. My electorate covers the lands of the Quandamooka people. I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. We are so 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. With me here today are my trusty deputy chair, the member for Southern Downs, Mr James Lister; the member for Theodore, Mr Mark Boothman; the member for Hinchinbrook, Mr Nick Dametto; the member for Stafford, Mr Jimmy Sullivan; and the member for Rockhampton, Mr Barry O'Rourke. We certainly cover a very diverse range of communities right the way across Queensland. The member for Cook, Cynthia Lui, is unable to be here today and sends her very sincere apologies. She is travelling with Minister Fentiman looking at a range of health needs across the Cook electorate.

Today's forum forms part of the committee's work on two inquiries, the first being the delivery of vocational education and training in regional, rural and remote areas; and the Cairns TAFE upgrade project, which we had the opportunity to visit yesterday—and a fantastic facility that is—in addition to the marine college. We had a great opportunity to visit and see the good work that is happening there. This meeting of the committee is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and it is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. For everyone speaking to share their views today, I must remind you that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. We are all extremely pleased to be here today on Thursday Island. It is a beautiful part of Queensland. We were a bit nervous that we might not get here. We have had a few delays this morning. Thank you for having us here today.

Vocational education and training is critically important to the Torres Strait region and all parts of Queensland for driving economic opportunity, growth, development and, importantly across the Torres Strait, making sure that you have the services that are needed. Gaining a trade or a skill through TAFE or other private vocational education and training providers can change lives forever, and for the better, and create stronger communities. Gaining access to a course that suits your needs, particularly in remote and regional areas, often presents challenges, as well as opportunities, to look at the way things are done. We hope to hear from you today. We have a number of submitters that we are going to hear from that are listed on the agenda as witnesses and then we would like to open the floor to anybody else who would like to contribute their thoughts in terms of the delivery of vocational education and training. As part of our work on vocational education and training we welcome any views that you have with regard to the Cairns TAFE campus that we looked at yesterday as part of the two facets of the inquiry that we are undertaking. We look forward to hearing your views.

NELLIMAN, Mr Moses, Principal Project Officer, Acting Manager Thursday Island, Department of Treaty, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, Communities and the Arts

CHAIR: Thank you, Moses. I invite you to make some opening statements and remarks and then the committee will have some questions for you.

Mr Nelliman: Thank you for the opportunity to speak here this afternoon and for visiting Thursday Island in the Torres Strait and getting a better understanding of the challenges around vocational education and training in the remote and rural areas. For anyone who does not know me, Moses Nelliman is my name and I am currently with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships office here on Thursday Island in Victoria Parade, previously known as DATSIP. We have just gone to a different department name, Department of Treaty, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, Communities and the Arts. We are more so in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships space and part of our core business, so to speak, is economic participation, including encouraging, supporting and assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities peoples into economic participation into Queensland's economy, whether that is through employment or training that will lead into employment. On Thursday Island we do operate in that space and my colleague Kerryn is in the room as well who also looks after the Northern Peninsula area, the five communities of Bamaga, Seisia, Injinoo, Umagico and New Mapoon.

We do try and encourage and support any training and employment activities that are happening in our region. The Youth Employment Program, commonly known as YEP, is an initiative for the younger cohort, commonly known as year 13s—the ones that are coming out of school—up to 25. We try and provide additional support and assistance for them to get into employment. Those members of parliament who come from remote rural areas will understand the challenges of limited industries and opportunities for them to go into. It is important that whatever training we assist them into will lead into sustainable employment or a pathway to employment on the mainland. That is more of an available option, particularly for those going into the resources sector or other industries where they will base themselves on the mainland. We normally would have a database of jobseekers. With the introduction of the new employment agency GBK on the island we are working closely with them to find opportunities to empower and build capacity in their database or for their clients to go into employment or training that is required to further them into employment.

At the moment, the YEP program is under review in Brisbane. They are just having a look to see whether it is effective, whether it is still relevant and whether it is doing what it is supposed to be doing. We are still active in that space. We look for any opportunities. I am currently talking to a number of stakeholders in the NPA and the Torres Strait. I am presently talking to a Western Australian company in the resources sector to work out employment pathways from the Torres Strait into mining companies in the Pilbara region. They are just ad hoc activities we are trying to do to link people into employment. Central to that is appropriate training and training pathways to get them job ready. That is my opening statement. I am open to questions.

Mr LISTER: Moses, you mentioned that politicians who come from regional areas will probably have an understanding of what you are getting at. Youngsters in my neck of the woods have to travel away for parts of their training and so forth. Can you give us an indication of what sort of cultural impacts there are for Indigenous youngsters who are going away to undertake parts of their training? It is not easy for anyone, I would suggest, but what are the particular cultural implications and what could be done to improve opportunities for Indigenous youth in accessing and completing vocational training, especially if they have to travel away?

Mr Nelliman: I think the obvious one is the language barrier. English is not necessarily the first language spoken at home, particularly in the outer islands, the eastern islands and the top western islands. There are a number of Torres Strait languages in existence that are still being spoken. When they do go to Cairns, for instance, to tech college or to do their TAFE component or whatever apprenticeship they are doing, the language may be above them depending on the trade, particularly if it is electrical and there is a lot of technical jargon that they may not be aware of that is not used on worksites here on TI or the NPA. It presents a challenge.

CHAIR: We saw that yesterday at the marine college. They have a partnership to deliver Pacific Islander trainees, and in terms of communicating you could see the challenge that language was presenting. I had the opportunity to visit this TAFE campus back in May, and I heard from the marine studies team here that language did not necessarily dictate whether or not they were competent and capable, but it was part of the challenge in terms of getting their qualification at the end of the course.

Mr Nelliman: Yes, absolutely. The cultural safe spaces that training providers offer on the mainland is important. TAFE—and I will not single them out—does a good job of having Indigenous engagement officers, they fly the flag outside some of their campuses and they have Indigenous print on their corporate uniform, which is important. I know the TAFE campus in Townsville has a big mural in the centre of the foyer. Creating a culturally safe space is important as well because they are a long way from home. They are isolated and they may feel they want to hop on the next plane back to Horn Island.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Moses, how do you attract trainers to come all the way to Thursday Island, and is it a problem retaining them up here?

Mr Nelliman: I am not a training provider, but one of the challenges is suitable housing on the island. Depending on the qualification they would be delivering, it may not be viable for the company to come up here if they are only delivering to half a dozen students. That can be a challenge if training providers are trying to meet their costs as well. I am not aware of instances where training providers have not travelled to the Torres Strait or the NPA for any particular reason other than because there has not been a demand or request.

Mr DAMETTO: Moses, I come from a regional area as well, a small town called Ingham. One of our biggest problems is retaining our youth. Do you have a similar problem up here in the Torres Strait, retaining youth once they have been trained up? If so, are there ways you think we could try to retain some of those youth in the area?

Mr Nelliman: I do know Ingham very well because I grew up down the road in Townsville and lived there for a long time. It is similar to Ingham, where you basically have to go away to university or you have to go away to train. Ultimately if you are doing training here, either through the school or other means, the jobs may not be on Thursday Island or in the Torres Strait; they may be in Cairns or elsewhere.

Mr DAMETTO: So becoming overqualified means you have to go and chase work somewhere else. It was very interesting when you commented earlier about looking for mining employment opportunities in the Pilbara region. Is there a reason why you would choose somewhere like that? Is it because there is a previous partnership or it is just an easier pathway into the Western Australian mines and east Queensland?

Mr Nelliman: One of the lead supervisors from the mining company that approached us is from the Torres Strait and understands the connection between Torres Strait Islanders and the northern part of Western Australia, particularly historically with the railways. There are a lot of Torres Strait community people still in Western Australia. He understands the challenges with training and employment in the Torres Strait and wants to provide a pathway. Not everyone will want to leave home or be suited for the mining industry, but he just wants to create a pathway into that sector.

Mr SULLIVAN: There is a local production company in Stafford that is producing a production called *Straight from the Strait* that talks about the mass movement of Torres Strait Islander men and their families over to regional WA, where they broke records. They beat the Americans and the Europeans in what they did. It is a fascinating story and a really legitimate link between the east and west coasts, so thanks for flagging that. From memory, I think you said that your mum was from Mer and your dad from Boigu?

Mr Nelliman: Badu Island.

Mr SULLIVAN: Sorry. For those of us from the south—and it is great to be back here on TI—can you just talk about how this is nowhere near the northernmost point of our state and the Torres Strait so do we bring young people in to TI or Cairns? Do we need more outreach? In your role it would be service delivery more broadly but obviously with an education bend today. Do you have any reflection on that difficulty?

Mr Nelliman: For certain types of employment there are people brought in from the outer islands to train on Thursday Island. Sometimes they have to go to Cairns, but cost wise it is more cost efficient to get the training here on Thursday Island, depending on the employment. It does happen. It has happened before. It will probably continue to happen that way. I guess some of the challenges with the outer islands is access to essential resources like the internet.

CHAIR: That was absolutely going to be my question.

Mr Nelliman: It would be very difficult to do online unless you are set up properly.

CHAIR: I think there are over 200 islands in the Torres Strait.

Mr Nelliman: Yes, 17 that are inhabited.

CHAIR: Of those 17, how many would face challenges with internet accessibility and connectivity?

Mr Nelliman: I would say 90 per cent.

CHAIR: That is substantial.

Mr Nelliman: Depending on where the towers are in the Torres Strait. Weather comes into play as well as other factors.

CHAIR: Which would be a real challenge when you think about in the post-COVID world how much we have changed the way we do things. In relation to skills and training delivery, particularly in those more unique courses, having access to the internet is imperative to get those skills and training, I would imagine, in service delivery.

Mr Nelliman: Yes, that is correct. Even on Thursday Island we are not immune to Telstra going down or losing online services for a while.

CHAIR: The last time I was here, in May, we were at the hotel and I think the power went out seven times over the course of two hours. It was quite incredible.

Mr LISTER: I know that in my neck of the woods there was a big investment by Education Queensland to access decent internet in schools and local communities also shared in that benefit. Is that something that is in progress in the Torres Strait that you are aware of?

Mr Nelliman: I believe Matt from the school is presenting later. That might be a question for him. I could not tell you.

Mr O'ROURKE: Moses, it has been really interesting to listen to you talk about the challenges for rural and regional Queensland in accessing training. It is so difficult; there is no question about that. Not having internet access and things like that are just critical and make it so much more difficult. Not having employment options locally is another level of complexity. Thank you for your presentation.

Mr Nelliman: Thank you. I have worked with DATSIP and DESBT and gone to communities such as Doomadgee and Mornington, some of those gulf communities, and there are the same challenges. It is not just the Torres Strait.

Mr DAMETTO: Moses, this is my first time in the Torres Strait. I am absolutely fascinated with the place and I wish we were staying here for a month, not 24 hours. I am trying to get an understanding of opportunities for employment up here. What type of trade-based or hospitality-based roles are available up here?

Mr Nelliman: There are a number of projects in the pipeline that we are looking at. There is the Pajinka project at Bamaga, which is the redevelopment of the old Pajinka lodge. If and when that goes ahead it will create a number of jobs, which will mean we will have to upskill the existing workforce that is there. At the moment we are flying people in to do jobs that essentially locals could be doing if we were to upskill them and provide them with the right training.

Mr DAMETTO: Because that is the whole idea of training people locally to be able to do those jobs locally. We do not want to see a fly-in fly-out workforce when we have people standing around wishing they could get into some of those roles locally and provide for their families and, like you said earlier, economically participate.

Mr Nelliman: Yes, and we understand that the Queensland government is pushing for Indigenous tourism in 2032 for the Olympics. If we have a number of people coming to the NPA and then coming to the Torres Strait, councils are going to have to ensure their infrastructure is up to standard for the number of people. I think the estimated numbers were 70,000 visitors this season into the NPA, and a number of those obviously come over to the Torres Strait as well to visit. If that is doubled by 2032, you can imagine the strain on the existing infrastructure if we do not keep on top of that.

Mr DAMETTO: We want to make sure that if we are having that large influx of tourism we are also making sure that that is sustained; it is not just a flash in the pan, right?

Mr Nelliman: Yes, that is correct.

Mr DAMETTO: Exactly, yes.

CHAIR: When I met with Mr Kazu over on Friday Island he was saying that they are booked for this season 100 per cent—absolutely chock-a-block—so you can only imagine what it will be like as we head towards 2032.

Mr DAMETTO: Yes. The secret is out.

CHAIR: The secret is out. Thank you very much for your presentation today. We are really grateful for your contribution. Thank you.

Mr Nelliman: Pleasure, Chair.

CHAIR: I take this opportunity to thank the TAFE here on Thursday Island for hosting us.

Mr LISTER: Hear, hear.

CHAIR: Yes, so thank you very much. I also acknowledge that we have with us today TAFE Queensland's new CEO and the general manager for North Queensland, John and Susan, so thank you for being here.

HORGAN, Ms Amara, Deputy Principal—Senior Schooling, Secondary, Waybeni Buway Ngurpay Mudh, Tagai State College

TULLY, Mr Matt, Head of Campus, Thursday Island Secondary, Tagai State College

CHAIR: I welcome representatives from Tagai State College. Matt, it is great to see you here again and it was lovely to catch up with you when I was up here in May, so thank you for joining us today.

Mr Tully: Thanks for having me, everyone. Before I start I obviously want to acknowledge the traditional owners, the Kaurareg nation, whose land we are on today and acknowledge all the people in the room. I do not presume to be anyone of note in this space, but I suppose the role does dictate that, so hopefully we will be able to provide something today for the panel's consideration. I have Amara Horgan with me, who is our senior school deputy principal and who used to be the head of campus at TAFE here, and also a number of our other Tagai executive staff as well, so feel free to value-add anything if I miss anything, guys.

With regard to an opening statement, we know that VET works for our kids and we know that competency-based training works for our kids. I have come from a teaching background where we have seen VET embedded within OP subjects in the 2000s. Up here we ran school-based VET with TAFE as the RTO and it got to a stage where we could not staff that anymore; in the mid-2010s we got to that stage where we could not staff it. We did not have enough qualified teachers with the TAE industry currency to be able to facilitate that delivery within the school. We then moved to a model of using TAFE solely as the RTO. We have had a longstanding relationship with the TAFE and have a great relationship with TAFE. We are next-door neighbours. So we had to move to a block model of delivery whereas before we would run school-based VET on our campus within our timetable. Because we could not staff VET anymore, so that the kids could access their VETiS funding still we had to move to a VET block model where TAFE would fly in external trainers. That allowed us to continue VET training for our kids which we believed was very important and for them to be able to access their VETiS money. That in itself presented a number of challenges that we overcame over many years of partnerships. We have up here what we call our flagship kind of VET training program which is our marine program which you saw here, and that is externally funded through TSRA. That has long been a really high-class, high-quality program for our kids.

Mr SULLIVAN: High completion rate.

Mr Tully: High completion rate, high job rate afterwards. One of the reasons for that is sustained partnerships over a long period of time, particularly with our service provider, UAV Industries, and their investment in the region and into our kids. That is one of the challenges we face obviously—you touched on it before—around staffing, retention and all of that kind of thing. That is par for the course up here. They are challenges that we overcome on a daily basis to ensure we can provide the best education we can for our kids. I want to maybe touch a little bit more on a few more of the challenges that we face, if that is what you are interested in.

CHAIR: Yes.

Mr DAMETTO: Yes.

Mr Tully: We are now in a space where our VET block model continues, and TAFE have been very supportive of that. When did we start that, Amara? 2017 or 2018 or something like that—2017. Now we want to invest more in VET within our timetables again—school-based VET run through our staff through external RTOs—but that costs money, money which our families do not have. If I was at Caloundra State High and, let us say, you are doing a cert III in fitness—great course—it would cost \$350 and our parents would happily pay that. Here the challenge is a bit different, so we then as a school have to fund that. Not only are we funding the training and assessment side of it; we are also funding the qualification side of it, which is not sustainable. What we have had to do is really think creatively around how we can increase our VET delivery whilst maintaining high levels of quality in that training as well as those currency and industry partnerships within that training. The model we are moving towards for 2024 is using another public school as the RTO which will be Caloundra, which is my base school. When I leave whenever my contract finishes, I will be able to still maintain that partnership from Caloundra to here, so that is super important.

I am kind of going all over the place here, but Moses touched on it around language and around engagement for our learners within the VET training space. Language is one element, but we have been working very hard and this year we are really seeing the fruits of that but we need relevant

pedagogy within the training space. One of the challenges with using external trainers coming up through TAFE was they are very much used to teaching adults who often pay to be there. In terms of our kids, yes, they are grade 11 and 12—they are young adults—but they are still school students, so you need to be engaging as well as being culturally sensitive in our region. TAFE and Amara in particular have been driving this for a very long time around relevance of that training package. We are getting to a space now where we believe as the client we have been able to influence that through TAFE and through that partnership. However, there is still a lot of work to do in that space.

Moving forward, I have touched on cost and I have touched on staffing, so what is my wish list? How do we resolve some of these problems? The big one that we have been advocating for for a very long time is for our year 11 students to be able to access their cert III guarantee funding in year 11. What we do know is that students leave school and do not engage with further training. In school we have them as a captive audience. We are working towards their QCE and they are part of a regimented, structured program. We know that students do not engage as much as we would like with that cert III guarantee funding. How can we improve our offering in years 11 and 12? By offering cert IIIs for starters. How do we then fund that? Let us have a concession potentially—whether it is this region, NPA, wherever—where we can access that C3G funding earlier rather than in year 13.

The second wish list is around cultural pedagogy and language. One of the reasons we want to pursue this RTO relationship with Caloundra is that my teaching staff, who know and understand our learners, have the ability to then modify that training package to suit my kids. TAFE have been great in the last couple of years in particular around wanting to meet the needs of our kids, and that has been an ongoing challenge over many years. So school-based VET works in the fact that I have my staff who teach them every single day of the week also training and assessing them in years 11 and 12, so that knowledge of your learner really comes home then.

The other big one that I know Amara has been working on for a very long time and the whole TAFE team really is around ensuring that local Indigenous tradespeople in particular have that pathway to become trainers themselves and therefore are able to train our kids. If we can facilitate them getting their TAEs and then giving back into the adult learning space and then the student learning space, that I think would make a big impact in terms of engagement. If you see a person you identify with having gone through a similar experience that you are going through now as a student, who has come out the other side and who is a tradesman but is now teaching me from my community, then that is very impactful. So that is one.

We talk about product development around training packages. There is a lot of scope in this space. There is a lot of intellectual property just sitting in this room—cultural knowledge and cultural understandings that I will never know and people from TAFE who write the training packages would never know. Yes, we have advisers and things like that, but there is real opportunity for us within this region to develop products—training packages—suited to our learners here, both adults and students, that has that cultural understanding and, really, acknowledgement of place in terms of where we are at right here. So there is the product development side. Probably the last one I will touch on—long opening statement, isn't it?

CHAIR: That is all right. Keep going.

Mr Tully: I apologise. The last one is that we really need that employer partnership. Moses was talking around the year 13. Our goal at Tagai State College is to open the door for kids to be able to have an opportunity when they finish school, and not just get their foot in the door but walk through the door and succeed. We have to equip the kids with the skills necessary to land the job in the first place. They do not get free jobs. They still have to compete with everyone else. We have to get them the entry but then give them the skills to be able to succeed once they are in there so if they did move away—have to move to Cairns—they are exposed to that, they are familiar with that and they are familiar with other work environments that they might be gaining employment with in year 13 and beyond. That is indicative of university as well. I think you touched on it earlier around the challenges that our kids face when they do leave the island for further employment and for university as well. It is a similar kind of issue. I kind of went all over the place there. I did not realise I would be grandstanding.

CHAIR: In terms of some of the things that you raised, Principal Houghton from Bentley Park was at the Cairns forum last night.

Mr Tully: Yes, Bruce.

CHAIR: There is some fascinating work happening down there in the health VET space. When he talked about what success looked like, it was about those industry collaborations first and foremost helping to drive that demand and that partnership amongst schools—working together to share that

resource as well. He spoke about the Shoreline program. We actually met one of the trainers at the marine college who was teaching some young people about marine mechanics, which was a fascinating program. Maybe that is something that could possibly be broadened because it certainly took in that cultural aspect as well as the language piece and the trainers were specific to that.

Mr Tully: I know Bruce and know of the program. We have run the marine training program up here very successfully for a very long time. That is a great program down there. The challenge for us up here is there is still that industry link around what happens to the kids afterwards.

Ms Horgan: To add to that, our region is historically overtrained. We have, I dare to say, thousands of people with qualifications that stop at that. Matt has touched on a lot of areas, but I think that transition between gaining a qualification and getting at least work experience is our issue. Ultimately, it would be wonderful to think that with every government agency on this island—I think there are 120 agencies on this island—there was some kind of agreement or commitment so that some kind of Indigenous procurement could perhaps be honoured. Again, previous mayors have talked about that extensively, that we are some of the most trained peoples in the country. However, it really is that link between the training and the employment outcomes that I think needs—

CHAIR: What Principal Houghton had suggested was interesting, that only in the last two years they have developed a stronger connection with the Cairns health services and the hospital there. That partnership with them has allowed them that opportunity to deliver a range of opportunities in the VET space in health and that practical opportunity in partnership with the hospital. There is a model there.

Mr Tully: Within our region we are looking to expand the SchoolTech model with Woree State High School.

CHAIR: He spoke about that.

Mr Tully: Bruce was one of the principals; he did not establish it but he kept that going for a very long time with the partnership. We are one of those schools that is part of that application to expand that. Obviously we have not secured the funding yet and it is getting to the eleventh hour for us in terms of planning for the next year. That would really help facilitate that link between training and work. Our model would look different to Woree State High School because of our location. If our kids could access work experience and work placement, whether it is in Cairns, the outer islands, TI or wherever, that would be an amazing opportunity. They would go from two weeks of high-quality training here at TAFE, whether it is in a certificate II or III, and they would transfer into a structured work experience program, whether that is a traineeship like the Shoreline model or work experience looking at different industries.

We restructured our senior schooling model to be pathway focused. The region has identified various industries for that growth. We were just talking to the grade 10s about it this afternoon. There are six pathways that we will be offering next year and a lot of that is contingent on the SchoolTech funding coming through. First is our university pathway; we need to maintain a strong academic program for those kids to progress. Then we have our services pathway, which is hospitality, tourism and early childhood. Then there is our trade pathway, which has a construction focus; our marine pathway, which is our long established flagship; health, obviously our biggest employer in the Torres Strait; and the last one which is a massive burgeoning industry up here which is our cultural arts. Obviously we have to try to align all of our subject offerings with the needs of where our kids are going to be working. It presents a great opportunity if we can see what kids are learning in the classroom but also have that real work experience and real structure and employer links into year 13.

It could be a game changer for our kids. These are external things that are out of our control. All we can do is put our best foot forward in relation to these applications. We will still continue to try to achieve the goals if that funding is not successful, but it would just reduce the impact. To give you an example, for year 10 work experience we take 30 kids to Cairns. It might be the first time a lot of those kids have gone to Cairns. It is definitely the first time they are doing work experience. It is \$50,000 and that comes out of our school budget.

Ms Horgan: That is without food.

Mr Tully: Yes, that is without food. Yes, students contribute to that, but we cannot expect them to pay \$1,500 for that, so they contribute \$300. That is the reality of it, and they are school funds that could be spent on other things. It could be spent on reducing class sizes or whatever else. That is just the realities of where we are. If we were to have the SchoolTech model and have proper industry placement for kids, we would be looking at a million dollars over three years for every one of our three cohorts of kids to have work experience in Cairns.

CHAIR: As Amara pointed out, what is contained here on Thursday Island would suggest that there is an opportunity for greater integration and collaboration.

Mr Tully: There is huge potential there for sure. Also our kids should not be disadvantaged because of the area they live in. We are a big believer in that. They should have the same opportunity as every other kid.

Ms Horgan: We can probably take that a little bit further. We know a lot of our students go away for work, but they come back and I am not sure what is set up here for them to come back to. There is conservation and land management, and ecosystems is another massive industry. We have already got great relationships with the TSRA rangers and the Kaurareg rangers as well. There are definitely employment opportunities in that space. It is getting a lot of media, particularly lately, but that is another area apart from the cultural and performing arts that we need to also explore outside of fisheries, which is another traditional industry here. There are only so many things within that industry that we can sustainably provide. I believe that link with industry and some kind of commitment that they are training for something to move into something is needed. If they do go away for employment, what has our region got in place to support them on their return?

Mr Tully: Amara articulates the vision we have long held that they graduate on the Friday, we walk across the stage with their QCE, their certificate II or certificate III and the person shaking their hand is not me but their employer to say, 'Welcome.'

Ms Horgan: 'See you Monday.'

Mr Tully: 'See you Monday.' I think that is a really powerful image of the year 13 process. They are leaving our care—and we case manage heavily, as every school does, to get the kids over the line—but who is taking care of them after that? That is the vision we have for it. VET is instrumental in achieving that. We are big believers in it; we are going all in on VET in a big way. We are trying our best to navigate the structures, the funding et cetera to provide what we can for our kids.

Ms Horgan: Actually reducing the applied subjects that we are offering and replacing them with VET qualifications. I must extend our greetings to TAFE and the executive here today. It is lovely to see you and congratulations on the appointment. They have worked with us really closely throughout the many years as well as Jo in really trying to tailor a bespoke model that best suits the needs without taking away any of the integrity of these qualifications. I give credit where it is due. Thank you.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Reading here, you have 17 different campuses?

Mr Tully: Yes.

Mr BOOTHMAN: How does that work?

Mr Tully: We are one college. We are the only secondary campus. In essence, I am the principal of the secondary college.

CHAIR: I have to say this is a tricky thing to get my head around.

Mr Tully: There are 16 primary campuses on, as Moses said, all the inhabited islands of the Torres Strait and there is TAFE.

Mr BOOTHMAN: When I went to Western Cape College a couple of years ago, they were saying they were getting quite a fair few students from the Thursday Island group going down there to do the courses. How does your relationship with Western Cape College work? Are they competing against you?

Mr Tully: No, we have a remote school alliance. Whether it has been active over the last couple of years I am not sure. Amara, you might be able to talk a bit more about that. In essence, we work collaboratively with NPA and Western Cape around a whole range of different things. We do not compete. It might be that kids from here go there for a particular reason. They do not actively seek enrolments from our region, but every family is different obviously. On some of our outer islands the kids will be going to Cairns.

Ms McLean: In terms of accommodation, we lose kids because we cannot accommodate them here.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Yes, Western Cape has accommodation onsite.

Mr Tully: My understanding is that Education Queensland runs that boarding facility at Western Cape. Here we have an Aboriginal hostel facility and an independent association called Kaziw Meta Boarding College. They are the two boarding facilities. Quite often they are full so they cannot take any more kids. Kids from the outer islands want to come to TI but quite often cannot

because they cannot find accommodation at the boarding colleges or with family, so they have to go to Cairns or Weipa to find that bed. It is a shame that they have to leave Torres Strait for that, but quite often it does come down to accommodation. Every school offers different things. A particular kid might have a particular skill set that is more accommodating at a different school, or their parents think that anyway.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Something that Noel Rawlins mentioned to me quite a few years ago is that one of the main reasons they were attracting those students to come down was because they actually had accommodation on site.

Mr Tully: On site, yes. We work well with our two boarding colleges. We always have. We have had great relationships with them, but if they are full then they are full. I do not know when that is going to happen with the boarding college on Horn Island. That has been in the pipeline for almost 10 years and still has not eventuated.

Mr BOOTHMAN: In terms of seasonal tourism up here, I was looking at an app last night when we were in Cairns. A lot of cruise ships go around Australia and obviously pass through this region. Is that something that potentially could be tapped into, to get a lot more individuals into the tourism industry through vocational education and training and to keep them here?

Mr Tully: Yes, for sure. As I said earlier, that cultural arts pathway is really aligned to that in terms of industries that we are wanting to equip our kids for. We offer a Certificate II in Tourism and a Certificate III in Business now, but that is through Binnacle, an external provider. We are always trying to gear kids up for industries that are relevant. For partnerships with tourism providers like a cruise ship, we have to ensure at school that things are sustainable and it can be done on a daily or weekly basis. Things like seasonal tourism partnerships become very complex. Do I remove a kid from their timetable for just two weeks to go and experience this or even a day? I do not even know when they are coming. There are complex things like that. There are providers here on the island that we would be looking to have partnerships with and local Indigenous tourism operators as well in particular. Again, these are all works in progress and have been progressing for a very long time often.

Mr BOOTHMAN: You mentioned retention. How do you attract and keep trained professionals up here, which is so far away pretty much from any major centre? How do you keep them? Do they leave for personal reasons? Are there problems when it comes to keeping the training of those individuals up to date?

Mr Tully: All of the above.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Is there anything that you feel would make a difference when it comes to keeping their training up to date? I have heard stories that people have had to leave Weipa to go to Brisbane to do some training.

Mr Tully: One hundred per cent. That is one of the reasons we go with the TAFE external trainers model so that we know that they are industry current when they come up here and do a bit of training. We are moving back now to a school-based model with the RTO at Caloundra and we are going to have to invest in industry currency for our staff. We are fortunate now that all of our staff who will be taking those subjects next year—cert III in fitness, cert III in hospitality, cert III in early childhood and care—are all industry current at the moment, but we will need to maintain that.

The retention piece is a massive question. As a school leader, I want to keep staff as long as I can and that is about creating a positive work culture where they feel valued and things like that. Obviously the department has incentives. We get an extra \$6,000 a year but no-one is going to uproot their family and come up here for an extra \$6,000 a year. We have to create an attractive environment where people want to come firstly and then stay. What we find is that the people we attract have genuine care for our kids and they see the social justice element to our work so they feel they are making a difference whereas you might not necessarily have that teaching math methods to a high-performing kid in Kelvin Grove, if you know what I mean. It is a different kind of work and it takes a different kind of individual to succeed in our environment. It is our job as school leaders to try to foster that and to try to help create a positive school culture so that people want to stay.

We are fortunate this year that all of our teachers want to stay another year, but the following year it is probably going to be different because their two years might be up and they will be eligible for a transfer. As I said earlier, that is a given in the environment in which we live unfortunately. I will talk to whoever wants to listen about how as a region—I do not presume to talk on behalf of the region, obviously, but I think I have been here long enough to have a perspective. We have to get our kids trained enough to take these jobs, to be the teachers, to be the nurses, to be the government

workers and have the housing. We talk about huge issues with housing up here. I feel terrible saying it because, as a government employee, I have a house. That is a grave injustice in itself, considering where we are. But there are so many knock-on effects of having high-quality education, high-quality training and kids succeeding in tertiary education because they can come back and they are the ones who have the houses available so we do not have to fly in a million nurses every week to staff the hospital; they are here. That is what we all work towards as educators. We have them only till grade 12. Year 13 we are trying to influence a little bit more these days.

CHAIR: That brings it back, as we spoke about last night, to the local industry partnerships.

Mr Tully: One hundred per cent, but also how are those organisations progressing their staff?

Ms Horgan: Workforce planning and succession planning.

Mr Tully: Yes. We get them cert IIIs and that gets them a job, but are we challenging our local staff to progress? Are we supporting them to do that? In health, for example, you have your cert III in health, but where is the pathway for them to progress to do their bachelor to become a registered nurse while being supported with an employer to do that? I am going to grandstand a bit now, but if we want a sustainable workforce we do not have to fly in people. The Indigenous population is more than capable of doing these roles. We just have to facilitate that as institutions. Structurally, how are we supporting that to make it happen? We try our best in education to get them so far, but what happens then? Anyway, I am grandstanding now. Those are just some thoughts.

Mr DAMETTO: You can do some more grandstanding. We are actually enjoying it. It is a really insightful view on how things work up here. My question is around something that I said a little earlier about people living in TI who are perhaps overtrained but underemployed. I think an important part of training is making sure not only that people can economically interact and participate but also that we are aligning the roles available locally so that people can do that. What is the missing gap there? Is it the pathway into those employment roles? Is it a further qualification that is necessary to go from that cert I, II or III into those roles? What is the gap or the bridge?

Ms Horgan: Again, I think it is a lack of a genuine commitment from our 120 agencies—to really genuinely commit. They say, for example, ‘At the end of every year we can provide five traineeships in the health industry’ in whatever spectrum. I do not think we have ever really nailed that. We may have the collegial partnerships with them. We may talk the same rhetoric.

Mr Tully: Or traineeships here and there.

Ms Horgan: Yes. However, there is nothing consistent.

CHAIR: Has marine been the exception?

Mr Tully: Not in terms of industry partnership. In terms of the high quality of the training that we offer here, yes, and the program that TSRA funded through us got that next step in the door, but still then where do they go after that?

Mr DAMETTO: If I can comment on the marine side of things, it is like down in Brisbane, Townsville or Cairns at the moment: not everyone wants to be a barista. We can train a million baristas through TAFE through a cert II or III, but not everyone is going to get employment roles through that training.

Ms Horgan: That is right.

Mr DAMETTO: You said earlier that there are only so many coxswains we may need in the commercial fishing or tourism industries, right?

Ms Horgan: Yes, that is right. I think there was definitely community feedback around that, too. They are aware that there has been a lot of money invested in that program, but again it is one industry. I think we do need to explore burgeoning industries and regional specific entrepreneurship opportunities as well. I am not sure further training is necessarily—again, you can train and train and have all these qualifications, but unless it is anchored into an employment opportunity then we are still just training.

Mr Tully: That is not to say that people cannot change what they want to do either.

Ms Horgan: Yes, sure.

Mr Tully: It happens all the time.

Mr DAMETTO: So perhaps it is not a training issue; it is more of an industry building problem that we have locally here?

Ms Horgan: Yes. The RTOs, obviously TAFE included, have worked with us for decades now to address the training needs. It is just the next leap.

CHAIR: The collaboration piece with the industry stakeholders.

Mr Tully: And hence people move.

Mr SULLIVAN: I want to broaden that question a little bit, and this is one of the issues that was raised by Bentley Park yesterday, too. Is there a weird interaction or a responsibility on Education Queensland as well with the ranking and ATAR system now within both of them? Is there a perverse incentive to just use VET to get the senior cert without it being their career? Is there a risk that the more you double down on VET in school then it is about getting the senior certificate and not that cert at all in terms of where to next? How do you balance those two? Going to your example previously about cooperation for government agencies here on the island, is there work to say, 'Okay, if they get their senior cert do they need to start their training again or is the VET that we are providing enough to go and get those jobs?' If we are talking locally, what is the goal for the school? Is it to get the highest percentage possible of kids finishing year 12 or is it both, because both are very worthwhile goals?

Mr Tully: If I was toeing the party line, I would say, yes, we have to get 100 per cent QCE and 100 per cent of kids in grade 8 we want to graduate in grade 12. However, we know that in reality kids get to grade 11 and that is why we have the policy of learn and earn. If we can say that we have a legitimate pathway for this student and they can transition into employment, or whether it is an apprenticeship or whatever it is, then it is a win for that kid. It might look bad on my data in terms of my percentage of retention, but I think whoop-de-do! It is a success for that kid.

Mr SULLIVAN: The flip side of that, though, could be it is a win-win whether it is an encouragement for them to stay in school knowing that they have that backup.

Mr Tully: We know in our context that kids are better off when they stay in school until grade 12. We want every kid to achieve a Queensland Certificate of Education and then have a pathway from there. That is our goal. As I said earlier, it is a foot in the door but with the skills to succeed. There are a couple of things there. Obviously the industry partnership links are around the foot in the door, but the skills to succeed part is our training and what we are doing there. The skills to succeed are also with the employer. How are they then progressing, in years 13, 14 and 15 and forever, our Indigenous population so they can progress within that organisation?

You commented around VET and alternative entry, universities and things like that. In reality, 30 to 40 per cent of kids in state schools now go the ATAR pathway. For us it is less. It ebbs and flows every year based on the cohort. It is important for us to be able to offer that university pathway, and we will always offer that university pathway because it is a big need. Being able to use a certificate III for the ATAR, I think that is a really important step and a good step by the QCAA to make that happen because it is an acknowledgement of the rigour which VET training can have. You do not need to write 2,000-word essays in whatever subject that you are doing in your general subject to be university ready.

Ms Horgan: Arcing back a bit to the certificate III year 11 proposal, we broached this some years ago with the then Minister Fentiman when she was minister for DESBT, and our idea around it, to start with, was around retention. We thought our outside island students rarely access that C3G funding or come back in once they are outside on the island. We thought that providing a certificate III over two years would retain them initially, and we are in an environment where we can really support the completion of those certs, and we know that industry highly regard a certificate III sometimes over an applied subject or a general subject as well. We tossed it around for a long time and we thought, 'Are we essentially buying points for our students?' A certificate III is worth eight points towards the 20.

Mr Tully: That was when we were funding it.

Ms Horgan: Yes. It was a matter of—I would not call it inequity, but we did really explore how it could be perceived and what were the inherent risks of pursuing that.

Mr Tully: I think it is important. Obviously it is a consideration. We have to give kids the opportunity to get their QCE and as much opportunity as possible. We are backward mapping certificates into year 10. The classic one we are going to run in term 4 is Certificate I in Basic Financial Literacy. My No. 1 priority is that kids are financially literate, but in the back of my mind is that they are getting two points, too. Cool, that's great! That might be unique, but I am pretty sure most Thursday Island

educators would be having the moral imperative of, 'Why are we doing the training in the first place on top of the points grab?' Every school would have done it: whether we need to push a kid through a particular cert at the end of grade 12 to get an additional four points or however many points are necessary. But, at the end of the day, while they are getting that qual, they are doing that learning, so the kid is benefiting from that. We can have broader conversations around QCE and that kind of thing, but I would probably be talking out of turn.

Ms Horgan: You also mentioned, too, that in competency-based training, that style of learning really suits in particular our senior secondary students because it is sequential. You finish one unit, you achieve success at regular intervals, you move onto the next one. It just makes sense. It anchors their learning. It makes school make sense, I think, as well.

Mr SULLIVAN: Certainly in comparison to the external examinations.

Mr Tully: The externals, but then even comparing VET to applied, you have the end-of-term exam where you do 10 weeks of learning, or we are working towards completing a project and being competent. That is where we are at in terms of why we are moving more towards the VET space rather than the applied—well, one of the many reasons.

CHAIR: I want to say thank you very much. I am mindful of time. We have a few more submitters.

Mr Tully: Apologies, everyone.

CHAIR: No. It was extremely valuable, so thank you very much, Matt and Amara. We are really grateful for that contribution. We will take a brief break for five minutes.

Proceedings suspended from 4.50 pm to 5.05 pm.

DICINOSKI, Mr Gavin, Managing Director, Occupational Skills Centre Australia (via teleconference)

CHAIR: Welcome back. We have on the line Mr Gavin Dicoski. Gavin, would you like to make some opening statements and then the committee will have some questions for you?

Mr Dicoski: The first thing I will say is thank you very much, Madam Chair. You have to be one of the few people who actually pronounced my name correctly from the get-go, so thank you.

CHAIR: I was panicking about it, I have to say.

Mr Dicoski: I had dot points put down that I wanted to quickly talk about, but that has certainly grown into a bit of a letter. I will read through it. As an RTO at a Skills Assure provider, I have witnessed significant advancements in the vocational education system since I was a young man growing up in Rockhampton. However, I still believe there is a long way to go in providing for and improving this sector. Just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, my business partner and I were invited to participate in an Austrade mission to India focusing on rail infrastructure and potentially exporting our skills training to that market. Unfortunately, our plans were derailed—no pun intended—by the virus and we still remain open to exploring such opportunities in the future. In the meantime, we have focused our efforts largely on other plans close to our hearts in upskilling Australians and addressing what we were seeing were existing job vacancies and shortages that sadly were often going unfilled.

For instance, when I talk about that with what we do with rail training, there is a rail company in Brisbane that is basically going to stop doing rail infrastructure building because they are struggling to get and retain staff. They are going to be moving their focus into civil construction, largely, as I say, due to the lack of rail workers. For them, no rail workers puts their contracts at risk so they are not interested in applying for contracts. Then when you look at it from a bigger perspective around Australia and certainly the state, a lack of rail workers puts more than their business in peril; it puts a whole lot of rail projects in peril.

Then you have other companies that are doing work offshore. There is one company we do work with that has workers working in New Zealand. Again, that is great for the economy. It brings dollars into our country and the state, but sadly it also sees workers get taken away and that labour force become weaker.

As a training provider, we have dedicated considerable effort to serving the people in regional and remote Queensland. As I said before, I was born in Rockhampton and I am certainly proud of my heritage. A few years ago, we were approached by a group of students in Cairns who had actually travelled down to Rockhampton prior to do a rail training course. They asked us to do a training course for them in Cairns and we did that. Those people picked up employment and then we were asked whether we would go up and do some work in the Torres Strait, specifically at that point on Thursday Island and Badu. These courses were highly successful, with the chairman of the Badu PBC at the time informing me that he was told that all the people who actually did the course in his community had secured employment in the industry. Sadly, there is a horrid word that we hear far too often now—casualisation. I would be foolish to say that I believed every bit of employment was ongoing, but it certainly did get those people a foot in the door.

As that happened, we had other communities come forward looking for the opportunity for us to do training for them as well. They were requesting our presence on their islands. However, once invited, you cannot simply just do a course for one or two people, due to the high costs involved. As a company that does rail infrastructure training—and I do not know if there are people in the room there who are aware of some of the training we have done up there—we have to go to the point of actually shipping rail track around the islands and buying new sleepers. Due to the biosecurity rule, you cannot move sleepers backwards and forwards throughout the Torres Strait. It does become expensive when you look at that with flights, accommodation, venue hire and trainer wages, so we do advertise and we do run some public courses right throughout the Torres Strait. Again, people in the Torres Strait and people who visit the Torres Strait know how expensive it is to live there. It is also pretty financially demanding running a business there. You might argue that, yes, there is a higher offset, and there is. For a training provider, there is a loading that gets applied to the funding but, again, that easily gets matched by the additional costs that are there. We have had some people ask us why we are doing rail training in the Torres Strait considering there is no rail track in the region.

CHAIR: I was going to ask that question, I have to be honest with you. Give us the answer.

Mr Dicoski: It is a very good question. If we look at it like that, then why do we do induction training for coalmines in Brisbane? The reality is that it allows people to fly-in fly-out. We see people who are picking up work, flying in and flying out from Horn Island, using their Local Fare Scheme et cetera. I have an email here from a past student. I will not read his name but if you want me to table this I am quite happy to. He said—

Hey, Gavin.

Sorry for a delayed response. I just wanted to let you know that I completed the Certificate II on Masig Island and I am currently employed by Switch Rail working for John Holland in the Yandee and Port Hedland area for BHP. I am grateful for the opportunity you provided to me and my people through this course. It has truly transformed my life and opened doors for my family and future generations.

Many thank yous.

It is not just about doing training for the sake of training. We do believe that the training that is conducted in the Torres Strait does change lives.

I have just recently come back from Erub myself doing some fee-for-service training for Meriba Ged Ngapun Mab GBK up there. Whilst we got some fantastic feedback on this fee-for-service training we are doing there, we had a guide who was that very first student who came to us and wanted us to go into the Torres Strait. He sent us an email wanting to catch up because he was actually forming his own rail company. He is just sitting there at the moment waiting on a bit of ink on paper from BHP and Rio Tinto in the Pilbara. He is going to use the Torres Strait people who he has worked with to work there. He announced this new rail training company that he is putting on Facebook. Again, this is a little bit of history for people who may not be aware. He said, '55 years ago our forefathers achieved a world record in Western Australia by laying the fastest track, covering 11 kilometres in 11 hours.'

CHAIR: We heard that.

Mr Dicoski: Have you? Okay. Well, there you go. It is interesting he says 11 kilometres. I think it was actually just under eight kilometres, but given this is what he has written I am not going to correct it. He said—

Now 55 years later it is official: I have started a railway company, United One Rail, so that our people no longer have to face the hardships they have to get a start in the railways. We now have a bridge to carry on that legacy. The world will now remember us.

So, again, there certainly is potential there.

We also get a lot of videos from individuals training and working down in the rail industry. It fills me with pride when we see these people who have picked up employment. One of the key lessons that I have learnt in doing training in the Torres Strait is it is certainly a unique place to do business. There are cultural differences such as things like sorry business and sad news, and it is nothing to see a classroom of people leave for two weeks. When you are paying \$300 a night for accommodation and \$300 a day for a training room and all that sort of thing it all adds up. But having said that, it is precisely these differences and that respect that makes us and motivates us to continue our work there. You are never going to strike a more respectful community of people than those in the Torres Strait.

Student retention can be challenging, but some of the differences can be attributed to the history of training where individuals are treated simply as square pegs and forced into round holes. Things like offering certificate II or certificate III in retail on some of the islands is absurd when there is one or two shops there. Again, nobody is going to offer fly-in fly-out roles to do retail work—well, at least to my knowledge anyhow. There are certain industries, like fisheries and tourism, that hold a lot of promise for the areas, as well as rail training, and we hope that that will continue to attract people in. We believe that we have contributed to changing people's lives. We believe everybody deserves an opportunity and that opportunity should not be based on where they live.

I must also mention that over the past 12 months, in partnership with GBK, or Meriba Ged, we have witnessed improvements in assisting jobseekers in the Torres Strait. Feedback from their clients to us indicates a positive change and positive outcomes all round. Again, we must be doing something right when we get asked to put a 12-month service plan together for GBK for their board. Numerous studies and surveys have indicated private providers are shouldering much of the burden of training and do so more cost effectively than public providers. Whilst that is encouraging, I think it is important that we all step back and break down this 'us verse them' mentality. Public providers and private providers need to work together. We must work together. Both groups can do excellent work and both

groups need to work together to make sure that we can meet those goals. I guess, we don't receive invites to these areas by providing substandard service. We focus on quality outcomes every time. I know that I said we need to work together. Let's endeavour to break down those barriers and dismantle the silos that we often place ourselves and others in.

In recent months my business partner and I have been approached to enter into a joint venture with the Torres Strait company that owns a quarry and is actively working towards securing contracts for building sea walls in the region. In actual fact, that business owner expressed his goal of actually one day buying our RTO and becoming the first private provider to be genuinely based in the Torres Strait. I have to admit, staring down the barrel of 60 years old, it would be quite good to see that happen in the future. Personally I have developed a deep connection with the people of the Torres Strait Islands, as I believe many of our staff have as well. The level of respect they bring is unparalleled in my experience. It is my intention to continue working with the communities and the people, even beyond my retirement if I do sell the business and move on in 12 months time or whatever.

The reality is that there are far too many things in this industry that people like myself and people who live on mainland Australia take for granted that just aren't offered to those communities. Again, I am proud of the many friendships I have made on the islands and I want to express my willingness to be involved in any projects, committees and task forces that aim to create opportunities in the Torres Strait through vocational education and any other contacts that I may be able to build. My focus is not on building business viability for myself. As I said before, I do not want to do that with any charge. It is something that I am committed to personally. Just as we do for many of our students now, if we get a student who cannot get funding for various reasons, we will put them into the classroom and we will train them free of charge. It costs very little more to train six people rather than five.

Every time I hear the words 'skills shortage' I cringe. What we collectively need to do is link the men and women of places like the Torres Strait to these jobs. Yes, many relocate for rail work, some do fly-in fly-out work, but again we need to ensure that the employers see how keen people are for those opportunities. Also, with low incomes and next to no disposable income for many peoples up there, it is hard for them to take that step from the classroom onto a payroll, but, again, hopefully collectively we can all make that happen.

In closing, I want to say to the Queensland government, both past governments and the present government, and certainly to this committee and Rob the secretary, on behalf of our company I extend gratitude for the efforts that the Queensland government has put into vocational education. Significant progress has been made and we must recognise this and we must recognise that this is only the beginning of a longer journey. That is realistically all I wanted to talk about, Madam Chair.

CHAIR: Terrific, thank you, Gavin. I have a couple of quick questions to get a better understanding. You are delivering rail training. How many certificate courses are you covering in that?

Mr Dicoski: When you say how many certificate courses, we have been doing a certificate II largely as a prerequisite for the certificate III. Now, what happens is rail is one of those peculiar things where you cannot do a certificate III training course until you hold a certificate II and what makes it even more challenging then is to work in the rail environment you need to be holding that certificate II. What happens is people come in, they get their certificate II and if they secure work they secure work. It becomes a bit difficult then to try to entice people to come back and do their certificate III when they don't really need to. They look at it then that it is training for the sake of training, which is not a good thing. We have done a few courses on quite a few of the islands.

CHAIR: Of just cert II?

Mr Dicoski: Cert II and a little bit of cert III as well. A little bit of cert III. We actually have a cert III course that is being run at the moment on Badu, although at the moment they are doing a bit of blended learning with video and that sort of thing.

CHAIR: That was my next question: how much of those certificate courses are delivered physically, in-person training time, and how much is done online?

Mr Dicoski: Realistically none of it is done online. What we will do is we will do face-to-face learning. It is easier to do that. I think it is something that you need to do to keep students engaged. As an example, our certificate II course, and again it is basics and at the end of it you bolt railway track together—move the track around and get sleepers and they put the sleepers down and they bolt it all together—but I don't know, it might take six weeks or something like that. So, we will run that for a straight six weeks and then when it comes to the certificate III, I think it is done in three blocks of four weeks plus self-learning in between.

CHAIR: How many islands are you delivering across? Is it that you need to go to each of those islands or is there a way of being more centrally based?

Mr Dicoski: It has been like that in the past. When we went and did it on Thursday Island—look, people up there—it is just crazy. Not that I am a Rugby League follower or anything like that, but they have a football competition on Thursday Island and people get in their dinghies and travel 80 kilometres by sea to get to play a game of football. We are trying to not encourage that. We have been doing that in the past, but we have been speaking with one of the ladies from Meriba Ged, or GBK, and looking at doing it wholly and solely in clusters and just doing it on an as-needed basis.

CHAIR: Your key challenge, if what I have heard is correct, is the logistics of in-person delivery on island?

Mr Dicoski: That is one of the key challenges. If there was transport between the islands that would be great, but sadly there is not. You get out to the outer islands and to travel anywhere you have to do it by dinghy or by air. We all know some of the horror stories that have happened in the oceans and only just recently up there. I do not want to be encouraging people to jump in a dinghy and travel 80 kilometres to come to training each day. I would be more than happy to look at doing training in the areas where they are, but like I say GBK have basically said that they will look at supporting people to go to other islands so they can do it in a cluster rather than have to jump in boats and go back and forth each day.

CHAIR: Thank you. Deputy chair, did you have a question?

Mr LISTER: Thank you for your appearance and for your kindly and perceptive approach to training. You mentioned the idea of training people in the Torres Strait in retail as being not the way to go. Do you have any observations to make, as some others have who have appeared before us on this trip, regarding the Skills Assure Supplier status of organisations that tend to exhaust the Certificate 3 Guarantee funding that individuals have on inappropriate training? Do you have any suggestions on how that might be discouraged better by the state government?

Mr Dicoski: That is actually quite an interesting question because, as I said, we are a Skills Assure provider ourselves. We get a lot of people coming in to the class that yes, they want to do it, no, they don't want to do it and then you will have a talk to them and you will hear that they don't want to travel. So if you don't want to travel the reality is that you are probably better off not doing that course. We get people who come into the class that might have two and three certificate IIIs to their name already. Not just that either, but people who come into the class who have two and three qualifications next to their name and often they are in things that you would think that—having said that, unless you dug into the rail thing you would not see the potential there either.

CHAIR: I was going to say that is the exact argument. You could say why would you do one in retail or why would you get one in rail for the very same reason.

Mr Dicoski: Yes, but the reality is I think that providers need to be a little bit serious about it. I do not think that we have exhausted anything there, so to speak. Like I said before, people come into the class and if they cannot get Certificate 3 Guarantee funding or cannot get Back to Work second chance funding, as long as they are committed to bettering themselves, we are more than happy to actually have them in the classroom and train them anyhow. I am not 100 per cent sure on the best way forward on that. I am really not. It does happen. You see them. As a Skills Assure provider you have to do a check through DET connect or the Australian apprenticeship information system to see whether a person is qualified for funded training or not. You see people there who have three or four different qualifications they have never been able to do anything at all with and not just that either, but you get ones who have actually started three or four as well as that.

CHAIR: We are rapidly running out of time and we still have two more witnesses. Thank you for speaking with us this afternoon. It was very insightful from a privately operated RTO in the rail industry in the Torres Strait Islands. Thank you very much for appearing today.

Mr Dicoski: Thank you very much everybody and safe trip home.

WARRIOR, Ms Flora, Board Member, Torres Strait Islanders Regional Education Council

Ms Warrior: Kapu kut nithamunka mura. Good afternoon to you all. I acknowledge the Kaurareg traditional owners on whose land we speak from. I just happened to sit next to the right person on the plane to come over here today. I did not know this was on, so I am just happy to be here. I have been scribbling notes in the back. I would like to talk from a lot of perspectives today.

I am a board member on TSIREC and I represent the top western cluster group. That includes Mabuia Island, Badu Island and Moa Island which has two communities, Kubin and St Pauls, so I represent the four communities. I would like to acknowledge our wonderful education leaders here from Tagai. As a TSIREC board member, I am also by default on the Tagai board as well under our new structure. I acknowledge them and our NPA brothers who came over and joined us today. I acknowledge Mr Moses Nelliman and other leaders present with us today. I would like also to declare that I am a traditional owner from Mabuia Island. I am probably the only outer island person here today, I think, by fluke.

I have been involved in the fisheries sector for a long time in a lot of capacities as a trainer, mentor and a volunteer to build our fisheries sector locally in the Torres Strait. I have my own small business so I am self-employed as a business consultant. I am also on the board of Torres Health Indigenous Corporation. I am the mother of five children and two of them have autism, so I am quite busy. I am honoured to be here today. It is a fluke to find out about this today, but I am happy to be here. I will just zip really quickly through my notes. It is not a proper presentation as such.

I am looking at this from an outer island perspective, because everything is about Thursday Island, let's face it. From an outer island perspective, we do not get much. Everything stops and starts at Thursday Island. We are happy if we get any service. We usually get breadcrumbs out on the outer islands, and that is why I strongly advocate all the time for outer island services. We face very different issues to people who live on Thursday Island.

CHAIR: I had the opportunity to visit Saibai Island in May.

Ms Warrior: The complexities are quite different to Thursday Island and outer island life is very, very different. We do not have banks or post offices. We do not have high schools. We do not have a CBD. We do not have infrastructure to set up an office and provide services. We have none of those things. One of my other hats is to run a microfinance program on Mabuia, and I run that from my kitchen table because there is just no office space on Mabuia to run that.

Going from the notes that I have written down, we still suffer from a lack of resources on the outer islands. We have people who can go away and do training and come back, and people do, but sometimes we just do not have the resources available locally to support them. One example I can give is a lot of communities have IKCs. I do not know if you have heard of the IKCs, but they are Indigenous knowledge centres. They are like country lending service libraries. It was set up through the State Library in the early 2000s and Mabuia was one of the first sites that got up as an IKC. Back then we had a lot of working public computers available for people to come and do research, assignments and all of that, but now it is quite under-resourced. Between that time and now I do not know what happened. There is certainly potential there to support people who do study through resourcing of those areas.

Another example is that we, as an outer island community, put in a submission for the state government initiative for children to get access to laptops over the COVID lockdown period. Not one child received a laptop in the Torres Strait, so it gives you an idea really of how under-resourced we are in the Torres Strait. Our children had to watch on TV other children getting laptops and wonder why they could not get them. It is not from want of trying; it is just that due to the complexity of our model and region we were just knocked back on technical grounds. I do not know how often a pandemic happens, but I think it was a good circumstance to bend the rules a bit. But we missed out, our children missed out.

CHAIR: What is the population of Mabuia?

Ms Warrior: Mabuia has 300 people. The census, I think, says something like 250 or something, but we have about 300 people. That sort of gives you an idea of what we miss out on as a community. It is not from want of trying; it is just that we are not seen or heard or listened to full stop.

CHAIR: Do you have a primary school?

Ms Warrior: We do. We do not have a high school. Some of our children attend Tagai college here. We now have an upgraded communications tower, which means our signals—

CHAIR: So you have good internet.

Ms Warrior: Connectivity is now improved on Mabuiag. Once upon a time we had to tiptoe on the beach to find a signal by putting our phones in the air. We do not have to do that anymore.

Mr DAMETTO: We still have to do that at Forrest Beach, don't worry.

CHAIR: I was going to say that I have to do that in Thornlands out on the driveway.

Ms Warrior: Hopefully there are no crocs around while you are doing that. We now have a communications tower upgrade which improved connectivity for us. Some of the families in the community also utilise satellite NBN services—not everyone, but some; maybe those who can afford it.

You heard about the fisheries program here. I have been involved as an entrepreneurship trainer in some aspects of the TSMPP, the Torres Strait Marine Pathway Program, to teach the entrepreneurship aspect of being a sole trader if you are a fisherman. A lot of our fishermen do not realise that, when you are a fisher and you are a sole trader, you are actually a business owner. Thumbs up also to Tagai for the Cert I in Financial Literacy. It is a wonderful step. There have been wonderful outcomes out of that program but there are still challenges. People get trained, yes, but there are still hiccups in terms of setting up their small businesses, finding finance, getting access to safe finance. A lot of people might say they do not have budgeting skills. When you are poor, you have very good budgeting skills. Again, it is not from want of trying. We have a lot of people who are interested in small business. They have other challenges in their way that they have to overcome.

CHAIR: Are the employment opportunities that exist on outer islands predominantly those small, self-run businesses? What does that look like?

Ms Warrior: There are not many opportunities but there is quite a huge potential for self-employment in a lot of areas, predominantly in the fisheries sector. Because of the complexities around fisheries I work in a lot of aspects. I not only work with small business intenders, the sole traders, the fishers, but I also work with organisations that set up as a social business so they can run a processing plant in the community. A lot of that is quite complex work because a lot of these communities are quite remote. Whatever resources you can get on the mainland, you would have to pay double or triple to get on the outer islands.

One thing we had an issue with last year starting from October—particularly on Mabuiag—is that we had our flights suspended under new regulations, so we had no access to public service flights out of Mabuiag and Erub Island. I think there has been an interim arrangement just recently to reinstate service flights. That means for me as a small business owner and trainer I had to work out of Cairns for four months because I got sick of sitting in a dinghy in rough weather travelling between islands. It is unsafe. That is part of the complexities of living in such a remote region. Not everyone has access to marine transportation. I had to ask someone to give me a lift all the time across from one island to another and get a service flight in from another island.

CHAIR: I greatly appreciate that. Although I am based in South-East Queensland I have five islands, and I know the challenge when you get from one island to another and it is not where your home is. It is generally not where you have a car or access to get around. It is difficult.

Ms Warrior: We cannot just stand at a bus stop or go to a train station. It is quite problematic. There are safety impacts we have to take into consideration. We do not want to put our children in an open boat in rough weather. I deal with a lot of vulnerable people with the microfinance program that I run, and I know that a lot of them are impacted by economic shocks that impact the family—that might be death or sickness in the family—that would then impact on their learning. Again, it is not from want of trying; it is just that these are the complexities of living in this region.

CHAIR: From your experience of the community on your home islands, have any of them undertaken skills and training to attain certificates, and what does that look like when married up to employment opportunities?

Ms Warrior: Most often it means people have to get off the island to work and maybe do fly-in fly-out. It is probably why it is popular because it means they can come home every now and again. I know people who have worked in the rail industry.

CHAIR: In the rail industry, who we have heard from before.

Ms Warrior: Yes. It is difficult to be away from your family for a long time. It is just that the longer you are away, it impacts on your connection to people and place. It is seen as a good option, yes. What are we interested in from an outer island perspective? We would like to be listened to. We would like resources when we ask for resources. I talked about the appropriate resourcing of the ITCs to get them up to standard so that they can service the community better. I would like there to be—

CHAIR: Would that help facilitate people achieving training qualifications online?

Ms Warrior: It is access to technology, yes. What are our people interested in? What are our kids interested in? They are interested in things like the maritime training we spoke about here before because it keeps them connected to place. They are interested in the land conservation training because again it keeps them connected to place. They are interested in language and culture. They are interested in trades as well, as long as they can come home and work. If you live on an outer island, the chances are they are going to go away and come back. My eldest child did not finish high school. She went to TAFE and did a few certificates and used it as a pathway to get into uni to do nursing, and today she is a renal nurse. She specialises in renal health.

CHAIR: Fantastic.

Ms Warrior: I have another child who is studying IT3 through TAFE at the moment and he is supported through the IYMP program which is quite a good program to help remote kids to transition into the urban centres where they provide them with accommodation, they teach them independent living, make sure they turn up to TAFE and that sort of thing. They respond really well to that program. I think it is called the Indigenous Youth Mobility Pathways Project, if I am correct. He wants to use it as a pathway into uni as well. The VET sector is quite important in that regard for our kids, particularly those who do not finish high school. From a TSIREC perspective, at the moment we are still challenged by the amount of boarding that is available. That is always top of the list. We are always challenged by transition issues on how to get the children from the outer islands transitioned into other towns or cities where they can then access education.

CHAIR: Is that the key remit of the Torres Strait Islander Regional Education Council, to look at how you facilitate solving challenges and problems that exist? Tell us a little bit about the structure of the council itself.

Ms Warrior: We have representatives from the five cluster groups in the Torres Strait so that we capture the diversity of the different regions. Every community is very different and highly independent. We respect another community's autonomy. We can never speak for another community without their permission, which is such a big thing in our culture as well. We are always mindful of that. We basically advocate and lobby to improve education services in the region. We also run programs and receive funding to run programs in conjunction with uni education which is the service delivery arm. One example is the Strait Start Montessori program which turned out to be a really good program to capture the zero to four age group before they start school, and not all our communities have access to a Strait Start site because they may not have the infrastructure available in the community to be able to put a program in the community. Again, not for want of trying. It is lack of physical infrastructure basically to run these wonderful programs. The Strait Start Montessori program has been running for a while now and quite successfully, and it comes down again to our wonderful education leaders who keep that one alive as well.

CHAIR: Flora, I am cognisant of time. The committee might have some questions. I have been a bit cheeky and asked quite a few questions.

Ms Warrior: I think I have read all my scribble. I cannot read my own writing!

Mr LISTER: I have nothing burning. It was really good to come across you, Flora, and I am sure I speak for everyone to say it is great that you have come before us.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I want to say thank you for coming in today and for your very comprehensive submission. You have given us a fair few thoughts on what is happening up here.

Mr DAMETTO: What employment is on your island at the moment? Is there a local trade, a butcher, a baker—

CHAIR: There are 300 people, member for Hinchinbrook.

Mr DAMETTO: I understand that, but obviously there is going to be someone doing some of these roles, or is everything fly-in fly-out? I am trying to paint a picture in my own head.

Ms Warrior: No, we do not have a butcher and a baker. We have people who are employed by the local regional council.

CHAIR: Is that set up like Saibai?

Ms Warrior: It is now a regional council and each division has a member on the regional council. Each used to be their own community council. I used to be the CEO of one council when there used to be individual councils. We still have the same problems with the regional council as we did back then which is that you send people away, they get trained, but at the end of the day you cannot find supervision for them in the community. How do you meet that challenge, the practical side of that? You can get a lot of training, but supervision is an important aspect to their journey as well because it is the transition into the workplace. It has not changed much since I was in local government. Apart from that, I would just like to round off by thanking you and also by saying that I would like there to be more access to face-to-face Indigenous training. We do not have enough Indigenous trainers out there in the VET sector.

CHAIR: Hopefully that is something as a collective we can work on with the establishment and changes to the department's structure and working hand in glove with DESBT to see how we can facilitate.

Ms Warrior: Thank you for having me and it is nice meeting you all.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Flora. That closes our public hearing session and brings the forum to a close. I thank everybody for their contributions today. They have been extraordinarily helpful in framing the challenges of particularly living on an island and the opportunities that there are to look at how we can make sure that VET is delivered appropriately in a complex setting. Nobody should underestimate how challenging island life can be and what that looks like. Thank you, everybody, for your contributions today. That closes the public hearing session.

The committee adjourned at 5.55 pm.