



EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Members present:

Ms KE Richards MP—Chair

Mr JP Lister MP

Mr MA Boothman MP

Mr SR King MP (teleconference)

Mr N Dametto MP (teleconference)

Mr JA Sullivan MP (teleconference)

Staff present:

Mr R Hansen—Committee Secretary

COMMUNITY FORUM—INQUIRY INTO THE DELIVERY OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE QUEENSLAND

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Friday, 27 October 2023

Roma

FRIDAY, 27 OCTOBER 2023

The committee met at 11.07 am.

CHAIR: I declare this public meeting open. I am Kim Richards, the member for Redlands and chair of the Education, Employment and Training Committee. I would like to respectfully acknowledge that we sit on the lands of traditional custodians and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. We are very fortunate in this country to have 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.

Welcome everybody, and thank you for such a great turnout and supporting our committee's work today. It is lovely to see such a full room. With me here today are: Mr James Lister, deputy chair and member for Southern Downs; and Mr Mark Boothman, the member for Theodore. We had hoped to have two additional committee members here today but the dreaded COVID struck very late yesterday afternoon. The member for Kurwongbah, Shane King, and the member for Stafford, Jimmy Sullivan, are both joining us online from places where they will not be spreading their nastiness. I expect to have the member for Hinchinbrook, Nick Dametto, dialling in shortly as well. We were also expecting Ann Leahy, but she is an apology today. She was very keen to participate in this forum, but unfortunately with the bushfires she is carrying an additional load at the moment. We are wishing her and the community well.

The forum today forms part of the committee's inquiry into the delivery of vocational education and training in regional, rural and remote Queensland. Vocation education and training is critically important to the Maranoa region, as it is to other regions across Queensland, for driving economic opportunity, growth, development and employment opportunities. We look forward to hearing your views today in our inquiry. This meeting of the committee is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. I must remind you that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. We will start by calling speakers in the order that I have them here listed in the program. After that I would really like to open it up for discussion. If there is anybody who is not on the list who would like to contribute, we would be very happy to hear from you.

JOHNSON, Mrs Camille, Chief Executive Officer, Golden West Apprenticeships

Mrs Johnson: Thank you, Chair and committee, for the opportunity to speak today. Golden West Apprenticeships is a community-based not-for-profit organisation that specialises in the group employment of apprentices and trainees. As a group training organisation, Golden West directly employs around 250 apprentices and trainees across Queensland's central, south-west and Darling Downs regions. We have been operating since 1988. I would like to express my sincere appreciation for this timely inquiry. As someone who lives and has worked for over 20 years across the VET sector in rural Queensland, I am acutely aware of the challenges faced by employers, apprentices and trainees in accessing quality education and training.

Before I speak to a couple of the key areas outlined in my submission I would like to start by sharing some stories from just two apprentices within this region. It can be really easy to forget that these issues affect real people, and I would just like you to consider their stories as I continue. Michael is a mature age Indigenous apprentice from Charleville. Michael is a dad who has a young family and works locally in the region, which is roughly four hours west of Roma here. Michael commenced his apprenticeship in January of this year. Disappointingly, there are no blocks of college available for him to attend across the Darling Downs or south-west until next year. In order to stay on track with his apprenticeship, Michael is now travelling to Nambour to attend TAFE. This car trip is nine hours just one way. While Michael is attending his block it is becoming extremely difficult for him to see his family due to distance and cost constraints.

Kane is a school-based apprentice in Emerald. Kane commenced on 25 May this year. His Australian Apprenticeship Support Network was provided with advice that he was commencing 10 May, two weeks prior to his start date; however, his training contract signup with AASN did not occur until 20 July—some 10 weeks after initial advice. Registration of his training contract was not provided

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until 6 September, and as of today Kane still does not have a training plan. Sadly, these stories are not isolated incidents. It leads me to address a couple of the key areas outlined in my submission. In my view, if we can address these issues it will overcome some of the challenges we are seeing.

The first is User Choice and location loadings within the User Choice program. As many of you know, User Choice is the public contribution to the apprenticeship and traineeship program. Across our region we receive an additional loading for face-to-face delivery; however, the loading here in Roma, 15 per cent, is the same loading in Toowoomba and it is the same loading in Saint George. This is highly inequitable, and with those loadings being the same there is very minimal incentive to encourage providers to deliver into our regions. We need a new means of classifying these regions. I am suggesting the Modified Monash Model in which these communities would be more equitably aligned. Toowoomba would be an MM2; Roma an MM4; and Saint George an MM6.

This also leads me to the Skills Assure Supplier framework. It is my view that the framework has very limited visibility on RTOs with capability and capacity to deliver into regional Queensland. There is no information available on the Queensland Training Information Service on RTOs that will deliver into our regions, their method of delivery or their cost of delivery. By improving this visibility, User Choice providers will be able to provide the Queensland government and other consumers such as myself, being an employer, with specific information and we can better realign VET investment to ensure regional and remote areas are serviced appropriately.

That said, there also needs to be some demonstration of capability for RTOs that can deliver into rural areas. Often they will say they deliver, we may see them once and never again, and then it is all online. That is extremely frustrating. The other thing within that space is there is no visibility on additional charges for gap fees, which leads me to my next point around employer contribution of gap fees.

These fees are often not faced by our metropolitan employers. There is an additional cost to deliver into regional Queensland. In my submission I outlined an example of a traineeship that was being delivered down in Saint George where there were only two private providers—one refused to deliver and the other needed to charge \$28,000 to deliver that traineeship. That trainee was fully eligible for User Choice funding. It was a priority 1 level qualification, meaning it was fully funded under the User Choice program. It also picked up that additional 15 per cent loading. That RTO was picking up full funding plus needing to charge an additional \$28,000 to deliver.

As RTOs are invited into the training contract, they have the capacity to accept or decline. Often acceptance may mean that they charge additional fees. Within the current system, there is no visibility to understand what those fees and charges will be prior unless you are phoning every single RTO to understand if they do intend to charge.

My next point is around where we cannot get training delivered locally and our apprentices are required to travel away for block training, and the travel and accommodation allowance. For Michael, he has had to travel away to Nambour. The current travel and accommodation allowance is \$55 per day. That includes accommodation and meals. As you know, on the coast that falls well short of what the true cost is. Where that shortfall exists, employers are required to pay those costs. Again, this is a financial impact that is faced only by rural employers, as the apprentices of our metropolitan cousins can go home every night. We need to look at reviewing what those allowance levels look like.

I also want to add, while we are talking about Michael, he is actually at block at the moment. We received correspondence on Wednesday that his block was being extended. While it was due to finish on Friday, it has now been extended through to Monday due to a trainer shortage. Unfortunately, there are now additional costs, unbudgeted costs, and another three days that Michael does not see his family.

I also want to talk about the delays we see to training contract registrations across this area. As we saw with Kane, we continue to see unreasonable delays in the registration of training contracts for apprentices and trainees. Golden West, as a large employer, is considered a corporate client of our AASN. While we are a corporate client, this is still the standard of service that we are subjected to which makes me dread the level of service delivery our smaller, local employers are being given. We must look at streamlining the process for training contract registrations to avoid unnecessary delays. I am of the understanding that the state provides financial support to AASN delivery in Queensland, and therefore this is an issue for the committee to consider. I also understand the expected time frame for training contract execution is two weeks, and that is rarely met across our region.

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I am supportive of a self-service model which was mentioned in DEWR's *Futures Directions* consultation paper, which will allow employers of apprentices to coordinate and execute the training contract themselves. For larger employers, such as GTOs who have considerable knowledge and experience in the system, allowing us to self-serve presents a very low-risk option to government, and will free up AASN services which will hopefully improve service delivery for employers that require a full service model.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate my gratitude for this inquiry and my commitment to working towards a collaborative outcome to improve the equity of access to vocational education and training.

CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Mr LISTER: Thanks very much, Mrs Johnson. I appreciate, as I am sure we all do, your very thorough submission and your appearance today. I was going to ask you about travel and accommodation and location loadings, but you have dealt with that in a very fulsome fashion, so nothing from me. Thank you.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Thank you for your comprehensive discussion and explaining what actually it is like for your apprentices out here. You talked about streamlining the training registrations. Can you elaborate on that?

Mrs Johnson: Within the apprenticeship system, we need to use an Australian support network to coordinate the training contract on behalf of the government. Where there are delays in that, it creates delays all the way downstream. To streamline that, by allowing large employers like ourselves who are commencing hundreds of apprentices each year, to deliver that service ourselves will lighten the workload for AASN themselves, but smooth that process out for our apprentices and speed it up. What we are seeing, particularly with Kane who is now nearly six months down the track after commencing, he has not been delivered a single unit to study, at all. To improve, streamline and make that process more efficient would allow us to deliver our own training contracts, speed it all up and keep our apprentices on track.

Mr BOOTHMAN: So he has not been delivered a single unit model?

Mrs Johnson: He does not have a training plan.

Mr BOOTHMAN: That is quite incredible.

Mrs Johnson: And it is not unique.

CHAIR: Did you happen to mention the RTO that is involved into the—

Mrs Johnson: The challenge happens at the front end. I am just double-checking my notes because I definitely do not want to mislead the committee. It took 10 weeks for the AASN to do the sign-up. Once the AASN does the sign up, they then issue the invitation to the RTO to accept that contract. It is at the front end.

CHAIR: It sounds like there might be multiple points of blockage there.

Mrs Johnson: Definitely, but if you are speeding it up at the front end, you come through it quicker at the back end as well.

CHAIR: I mean in terms of stakeholders that are involved in that front-end piece of the process, there are more components, I am sure, between the backward and forwarding of contracts.

Mrs Johnson: Yes, there is.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Thank you for that. Are we able to get additional information about that specific apprentice?

Mrs Johnson: Of course, and I have multiple other examples that I can provide you with.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I appreciate that.

Mrs Johnson: Happy to.

CHAIR: Is it consistent in the particular industry that you are in?

Mrs Johnson: It is consistent across the region we are in. We do not have a locally-based AASN in this region.

Mr SULLIVAN: Thank you for that presentation, Mrs Johnson. It was very interesting. I know your organisation is not just Roma-centric, that you are across the west more broadly, but where do you recruit your more senior skilled staff, whether they be trainers or the managers who look after the process of putting trainees or apprentices in touch with employers? Do you tend to try to recruit them from other regions, or is there a process of trying to upskill locals so that they can get to that skill level required to do that sort of work?

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Mrs Johnson: For our internal staff, we like to grow our own. I started my career with Golden West as a business trainee in 2001 and I have had the opportunity to grow with the company. We do try to recruit within our regions because they understand community needs and can be responsive to the needs of their communities, particularly for our training and employment coordinators. We do not train, so we do not employ trainers, but we do have a very robust internal training system to bring the skills to the level that we need for our internal staff.

CHAIR: Member for Hinchinbrook, do you have a question?

Mr DAMETTO: Sorry, Chair, I cannot hear what anyone is saying, so I am not going to ask any questions.

CHAIR: Thank you, member for Hinchinbrook. Member for Kurwongbah, do you have a question/

Mr KING: You pretty well explained it when you were filling us in, but in regards to the \$55 allowance to travel to Nambour and stay there, obviously that is insufficient. I have had experience with working and training remotely in a different state, I must say; yes, it is difficult. Do you have any suggestions to improve that? You mentioned employer funding to pick up the shortfall, but are there any other ways can you think of?

Mrs Johnson: If it was the world according to Camille, you would fix your location learnings to attract training delivery into your regions to avoid the need for your apprentices and trainees to travel. That said, the next point would be to re-evaluate and re-align some of those costs. The \$55 a day for meals and accommodation is just simply insufficient.

Mr KING: It is outrageous. I commend you all for distance education. I do not know if it is the way my mind works, but I really struggled and really looked forward to residential school, so I could catch everything up. Thank you for what you do.

Mr BOOTHMAN: When it comes to connectivity out here in these regions—we heard some statistics before that about 36 per cent have internet or computers at home—how is that impacting when it comes to training for these especially young people to becoming attuned to actually using the internet and using computer devices? How do you feel that is impacting educational outcomes out here?

Mrs Johnson: In respect of digital literacy, in order to study online, you need a higher level of numeracy and literacy, which is problematic in itself with a lot of the courses being delivered online. Where you have a requirement for higher levels of numeracy and literacy, a limited access to computers and good quality internet, it certainly does impact. Unfortunately, I cannot quantify it, but it does have a very significant impact on how students progress through their apprenticeships. You do see disengagement when all their training is delivered online and they are not getting that one-on-one support that they need.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I was looking at the Bureau of Statistics data, and it seems that literally when they get to the age of 19, there is a mass exodus of population from this area. Do you feel that having better connectivity, better support in the local area, would actually address that?

Mrs Johnson: I would like to say that it would, but I cannot guarantee that. Having local opportunities in terms of better training, better education available locally—and we saw that this morning with the CUC—it will stop that need for people travelling to get that skill set that they are looking for.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Looking at the Bureau of Statistics again, the statistics show around about age 40—say, 45 and onwards—they seem to come back. I find it very interesting.

Mrs Johnson: They love this lifestyle, but they need the opportunities here locally.

CHAIR: In terms of digital literacy, where do you think that gap is starting? Is that in the more mature-age entry apprentices? I am trying to work out where that gap is?

Mrs Johnson: Kim, I could not tell you, I am sorry.

Mr SULLIVAN: Again, I note you said in your opening statement that you are not just based out in the south-west, but also, I think you said, in Southern Downs and Toowoomba. Across those regions or elsewhere, what collaboration or interaction do you have with state providers like TAFE or Education Queensland for school-based apprenticeships, or any other coordination with those sort of bodies, including local representative and consultation bodies?

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Mrs Johnson: Operating across this footprint, you need to collaborate in order to be successful, so we do very strong engagement with our schools. TAFE are our preferred provider, and 40 per cent of our apprenticeships and traineeships have been delivered through TAFE Queensland. We are very fortunate here in Roma to have an amazing campus and amazing staff, so we are exceptionally proud of that. We also engage quite heavily with other partners such as the Downs Industry School's Co-Op, Transition to Work providers and Workforce Australia providers. We are also in the process of working with the Queensland police force around Project Booyah which will be delivered into Toowoomba around February. We are very excited about those relationships that we have around promoting apprenticeships and traineeships and encouraging those pathways.

Mr SULLIVAN: That is great, thank you. Good on you.

CHAIR: There being no further questions, thank you very much for appearing before us today. It is fascinating to hear about what you are doing and what the challenges are. We have had the opportunity to visit Thursday Island, Cairns and other remote parts of Queensland, and there are some good, consistent themes and challenges that you experience here that go up as far as those areas. Thank you.

Mrs Johnson: Thank you.

DAY, Mrs Anneli, Councillor, Portfolio Leader, Tertiary Trade and Training, Isolated Children's Parents' Association Queensland

CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing before us. Would you like to make an opening statement and then we will have some questions for you.

Mrs Day: Thank you for the opportunity to present today. The Isolated Children's Parents' Association is a voluntary, apolitical parent organisation that advocates for equitable access to quality education for children in rural and remote areas. ICPA Queensland represents 45 branches comprising over 1,300 families throughout the state.

Rural and remote Queensland students have a great deal to offer. They must be provided with access and ongoing support to VET learning pathways. It is vitally important that they get exposure to traditional as well as emerging employment opportunities which will contribute to the liveability and vibrancy of their regions. These students want to train in and remain in their local communities, and government must do all they can to support this.

Rural students should be able to and want to complete VET qualifications in their home towns where they have family, school and local support. When quality VET teachers exist in the region, VET students can stay in their communities to access the training required to complete their qualifications. A very good example of this is the Big Red Truck, which was initially funded by the Commonwealth government. It provides year 10 to 12 students with the opportunity to work towards obtaining a Certificate II in Kitchen Operations. It is based at Longreach State School and is accessed by students in Aramac, Barcaldine, Blackall and Winton.

CHAIR: We have heard a lot about the Big Red Truck in the parliament.

Mrs Day: It is fantastic. I have witnessed the students actually catering for community events. It has just been a great model.

ICPA fully supports further extension of the country universities centres as we believe they can support rural students in a number of very positive ways. 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. Opportunities to engage in training at these dedicated facilities will assist rural VET students to successfully engage in online training, enabling them to remain there for their training. We have recently had members give us feedback that these centres offer far more than just a training base with them reporting that student wellbeing and encouragement into further pathways is also occurring.

Online must not be the only option though as there is nothing quite like face-to-face learning, especially for those who already lead a quite isolated life. It is recognised that not all regions have suitable regionally based training opportunities and for these students who have to go away to access training, the associated expenses can be a real 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 retention and course completion.

ICPA Queensland notes the opportunities for VET students to access affordable accommodation options to undertake training outside of their regional bases is just essential. We have also heard some very positive stories from members whose children have attended or are attending Tec-NQ in Townsville. There are some very positive stories about this facility as it also offers a boarding facility alongside the training.

Careers advisers and teachers in schools need to be well equipped and aid in changing 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 obtaining a VET qualification from working with parents, negotiating with employers and engaging other stakeholders. This process which involves several stakeholders can be daunting to students and parents who are not familiar with the process.

Some students who undertake a VET pathway may struggle academically and thrive on hands-on experience. It is vital that they are supported with the administrative side of the process. This also includes careers advisers or VET teachers at boarding schools. As you will be aware, many of our members' students have to attend boarding school for their secondary schooling as there is no suitable schooling in the secondary years. These students need to be guided and supported as their parents are hundreds or even thousands of kilometres away and cannot be there to physically support them on a daily basis.

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Registered training organisations and AASNs play an integral role in the overall success of apprenticeships and VET pathways. These organisations must provide timely and effective support for students and an ability to work with the unique situations and locations. It is imperative to retention and it needs to be ongoing throughout the duration of the course.

These organisations must have flexible approaches to the way the learning and practical components of courses are structured that include and encourage student participation, retention and course completion. These organisations also need to have an understanding of unique situations such as learning needs, geographic location and boarding school student needs. For optimum success, all stakeholders should be offering these students heightened levels of support throughout their chosen pathway.

We acknowledge that VET teachers can be hard to attract to rural areas and those who reside there must be well supported and resourced including access to regular, high-quality, ongoing professional development to ensure their skills and knowledge remain relevant to emerging trends and the demands of business and industry. ICPA Queensland believes that VET is currently well placed to support the development of existing and emerging industries through the various programs on offer. VET pathways give students workplace skills and technical knowledge with an emphasis on hands-on experience that is vital to fill the current skills shortage.

Mr LISTER: Thanks for coming and I thank the ICPA for its submission. You spoke about the need for students to engage with their training and you said so in connection with, for example, the Country Universities Centre here in Maranoa. Are you, by extension, concerned that some VET is being offered in formats which are more concerned with the commercial aspect of selling the program but not following through with the engagement that students need such as the face-to-face contact and the support they need to get through?

Mrs Day: Absolutely. We have had several motions presented at our conferences around the support that the students do need and probably more so in the apprenticeship space. We have a number of students who are completing VET pathways and are at boarding schools and then, of course, some are able to remain in our regional areas. We certainly see the CUC as a complementary facility that can support our students.

Mr LISTER: Do you have concerns about the number of Skills Assure Suppliers out there and that some of them ought not to be on the list?

Mrs Day: I guess so. We do not have evidence to back that up.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Thank you for coming here today. It is very interesting. You were talking about vocational education and training teachers; are you retaining them out here? Is there a problem that they are leaving because of family commitments in other areas? Are they staying? Is it the case that students are able to finish courses, or are their courses disrupted because the teachers are leaving or going back and forth? Is that a problem out here?

Mrs Day: I think it is a problem in that there is a shortage of teachers everywhere. It is compounded when you are asking for a skill set and there is only a limited supply of those teachers.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Is it often disrupting courses?

Mrs Day: Certainly, if you do not have the people who can provide—

Mr BOOTHMAN: Is that regularly happening out here in these areas?

Mrs Day: I could not comment on that specifically.

Mr BOOTHMAN: We are talking about accommodation. We were up in Thursday Island a little while back and one of the issues there was accommodation with there being an island lifestyle there. You could say it is similar to here where you have townships. They have islands on a massive—

CHAIR: Two hundred islands.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Yes, there are 200 islands on a massive scale out in that area. When it comes to accommodation in Roma itself—and we are talking about the Central Universities Centre here—what accommodation is there for the students to potentially stay in Roma?

Mrs Day: Someone with local knowledge would probably know that better than me. I touched on the Tec-NQ facility, which we toured up in the north, and that is accessed by a lot of our members. It is so attractive because it has the boarding facility alongside the training. It is at a separate venue, but certainly it is very attractive for our members from all over Queensland because they can reside there as well as train there.

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CHAIR: That is an interesting point though, member for Theodore. We heard earlier this morning that obviously the TAFE here in Roma and the CUC service the greater area of Maranoa that goes beyond the two high schools here. If you are coming to Roma, that central hub, from those isolated areas is it easy for them to stay here with accommodation? That was a similar issue faced on Thursday Island. There were pressures put on rental prices and all sorts of things happening there and it might be similar here.

Mrs Day: Certainly we find that if they do not have strong networks behind them, financial and other, it just becomes too difficult, particularly for these apprentices and trainees to have to go to another location.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Thank you for that. My electorate is in South-East Queensland. I do not want the crowd laughing, but it takes about 20 minutes to drive across it. If we have bad traffic—we would love your traffic out here, but it only takes me 20 minutes to drive across my electorate. Most people do not realise the tyranny of distance that exists out here.

CHAIR: The trade-offs.

Mr SULLIVAN: I have a quick question and, forgive me, it is more of a clarification because the call dropped out a little bit. You mentioned in your opening statement the sense of community that happens when students get together. Were you referring to the need for a physical location, or were you referencing that when access to the internet is fine, there are options to create that effectively online campus experience where you do feed off your peers and others? Can you talk to that a little bit? As I said, the line was a bit crackly at the time.

Mrs Day: Thank you for the question. Certainly, the best model is a combination of both. I touched on that before when I was saying that a lot of our members are just so isolated. For them to do all of it online is probably not the best model. A combination of both would be good and certain courses lend themselves to being more hands on as well.

Mr BOOTHMAN: When it comes to the Country Universities Centre here, what are your thoughts? How do you feel that it is changing how students are using learning facilities? Are more remote families using this type of facility? Do you have any comments on that?

Mrs Day: I think the CUC representatives will be here to speak shortly. From our perspective, it probably started as more university students accessing it, and of course it has grown and grown. We are really pleased to see that the CUCs are also offering I think they call them outreach programs. They are going out into schools promoting different pathways and offering information to students in the primary years as well. Not only are they supporting apprentices, VET students and university students; they are also widening what they are offering. It is very positive.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Do you feel that it will increase the uptake of individual students to use these facilities and get a tertiary qualification?

Mrs Day: Absolutely, because they are able to access them in their own regions.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I was looking at the ABS data. This region has almost half the number of tertiary qualifications compared to the rest of Queensland. To lift that up would be a great thing, wouldn't it?

Mrs Day: Absolutely.

CHAIR: There being no further questions, thank you very much for appearing before us today, Mrs Day. We are very grateful for your contribution to this inquiry.

Mrs Day: Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity.

CHAIR: Before we move on to our next witness, it was extraordinarily remiss of me not to acknowledge Councillor Cameron O'Neil from the Maranoa Regional Council, whom we had the honour of visiting CUC with in his position on the board of directors for the CUC. We also have John Tucker, CEO of TAFE Queensland, and Simon Pritchard, Chief Financial Officer, here. If you have questions about TAFE, you have the right people in the room here today. From the Department of Youth Justice, Employment, Small Business and Training we have Assistant Director-General Steve Koch and Jenelle Choyce, who is the regional director for this area. Again, if you have questions about this space, you will have a great chance to talk to some people whom you might not otherwise have seen in Roma. Thank you for joining us here today.

WALES, Mr Daniel, Community Engagement Officer, Headspace Roma

CHAIR: Next up we have Mr Daniel Wales, the Community Engagement Officer from Headspace Roma. Thank you for joining us here today. I invite you to make an opening statement and then we will have some questions for you.

Mr Wales: Before I start I want to acknowledge the roles that our local TAFE, Golden West and CUC play in providing services. We really want to recognise the innovation they bring to the area off their own bat. We want to talk today about the systems that are in place and the barriers preventing access and completion of VET programs. Headspace is the only service of its type in the south-west. We service clients as far away as Quilpie, Tara, Chinchilla and Miles. Officially we service the Maranoa Regional Council region. We cover mental health, sexual and physical health, alcohol and drugs, vocation and education.

Everything I bring to you today has been brought to us from young people. We talk to young people in a variety of different ways, whether that be through a one-on-one session where we are helping a young person through some mental health issues or through our youth reference group, which guides us on how we need to operate and how to stay relevant and tells us what is happening for young people in our community, or through community engagement projects where we go out into the community and talk to young people in the community. Everything I raise here has been raised with us by young people. We want to bring the voice of the young people here today because we believe that they are a vital part of this conversation.

The first point that we often hear about is transport. Whilst we recognise that transport is not directly associated with VET, the fact is that in rural and remote Australia we do not have public transport. We often talk to young people whose families are not able to provide transport, whether that is because of a lack of finance, illness or the family themselves are working. This is a common issue that we come across. It does put people off from accessing training opportunities. They recognise that they can get much better incomes and they can get much better jobs by completing a program but they just cannot get there. A number of families from lower socio-economic backgrounds also report to us that they are unable to afford a vehicle or that they cannot maintain a vehicle because of the costs. For a first-year apprentice, maintaining the cost of a vehicle is incredibly challenging.

CHAIR: It does not matter what part of the state you are in in that space.

Mr Wales: Yes. When there is no transport available, young people miss shifts or they do not get the job. We have young people who travel from Mitchell and Injune who travel over an hour. We talk about traffic in the city where a daily commute can take an hour.

CHAIR: It is the norm.

Mr Wales: Out here we are travelling through the bush. Young people are leaving at three or four o'clock in the morning. There are roos and all of that. Even if we talk about young people in Roma who might have the ability to walk, walking on a 40-degree day is not conducive to a good day at work or walking in subzero weather during winter does not help them at all.

Transport is a barrier for these young people. We hear almost every week, 'I really want this job, but I cannot afford to look after my vehicle if I am a first-year apprentice or a second-year apprentice.' We all know the cost of living has gone up. Inflation is getting higher and higher. The percentage of the increase in rent in Australia is over seven per cent according to the statistics from the ABS from last month. We know that food and utilities such as electricity are big costs. We heard before that young people have to travel away whether for block training or for a job. One young person we have seen recently lives in a three-bedroom house with five people. That is the only way they can afford to cover utilities and rent.

We know that the wages of an apprentice or a trainee represent their experience and represent their knowledge of the industry. We accept that and that is a part of life, but for a lot of young people living with family is not appropriate. There are young people who are trying to break intergenerational cycles, who are trying to escape conflict in the family house or who have to move hundreds or thousands of kilometres away because they want a job. Sometimes they do need to live out of home.

We hear time and time again that unless they have that strong financial network they struggle. A lot of apprentices and trainees we have spoken to do not have a social life because they cannot afford to have one. They cannot afford to go out for a drink. They cannot afford to go out for Macca's. We see this time and time again. Yesterday I was discussing with my manager what I was going to say today. She shared another story of a young person in Roma who lives in a fairly small house with up to eight other people. This is a small house. Officially on paper it has three bedrooms; it has only two. The third bedroom is a tiny study. Again, this is how they make ends meet.

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We heard before from Golden West that when young people go to block training in Nambour or in the city they have to pay for their accommodation and meals. Again, the cost of living has gone up but wages not to such. When we send a first-year apprentice to the city for block training, that first-year apprentice wage does not cover much. If they are lucky enough to have friends and family to stay with, that works well, but a lot of us do not. We know that there are organisations like Golden West that are working towards finding initiatives to help with this. We know that organisations like Roma Commerce and Tourism and our local council are working towards making this region in particular more attractive to live. The more these activities are undertaken the more people come to Roma and the more people come to Roma from miles and miles away for these opportunities.

That is rather ironic given that my next point is about a lack of knowledge by young people. Every time we ask a young person in year 10 to 12 what they want to do when they become an adult their response is, 'I don't know.' That is a pretty standard response. I know that I was the same when I was their age. When we talk to them about what opportunities are out there, they do not know. In a small place like Wallumbilla they know they can be a tradie—basic trades such as being a plumber, a sparkie or a chippie—or they can be a teacher. However, their knowledge of careers is limited and their knowledge of pathways is limited.

Our local TAFE, in partnership with other organisations, has a great career expo every year. They do a great job with this. I want to be clear on that point. However, we know that young people are not where our marketing efforts are, whether that is us as Headspace or whether that is government organisations. We are not where young people are.

I spoke to a young person a couple of months ago and she shared with us that the only reason she knew about Headspace is that a friend showed her on Instagram. She is not on Instagram anymore but she uses the Insta messaging services. This is something we hear time and time again: young people are not on traditional media. They are not watching the TV. They are not listening to the radio. They are not reading newspapers. They are watching Netflix. They are on Spotify. They are on TikTok. They are on Snapchat. That is where our young people are. When we try to communicate with them about what opportunities are available or about the different jobs they could have or about the different options and pathways to those jobs, we are not where they are.

Our youth reference group is the guiding body that tells us how to be relevant and how we need to operate to better serve young people, but just about every month we need to change where we are when it comes to media. This is not a message that is just for Headspace. This is a message that young people send to every organisation they come in contact with.

As everyone knows, rural and remote Australia is very different to metropolitan Australia. There are differences everywhere we look, including workplace cultures. We still see throughout the south-west region that there are still high levels of bullying of young people in employment.

I met a young person a week or two ago. He has recently started an apprenticeship. This young man does not drink. For religious reasons he does not consume alcohol, but that does not stop his employers from pressuring him into a drink at the end of the week: 'It's been a hot day; let's go down and have a drink.' Not only is this person under-age but he is being pressured into this situation. He feels that refraining from the alcohol makes it difficult for him to maintain his employment because it makes it difficult for him to maintain a relationship with his boss.

We have another story of a young man who tells us that he was expected to work in excess of 50 hours a week. He only gets paid for 40. If he does not work the extra hours he does not get paid. These are the situations we work through with the young person to help find ways for them to get through that, but these are the stories that are happening. We hear stories of young people being exploited through apprenticeships and trainees somewhat frequently. We have another young person who was employed as a trainee on a full-time basis, but they did not get their leave benefits—so no leave, no sick time. These benefits do not even show up on their pay slips. Another young person—and this is not the only time we have heard this story—was paid cash in hand and they were never formally signed on to a traineeship. They were told they would be.

The final point we want to bring up—and this is a conversation with young people and with employers—is that there appears to be a lack of incentives for employers to take on apprentices, from different employers that we have spoken to. A lot of employers are not aware of the fact that they can take on trainees and apprentices. We live in Roma, where marketing is probably the hardest thing I have ever done. I have done marketing throughout Australia, and marketing in Roma is like nothing else I have ever done. It is so hard. We see the careers expo and we see organisations like Golden West—they go out and they try and show the community—and Roma Commerce and Tourism. They try and show what is out there, but there is still that lack of knowledge.

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A recently qualified diesel mechanic—he has been qualified for about two years—reports that he was in charge of his workshop as well as four apprentices. This particular young man reports that he did not have the skill to manage that workload. He did not have the experience that was built up. When we talk about diesel mechanics, this particular gentleman worked in agriculture so when it comes to harvest season and there are tight deadlines, his hands were full. This young man ended up leaving that employment, leaving that particular organisation without a supervisor. There is a lot of effort to try to bring employees to the region to help address skills shortages, but those skills shortages do affect an employer's ability to have effective supervisors.

A young lady was completing her traineeship in child care. Workplace bullying is somewhat tolerated in regional Australia. She was belittled when she made a mistake, got things wrong, because she is a trainee; she does not know it all yet. But then, despite her lack of experience, she was expected to play the role of lead educator in one of the rooms—a position that she was not qualified for and did not have the experience to do—and the fallout when she made a mistake in that role caused significant mental distress. We worked with this particular young lady to help keep her in that position. She completed her qualification and left the industry. She has no plans to return.

To finish up, we do want to thank Golden West, CUC and TAFE for the efforts they make. We see the innovation they bring to our region and we see that they do it off their own back. Our young people tell us how much support they get through these organisations. We want to make sure that these voices of young people are heard. These are the people who are going through these systems. They are the ones who are trying to get qualifications. They are our future. We know that, directly speaking, the VET program cannot cover all of these points, but these are barriers. These are what is stopping young people from completing their qualifications and from even accessing those qualifications in the first place.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. You have certainly raised some significant concerns in my mind. I am pleased that we have the assistant director for DESBT in the room with us. I would like you to connect with him after this and to provide that information in more specific detail as it relates to those cases. There are a number of things that you have raised that would identify to me issues within workplaces, whether that be in the bullying space or unpaid hours of work. There are mechanisms and pathways that you need to be aware of on how to refer those clients. I assume those are clients of yours that are coming through headspace?

Mr Wales: Directly or indirectly, yes.

CHAIR: You should have that information on what pathways they need to be referred to to remedy those types of issues. I would like to see that connection happen after this to make sure that you know where you need to be referring people who come to you with those issues that are outstanding. That is very important. I might leave that there for now. I wanted to be very clear about that. Those things are breaches of workplace and industrial laws and there are mechanisms where they should be dealt with in an appropriate manner for the employee and the employer.

Mr LISTER: Thank you, Mr Wales. You talked at one point about how you work with young people to get through challenges in terms of their access to VET. What does that look like when you are dealing with an absence of transport options or other barriers to access to the VET system?

Mr Wales: It looks like a mess. Our lack of options here is very challenging. Sometimes it is encouraging the young person to negotiate with an employer, because that is an option they have. Sometimes it is supporting the young person to talk about these issues with organisations like Golden West, with TAFE, with the RTOs, to find ways for them to address those situations. Headspace has a lot of good connections throughout the community. Leveraging those contacts is sometimes an effective way to resolve some of those issues. The fact is that there is only so much we can do when there is no transport. Sometimes the approach has been that a young person seeks other employment to build up the funds for their own vehicle, where they build up the funds to get accommodation closer to their desired workplace, so that they have the initial funds to get themselves started before they start that qualification they are seeking.

Mr BOOTHMAN: It has been very enlightening listening to you. How does headspace work in Roma? I have a headspace in Upper Coomera. Do you get so many hours per client funded? How does it work out here?

Mr Wales: We are 100 per cent federally funded. We support our clients as long as necessary. In remote regional Australia there is a lack of services. We do sometimes hold clients longer than some of our metropolitan cousins will because we do not have the referral pathways. As we heard before, the online stuff we get a lot of. For a lot of people out here that online telehealth style communication does not work, so we hold onto clients a little bit longer sometimes, but each client is fully funded.

Mr BOOTHMAN: With literacy when it comes to online services, are you finding that is a bit of a blockage for these younger people? We were hearing 36 per cent internet accessibility and technology. Is that something you are also finding is a major issue?

Mr Wales: The further you get out of Roma, yes, technology becomes less and less of a thing. Generally, the further out you are the more likely you are to be working on a property. When you spend your time working on a property and you do not have access to the internet, you do not have access to that technology, literacy does come down. That is something that we see.

Mr BOOTHMAN: How do you feel that younger people combat that? How do they try to work their way through that without that technology? Do you think that is a major handicap for them, especially for their mental wellbeing and connectivity? Do you feel that they are lonely in those environments?

Mr Wales: I cannot speak too much about whether they are feeling lonely in the scope of what we are talking about today, but I definitely know that it is hard for communication. It is hard to get out there. Generally, if you are working on a property you are working big hours. I know that, when it comes to accessing that technology, they are either very good at bluffing or they are quite good at getting their family and friends to work through whatever the technology thing is. Whether it is an online portal for TAFE or even jumping on to myGov, getting family or a friend to do that is a big part of what happens.

Mr BOOTHMAN: You spoke about finding advertising in Roma very difficult. You have obviously been to quite a few different places. How do you find the engagement with people in this area compared to other places you have worked?

Mr Wales: Generally, I find it quite low. This was a topic of conversation at a meeting I was in last week. We do not have access to a lot of marketing techniques. Organisation wise, a lot of us are restricted to what social media platforms we can use. There are so many posters on a shop door that a lot of people do not read them. The engagement is low. We rely so much on word of mouth now. That is our primary marketing technique. We make sure everyone who comes into our centre knows what is happening and to pass that on to everybody else.

CHAIR: You mentioned a youth reference group.

Mr Wales: Our youth reference group is a core part of getting our message out there.

CHAIR: Are they currently clients of headspace?

Mr Wales: They are part of the headspace family.

Mr BOOTHMAN: They just do word of mouth?

Mr Wales: Yes. We still utilise whatever marketing techniques we can—social media, newspaper and so on—but our most effective marketing is word of mouth.

CHAIR: If you had young people coming to you—and you are obviously not a careers adviser, but are you aware of those pathways of referral, whether it be connecting with TAFE, connecting with the CUC or connecting through the chamber of commerce?

Mr Wales: Yes. That is part of why we keep strong connections within the community, so that when young people present, regardless of what it is for, whether they want to go through an apprenticeship or traineeship or whether they want to go to uni—whatever the aspect is—we have an idea of how that pathway works within the Roma and the Maranoa region.

Mr SULLIVAN: Thank you for that comprehensive opening statement. Can I just drill down on the transport issue that you referred to. You mentioned the cost of purchasing and maintaining a car. Do you find in your space it is also about whether or not people have the time to get the hours up to get their licence in the first place? Is that something that you have come across?

Mr Wales: It is definitely an issue we see quite regularly.

CHAIR: One hundred hours is a lot.

Mr Wales: It is. For many young people, that 100 hours is driving around Roma. Roma is not big. You can cross town in probably 10 minutes, so that is a lot of hours. It is a lot of driving you need to do in a very small area.

Mr BOOTHMAN: That is like my electorate.

Mr Wales: Yes. We have one set of traffic lights and we have one roundabout. We do have organisations like PCYC, which runs what is called the Braking the Cycle program which—

CHAIR: That is a great program.

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Mr Wales: They help support young people to access their licence.

Mr SULLIVAN: That is good to hear. They operate in many areas. That is good to know that is on the ground as well.

Mr Wales: Again, that it is a volunteer-driven program so it is limited by the number of volunteers they have. The line-up to access that program at the moment I believe is relatively significant. It is still quite a challenge to get those hours.

Mr KING: Thanks very much for running us through what it is like for the kids out there. The industrial issues are what concern me. You said there are people being pushed into positions to run workshops and things like that when they do not have the skills and experience for workplace health and safety issues. Have you reached out to those organisations? You might have confidentiality reasons, but I am just wondering if you feel there is assistance out there for those issues.

CHAIR: Member for Kurwongbah, I have just asked the director-general to catch up with Daniel after this session.

Mr KING: Thank you for that, Chair.

CHAIR: Is the member for Hinchinbrook on the line? I think we might have lost the member for Hinchinbrook. As there are no further questions, I thank you for appearing before us today and for the information you have provided. We look forward to helping get some resolution for some of those trickier industrial matters that you have raised today.

Mr Wales: Thank you.

JOHNSON, Mrs Camille, Director, Country Universities Centre Maranoa

O'NEIL, Mr Cameron, Chair, Board of Directors, Country Universities Centre Maranoa

WILD, Ms Jessica, Centre Manager, Country Universities Centre Maranoa

CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you for appearing before us today and for meeting with us earlier to share some of the amazing things that your centre is doing for young people in Roma and more broadly Maranoa. I invite you to make an opening statement.

Mr O'Neil: Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to today's community forum on vocational education and training. By way of background, the Country Universities Centre Maranoa is a not-for-profit, community-driven organisation that aims to provide a new opportunity to make higher education more accessible for students of all ages in the Maranoa region. CUC Maranoa is jointly funded by the Commonwealth government under the regional university centres program and through local sponsorship, including financial support from Maranoa Regional Council. We are driving change in regional education by empowering the Maranoa community to fulfil their potential through higher education. We are increasing access by providing a highly connected learning community in Roma to overcome the barriers to success. Our students have free access to high-speed internet, modern technology and generalised academic support—all delivered locally at CUC Maranoa. Our centre is open for access to all VET students within the district, including apprentices and trainees.

Improving equitable access to higher education is our goal. CUC Maranoa exists to provide equitable access, and we do that to our rural students through, since opening in 2002, having 510 students register. We have 196 students currently registered, of which 37 are VET students. Pleasingly, our 500th student registration, Josh Carroll, is a VET student undertaking a certificate III in carpentry through TAFE Queensland.

These statistics have seen CUC Maranoa become the fastest growing CUC across the network of centres in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. This is something we are of course incredibly proud of, as it strengthens not only the local case but more broadly the case that, if we are going to bridge the gap between urban and regional higher education opportunities, long-term funding partnerships will be required to deliver long-term outcomes to both students and regional communities like Roma and the Maranoa.

The model of our study centre is not earth-shattering. It simply provides: a dedicated hub that can be used for uninterrupted studying; a space that fosters learning alongside fellow peers; the best of the best technology with the fastest internet possible; access between 5 am and 12 pm, seven days a week, all year round; and dedicated support through our centre manager and learning skill advisers, with their roles aligned to ensuring support is tailored to making studying in a regional setting successful. Our role at CUC Maranoa is to value-add to the learning experience, whether that be through TAFE or university. We see ourselves as a partner in our students' studying journey along with the on-campus support that can come from our regional TAFE and other vocational education providers.

Like all regional areas, the Maranoa has significant demand for skilled employees. In order to facilitate successful VET pathways into employment, the CUC facilities provide professional networking evenings to assist both local employers and students in forming a connection. By removing many of the known barriers to attaining study, we aim to help as many of our local community members as possible further their qualification through engaging in higher education studies. This will have a lasting effect on the percentage of skilled employees available in our region.

There are two important funding points I would like to address today. The first is the funding contribution, which has already been touched on, for regional, rural and remote VET students as it has become evident that our rural and regional students are disadvantaged due to the department's purchasing policies relating to training services. We have become aware that, while location loadings are provided to RTOs in rural areas, there is a significant inequity regarding regional classifications. One such example is user choice funding, primarily used to fund training for apprentices and trainees. We are aware that location loadings are currently allocated in eight different categories, with our region, the Maranoa, being categorised as 'country', meaning training services delivered in our region will attract an additional 15 per cent of funding compared to training services delivered in the south-east corner, which attracts no loadings at all. Disappointingly, the local categorisation for Roma being 'country' is also the same as Toowoomba. The categorisation has resulted in ongoing

challenges, especially around registered training organisation attraction in our Maranoa region. It is our view that the department should urgently review and realign regional classifications to make our rural and remote communities more attractive for providers to deliver training services.

The second point is around the CUC more broadly. The model of providing a centre like CUC Maranoa at no cost to the student can only be realised with significant lasting financial support by government. To date, our centre has relied on funding from the Commonwealth government and local sponsorship through industry and local government to exist. Long term, we strongly believe that to ensure success a three-tier partnership between Commonwealth, state and local government is essential, in partnership with local business and industry. All governments have a vested interest in ensuring the success of growing our own future workforce. This is already proving success in other states where the CUC model is co-funded in partnership with the state government.

Whilst we are here talking about VET students, I do want to acknowledge the fact that CUC plays a significant role in supporting students who are undertaking degrees in the health and education sector, which are the most dominated fields of study of our students currently registered at CUC Maranoa. The likelihood of those students going on to work in government roles within education and health is high, so I therefore recommend today that the Queensland government review its investment position into the regional study hubs or CUCs to provide support to our network and local students within our regional communities.

In closing, I want to say how pleased I am that the committee rescheduled the hearing here today. It is evident from the contributions already made that our region is very passionate about ensuring there are opportunities for our students to study locally, whether that be through a tertiary course or through vocational education. Thank you for being here.

CHAIR: We are very glad to be here. We had quite a disastrous trip last time with flights and Qantas. We were on the very unhappy side of some Qantas people. I think four out of the six of us missed connecting flights.

Mr LISTER: We were bumped because there were no seats, but there were empty seats.

CHAIR: There were empty seats on the plane. It was not a great trip back from Thursday Island. We were meant to be connecting right the way through. We apologise, but we are very glad to get here today.

Mr LISTER: Mr O'Neil, thank you, your board and your staff for the great exposure you gave us earlier to what you have going out there. I am sure we are all very impressed with what you have achieved in such a short period of time there.

Mr O'Neil: Thank you.

Mr LISTER: Your expressions about funding from all three levels of government have been noted. What involvement has your sponsorship had in terms of direction for the centre? Does that engagement drive you to better serve industry in terms of the training that occurs under your roof?

Mr O'Neil: It has not directed why we exist and why we have set up the centre. At the end of the day, as long as you are a student enrolled in higher education anywhere in Australia, you access this centre for free. What the foundation sponsorship through industry has done is deliver a very strong case to government that we have industry backing, that we have business backing. If we did not have that, I really do not think we would be as strong as we are today.

We are in a unique position where we are a huge oil and gas area, so we do have big players that back us. The advice I have given to many other regional communities that are looking at a similar model to the CUC is that the financial level of support that comes in via the sponsorships does not matter; it is as long as you have them, because it will show government that this is a broad partnership in delivering good outcomes and in this case educational opportunities for locals. It has not changed the direction in which we operate, but it has certainly allowed us to do the little bit extra for our students by having that support.

CHAIR: You could think about that in reverse. To be honest with you, it does not matter what region you look at: everybody has its different strengths and weaknesses and its different significant players. We spoke about SeaLink in my area before. It is not just about three levels of government funding it. The beneficiaries of a trained and skilled workforce absolutely fall back into the employer space, so for them to have skin in the game is a critical part of any of these centres. If it is ever to be successful, it needs to be that genuine and true collaboration. If they are the employers at the end of the day that are taking that skilled workforce, one would assume you would want them involved in the aspects of that which look at planning in the VET space—what each region needs and what those key drivers are for economic success and job opportunities into the future through that skills and training.

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I would go further and say that it is not just about three levels of government; it is a very big collaborative piece. If you are looking at providing for those oil companies or big marine companies, they absolutely need to have skin in the game in terms of making sure you can grow your own workforce, not just for your community and your regional area but for your businesses as well. That is a very good point, thank you.

Mr BOOTHMAN: I asked a question before to Mrs Day about accommodation in Roma and I am just after your opinion, because obviously it is an issue. Up on Thursday Island that was one of the main issues that we found, especially for getting students at the local high school and to do further education. I am just curious to hear your comments about the accommodation here to support your Country Universities Centre.

Mr O'Neil: I will come at it from a couple of different angles. From a high school perspective, we have a student hostel, which I am on the board of as well, so we provide a centre where outlying students can come in and board Monday to Friday. It is a small hostel—it is 25 beds—and, pleasingly, next year will be at full capacity, which we have not seen in close to a decade. If you look at the tertiary students, Queensland Health have invested in significant student accommodation here. Some universities have leased houses to accommodate some of their placement students. When it comes to the vocational education students, there is not anything and it is a real void in accommodation here, but Roma is not immune. Like many other regional communities, we are grappling with a housing shortage here at the moment and it is proving to be incredibly difficult to get people into professional roles because of the lack of housing, and I can only imagine how difficult it is then to attract someone at an apprentice level to come into town to do that as well. That is a whole other issue that would fill up a whole inquiry I think, but I am sure you are hearing that across the state.

CHAIR: Housing is a consistent challenge, particularly in regional and remote locations.

Mr SULLIVAN: I assume that you were in the room earlier, so forgive me for repeating myself, but I want to ask about recruitment for your staff, for your trainers, and I think you called them supporters in some circumstances. Do you try to train up people from within? Do you recruit from the region? Are you big enough now and substantial enough now that you recruit from other regions to bring highly skilled people in? What is your mode of recruitment in that regard?

CHAIR: Member for Stafford, the committee just had a new learning while we visited there, because I sort of envisaged that they would be engaging trainers in that space at CUC. It is a support for students, whether they be taking that academic pathway or that skills and training pathway to be able to come in to a supported environment, but they are not literally delivering the certs or the tertiary qual; it is more like a wraparound service, so that might change the way you think about that question.

Mr SULLIVAN: Yes, so not just trainers but highly skilled staff that run your organisation in terms of putting the pieces of the puzzle in place. Do you try to grow from within or do you need to recruit from outside or do you collaborate with other partners? How do you build up your internal skill sets?

Mr O'Neil: We have been operating for 2½ years. Initially we started with a centre manager and we have expanded to a team of four now. Jess, our centre manager who is alongside me, is our second centre manager and, pleasingly, as I shared with other members of your committee earlier this morning, Jess we have grown within. Jess in fact is a student still undertaking her tertiary qualifications. When we put out a public call for the replacement of our inaugural centre manager, Jess applied and she was the right fit for us because she was, for all intents and purposes, a customer or a client, so she knew the ins and outs of our operation better than anyone and so for her to transition from student to centre manager has been seamless, so from that perspective we grew our own. In terms of our learning skills advisers, both are locals, which again is exciting for us and allows us somewhat to deal with any housing issues that can be present when you are recruiting from outside the region. Our administrative support officer, Danny, is again another local, so we have been really blessed in being able to attract the best skilled workers into our organisation and so very pleased that they are locals.

Mr SULLIVAN: What a great story. Thank you, and apologies again I am not there in person, but I am obviously doing the right thing. Thank you for what you do.

CHAIR: Mr O'Neil said he did not want COVID for a third time.

Mr O'Neil: No, that is right.

Mr BOOTHMAN: He is happy you are not here, Jimmy.

Mr O'Neil: No offence. Chair, can I just add that the beauty of being affiliated with a Country Universities Centre model is that we do not stand alone, and so our centre staff have the ability to interact with a much larger network, which adds to the professional development, which I think is

incredibly important in any role. For us we need to learn from others, but even more so when you have a centre manager who is still studying; she is vested with all other students that she is helping to support.

CHAIR: Skin in the game. It is important.

Mr O'Neil: She knows the challenges better than anyone.

CHAIR: That is excellent, and it is a pretty impressive job that you are doing out there, Jess.

Ms Wild: We have a wonderful centre. We have a community that wants to participate, as is shown in our numbers. The fact that we have reached 500 students in just 2½ years shows that the Maranoa is really interested in gaining education and participating in ongoing education across all age groups. We have students from straight out of school all the way through to 77 years of age—that is our oldest registered student—so, really, it is across the whole community that people are wanting to engage in those studies.

Mr LISTER: I think it says a lot about a community that it can identify this need and recognise what to do about it, bring about what you have done and then have the community embrace it so wholeheartedly and take advantage of it. It says a lot about Roma; it really does.

CHAIR: Yes, it just shows. That is genuine collaboration across community, industry, government, students, people and what can be achieved, and I think it is really lovely the connection that you are now developing with your high school students which hopefully goes some way to address some of the issues raised by headspace as you continue to grow and expand that sees young people already being ahead of the game and knowing what pathways exist, so that is really terrific.

Ms Wild: Absolutely, yes.

Mr KING: Forgive my naivety, but I have not been on this journey; I am from a different committee. However, I am very interested in VET training, having been a product of VET training myself. You mentioned that you work with the big players in mining and everything else. I was just wondering how that works. In previous experience of mine, the mining companies did some of their own VET training. I was wondering if you have an interface with mining or big industry and student placement for parts of that work.

Mrs Johnson: We do have a very strong level of engagement with the resource sector out here and in particular some of the main players as well as the support sector industries. We see a lot of engagement through the apprenticeship and traineeship space, and a lot of that is delivered within our TAFE system. There are a lot of pathways programs in terms of engagement, and Maxine, who sits on our board here, chairs the schools to industry partnership program, which supports STEM pathways and career information and that type of thing, so we do have very strong collaboration from the industries around local employment, local VET pathways et cetera.

Mr BOOTHMAN: With the courses that are staged over here, what are the most popular courses that students are participating in?

Ms Wild: The majority of students undertake health studies, closely followed by education. In saying that, health studies is where the majority are. That is not just the local students but that is placement students. Students who are coming in from metropolitan areas are generally on campus in those metropolitan areas and they are choosing to come and do their placements out here. Again, it is those connections throughout the community that enable that to grow and has seen a positive growth within the various universities that are sending their students out this way—the fact that we have the accommodation that we have already mentioned that the hospital provides and the fact that there are various other service groups in town that can support them whilst they are here. Again, this is another one of those facets where the majority of students are undertaking those placements with government organisations here in town—our local schools and our local hospitals—and they will be looking for graduate positions afterwards. We are very pleased that some of those placement students have actually returned and taken up graduate positions here in our hospital. That is a wonderful boost for our town, but it also shows that people are interested in taking regional positions when they are available to them.

CHAIR: It is a fantastic opportunity to attract local talent to the community—

Mr BOOTHMAN: And retain them, yes.

CHAIR:—in doctors and nurses and pharmacists.

Ms Wild: Exactly.

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Mr LISTER: And you organise those B&S balls, don't you, to make sure that once they come here they meet a partner and stay?

Ms Wild: It is a marketing plan of many regional areas, yes.

CHAIR: I actually read a story about that in Mount Isa.

Mr O'Neil: From our perspective, more broadly than just providing a centre where students can come and learn and fulfil their education goals, particularly with the students who come here on placement, if this ticks the box to add to their overall vision of what living in a regional community is like then that is a win for us. Even if it is only a very small percentage that in turn continue their presence in a regional centre, that is a win for our community. It is just that initial hook that gets them here, so, pleasingly, when any of these students come out to undertake their placement with Queensland Health, on the first day of induction into this community they know about CUC Maranoa, and Jess will see it. There will be an uptick in placement registrations into the centre, and that is that broader buy-in to that collaboration. A centre like ours will not be as successful unless you are getting all those facets of a community seeing that there is a real advantage to having the doors open and the success that it brings.

CHAIR: Isn't that terrific, as I said, if you are attracting those doctors, those nurses, those pharmacists, because not only are they contributing to delivering those vital care services to your community—the community asset—but also they are contributing to the greater economy of regional towns like Roma?

Mr O'Neil: Absolutely.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Yes, and you are stemming the exodus from these communities which is a major problem in other areas of Queensland.

Mr O'Neil: It is, and for us as a region, between the two last Census years, we have dropped back. For a community in the south-east, dropping 700 residents is probably a drop in the ocean; for us, that is significant. Moving from 13½ thousand to just under 13,000 is a massive hit, so we need to do whatever we can, as a broader collaboration for our community, to continue to drive that back up to that magic number, which we are told is 20,000 for regional communities. CUC is just a part of that puzzle to be able to do that.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Yes, it is a great initiative what you are doing and what you are achieving. I know on the northern Gold Coast we have had a massive population explosion. The population in the electorate just north of me is probably double that of the Warrego electorate in total, so in just one electorate the population is just going crazy. With regard to the initial set-up costs to get to where you have got to now, how much was that? Do you have any idea?

Mr O'Neil: Yes, round figures. Our initial funding grant from the Commonwealth was \$1.32 million. Within that component about \$350,000 was for the set-up of the centre, and that seed funding was incredibly important. We were lucky, as you saw this morning, that the bricks and mortar were already there. It was about designing the inside to make it work for what we wanted, so it was about that \$350,000 mark.

CHAIR: So \$350,000 for the refurbishment into the council building at a discounted lease, and then is the balance that operational piece that we spoke about this morning?

Mr O'Neil: It is, yes.

CHAIR: Is that over a certain number of years or is that—

Mr O'Neil: The initial grant was for three and, pleasingly, we got an extension of four years this year.

CHAIR: Awesome.

Mr BOOTHMAN: How much does it cost to run that facility per year?

Mr O'Neil: It is around \$470,000.

Mr BOOTHMAN: In the scheme of things, that is very economical for what you are achieving here.

Mr O'Neil: We would like to think so. The numbers speak for themselves.

Mr BOOTHMAN: It is very economical. It is a great success and something that you should all be very proud of.

CHAIR: Are there any further questions from those on the line?

Mr KING: I am good, thanks.

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Mr SULLIVAN: No. It was a fantastic presentation, thank you.

CHAIR: I have one last question before you go, on the registered training organisations. There are 37 VET students. Is that a mix of RTO students and TAFE students?

Mr O'Neil: It is, yes.

CHAIR: Would you be able to send me the split of what is TAFE and what is RTO?

Mr O'Neil: Yes, we can.

CHAIR: There being no further questions, I thank you very much for the tour today and for your contributions today. It was very helpful.

Mr O'Neil: Thank you for the opportunity.

BURRELL, Mr Jonathan, Director, Country Universities Centre Balonne

HURSE, Ms Elspeth, Centre Manager, Country Universities Centre Balonne

OTTO, Ms Liz, Consultant, Country Universities Centre Balonne

CHAIR: Welcome. We are looking forward to hearing a comparison between Balonne and Roma in terms of your university centres.

Mr Burrell: Thank you for taking our submission. I will say before I commence my presentation that many of the things that Maranoa have talked about are applicable to us, so we will run the two together.

CHAIR: That is good to hear.

Mr Burrell: I would like to give you a brief introduction to the CUC Balonne initially. We are a not-for-profit company representing community interests in education, training and employment. CUC Balonne is affiliated with the Country Universities Centre network of regional university centres across New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. Our mission is to build the aspirations of our community through the power of education and training by changing lives, one student at a time. CUC Balonne has strategic objectives and they are to: provide local options for workforce development and upskilling; pursue opportunities to close the gap with pathway options into education and training; make study possible, financially viable and accessible; provide options to stay in the region and to learn on country; and set up students for success as part of a supportive learning community.

CUC Balonne has campuses in both St George and Dirranbandi, currently servicing over 130 remote and very remote students. Students receive face-to-face academic support, study spaces, exam support, access to high-speed internet technology, wellbeing support and a local learning community of other students. CUC Balonne employs a centre manager, a learning skills adviser, a First Nations community engagement and support coordinator, and an administrative assistant.

I have some specific statistics relating to VET course training in the Balonne shire. In 2021 we had 775 student enrolments in 450 programs, studying over 5,000 subjects. I have some specific notes here: 55 student enrolments were full-time and 720 part-time; there were 140 Indigenous student enrolments and 540 non-Indigenous; and we have 40 RTOs and 22 universities delivering in the Balonne shire. CUC Balonne is already servicing VET students along with our undergraduate students. The federal government has funded the CUC facilities and its operations to date in the Balonne. The Queensland government should utilise these CUC facilities to deliver VET courses in an area where we have no TAFE campus. We believe that we have the solutions.

We would like sufficient funding to employ two more people. One of them we will call a VET student support officer. We are even proposing the figure we want to fund this person: we would like \$160,000 per annum in funding to provide a wraparound student support person. This position will see the extension of existing CUC services specialising in VET support requirements and provide access to appropriate study spaces, learning resources and learning support including in language, literacy and numeracy study, assessment and using online learning, and access to suitable mentors and pastoral care. This person will also support pathway development and navigation of the VET system itself.

We have a second position we would like funded, which is also to the tune of \$160,000. We will call this person a VET community coordinator. This person will: coordinate partnerships with VET service providers for the local delivery of courses, including service delivery arrangements within CUC Balonne; collaborate with all stakeholders and community, industry, government, VET providers, workplaces and students; and directly support local needs to increase participation and delivery and meet targeted workplace needs. This position will also reduce the inefficiencies in local delivery and attract local training opportunities.

I ask you to receive a copy of our needs analysis report, which Liz popped on your table. That is what we are after.

CHAIR: Let's talk about why you are after those things. Firstly, you are seeking leave to table these two documents. Leave is granted. It is interesting that you come back to back with CUC Maranoa. Did Maranoa open at a similar time? Was it all part of the same first round?

Ms Hurse: Yes. We were funded on the same cohort of funding and we have now just started our second round of funding.

CHAIR: And you have had the same four-year extension?

Ms Hurse: Yes. There are some differences between the two.

CHAIR: That is what I am keen to understand. If you want to share that, that would be great.

Ms Hurse: We were a pilot project because we are a small population base. We are looking at about 3½ thousand. We are a dual campus. As well as having the campus in St George, we have a mini campus at Dirranbandi.

CHAIR: Would the St George campus be of a similar scale, in size and footprint, to the Maranoa campus?

Ms Hurse: If we are looking at it on a scale basis, for our population base, in the first 2½ years we have had over 220 students who have come through. I think we anticipated well under 100 when we originally applied for funding so it has well exceeded our expectations.

CHAIR: That is St George?

Ms Hurse: That is St George and Dirranbandi combined. In terms of what we are presenting here, another thing that is similar is that we are getting the same representation through health and education, and agriculture comes after that, but there are myriad other options. We have legal studies and all sorts of things happening. Another thing that is different is that we have a pilot study at the moment for our First Nations engagement and support coordinator position. There are only two positions like that in Australia at the moment in pilot form—in Cooktown and where we are. We are fulfilling really important work that can have national implications in terms of models that we start to look at that are going to really open up further training pathways for our First Nations people. It is a really important part of the work that we are doing. Like Maranoa, we support a lot of placement students.

CHAIR: VET placement students?

Ms Hurse: This is university placements for health. We will get to VET. We have important partnerships with the University of Queensland, because the School of Dentistry has a clinic here in St George and I believe Dalby is their only other one. We have the medical students coming through from the University of Queensland as well. We have Southern Queensland Rural Health, where we have all the allied health students. Like Maranoa, we provide an important service base for the health sector.

In terms of VET, our situation is challenging because we do not have a TAFE and RTOs. The problems that you talked about and that have been raised today in terms of transport and accommodation options and continuity of service are magnified in our case. In the role of manager, not only are we dealing with our partnerships and work in that university and that tertiary space; we have a whole breadth of work to cover in the VET space. We feel, with the options that we have presented today, we would be able to improve numbers, efficacy across the community, options for students and just operate a much more tailored and efficient service. I think that is really the crux of what we are on about and where we are coming from.

CHAIR: You do not have any VET-based students who are using your facilities?

Ms Hurse: Yes, we do. We have a lot of certificate students using our services. In fact, I would probably have more queries from people and put a lot more work into my cert. students than I am able to put into a lot of my university students, because they do not have the digital literacy and they do not have the contacts; they do not have the same connections. It is a more demanding sector.

CHAIR: From the point of doing the comparison, I am really keen to see what the scale and size looks like by centre. For Maranoa, for semester 2 of 2023 there are 190 registrations in total, 37 being VET students and 153 being university students. I would be super keen to see that for St George and Dirranbandi.

Ms Hurse: I do not have those exact figures.

CHAIR: You can come back to me.

Ms Hurse: I can pull that out for you.

Mr Burrell: At least an update for the VET part.

Ms Otto: The old figures are as of December 2022. I did not have the updated ones when I did the study. There were 130 students and, of those, about 24 were certificate enrolled VET students who had enrolled into the CUC.

CHAIR: That is at December 2022. Can you get me the 2023 figures?

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Ms Otto: We can get you updated ones.

Mr LISTER: Thank you very much for coming from St George to see us. It is really great, when we come to one place, that so many people take the trouble to come to us. One of the things that I have picked up on in our travels so far is that there are particular difficulties for Indigenous students in terms of travel, accommodation away from home and so on. You have obviously a fairly large population of Aboriginal people who use your offering. Is that a peculiarity that you are noticing as well?

Ms Hurse: It is not that we have large numbers. We believe that we should have a higher representation of First Nations students, and the work we are doing at the moment is very much outreach work. I think the last statistic we had was that 11 of our students were First Nations students. We really want to increase that and open up more options for them. That role that I talked about—our First Nations engagement and support coordinator—is really about growing that space. We also have an outreach—

Mr LISTER: Is that one of the roles that you already have?

Ms Hurse: Yes. That is a pilot project. Like Maranoa, we are part of the RPPPP, which is more research work. It is about working with the students from year 5 upwards to try to really build in young people the idea of vision and what is possible and what their options are and develop a strength of self within them. That work will also be linked in with the work of our First Nations worker.

Mr LISTER: Are you able to share with us some of the barriers to First Nations people's participation, in your view? Obviously, that is a fairly important part of the inquiry that we are doing as we move around the state.

Ms Hurse: There are many statistics we can draw on that relate to the state of First Nations people in this country. I am fairly new to St George. I do not know if anyone else on the panel can speak to this.

Ms Otto: I am happy to. To provide a little bit of context, since we submitted our submission to the inquiry in January I was engaged to conduct a needs analysis on behalf of the CUC Balonne community which looked at what exactly are the barriers and challenges to participation in VET in that community and also some of the opportunities for CUC Balonne to overcome and address that, hence the proposal earlier. As part of that study we did consultation and I did a fairly thorough analysis of the statistics of the community as well, both in the workplace and VET participation.

Drawing on one of your key comments there, from ABS statistics there were 70 people between the ages of 15 and 24 who are disengaged in employment and education. That is disproportionately higher than other communities percentage wise. In terms of the Indigenous population, there is a higher percentage in the Balonne community than probably other regional communities, so that proportionately is representing that community as well. The key barriers that we talked about were consistent. We talked to Indigenous organisations as well as our First Nations engagement officer, who was across all of these. All of the same barriers have come up, independent of what sector of the community it has been. It has definitely been around travel—even just travel within the shire. We did surveys that looked at how much travel inside the shire was a barrier versus outside. When people come from Dirranbandi, that is still an hour away within the shire. Similarly to Maranoa, people travelling within the shire to the main centre to access services alone is the first barrier, and travelling outside of the shire to access services was a major barrier that came up.

The cost of doing that and the cost of being away from family and all of those additional costs with being away that we talked about, both to the student and to the employer, was another barrier. The statistics are telling us that access to internet—absolutely. As part of that survey we also surveyed the high school students and, surprisingly, going back to some of the things that have been raised, it did come up in our survey that a high proportion of the high school students from grade 10 to grade 12 said that they had no plans as to what they were going to do after school and that all of these barriers around travel, cost, literacy and online literacy were barriers to them post school engaging in vocational education. That has come directly from the students themselves saying they are barriers. After school we do not think that is an option for us, because we still do not have the level of skills to engage in VET services. I did not collect statistics specifically for the Indigenous population, but they were included in the consultation and they are consistent themes that come up. Those statistics are represented in that report.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Elspeth, in relation to accommodation around the St George area—obviously we are in Roma, with hospital and health boarding here—what type of accommodation do you have down in your neck of the woods?

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Ms Hurse: It is the same story you heard before. There is an acute shortage of accommodation. Similar to Roma, the School of Dentistry, UQ medical department and Southern Queensland Rural Health have all bought or rented accommodation for the placement of students, but to my knowledge there is no other accommodation available to any of our other students. I do find that a lot of our students move in back home. That is what I hear from the students I have met so far.

Mr BOOTHMAN: If there was more available accommodation, do you feel that more people would stay in town and therefore potentially grow the economy?

Ms Hurse: I do believe there is the potential for that.

Mr BOOTHMAN: It is just that everywhere we go that is one of the issues that keeps coming up. For me, especially as somebody who comes from South-East Queensland, where we have an overflow of people, we need to really emphasise getting people into these more regional areas because there are potentially a lot of jobs out here. I feel that what you are trying to achieve here is a way of doing that; it is just getting accommodation out here.

Ms Hurse: Yes, but we have to have the service providers and the infrastructure to support them and make it a success.

Ms Otto: In terms of the issue around accommodation that you have touched on, that is something I am aware the regional councils across this whole southern area of Queensland are certainly collaborating and working on, and I know that Balonne Shire Council is participating in those studies as well. I know that a lot of work is being done around the housing shortage, and this is an overflow of the impacts that is having.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Do you have a breakdown of the vocational educational and training courses?

Ms Otto: Yes, we do. If you turn to page 24 of the report, it has total subject enrolments and what the different courses are. That is all of the courses that students are enrolled in within the shire. If you look at the highlighted courses, they are the ones that our students are enrolled in for CUC.

Mr BOOTHMAN: It is an issue when it comes to construction shortages, trainees and trade areas. That is certainly a major issue in the south-east and it would probably be far worse out here.

Ms Otto: We looked at the employment statistics as well in the different industries that people are employed in and the overlap with the different courses. As part of this study we also identified that, according to ABS statistics, there is a shortage of local people. There are people coming from other regions to fill local employment requirements. There is a demand for more local employment across different key industries that we could be meeting locally but we cannot get people for.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Do you feel there should be further incentives to get more people to come out here in those critically important construction areas? There is a big smile there. Everyone likes incentives.

Ms Otto: One of the key things we proposed in the second role around community liaison, community engagement support, is that collaboration which CUC Maranoa has already touched on as well. There needs to be streamlining around what industry and employment demand is and linking that back to the pathway connections and then actually enabling support and delivery of that training to have those pathways in place so that we are actually addressing the shortages locally. That collaboration is piecemeal. It would be really nice to have it brought together through community collaboration. The CUCs have on their boards representatives from industry, education, community, councils and Indigenous communities, so we have all of the right people sitting on our board. What we need is that additional support to link what the local employment demand is with industry initiatives, with government initiatives and then linking that to the training, attraction and retention of students as well.

CHAIR: Would you say that you are functioning a little bit differently to the CUC at Maranoa? What we have just heard from them is an absolute collaboration between community, between the ministry and the chamber and partnership with TAFE. Are you doing something different?

Ms Otto: The missing piece for us is around the local TAFE and local service providers being present. A lot of the role that our centre manager needs to pick up is the pathway advice and support to people looking for those options, actually navigating the VET systems for enrolment, but then further than that actually having the coordination of training happening within the community. As part of the consultation I did, so many people were trying to organise courses but they could not get enough people to participate. Similarly, it is just getting support for apprenticeships and traineeships. There is just that lack of local knowledge and awareness. There is no referral system. There is no

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other person to go to in our local community. We cannot refer them, so we have to fulfil all of those services and refer them outside of our region to get the support they need. It is that one-stop shop within the community to then connect them with the service need because it is not currently present.

CHAIR: It is interesting that two CUCs in two very closely located geographical areas have such different challenges. We heard from CUC Maranoa and we have seen the great involvement of the industries that matter to the local community the most, their engagement and then having a bit of skin in the game as being drivers. Do you have the same engagement with industry?

Ms Hurse: Probably not.

Ms Otto: Probably not the funding side of it, but the CUC board representation includes health, agriculture, the council, education, school education, Indigenous. The board itself is representative. We just have not had the sponsorship model they have.

CHAIR: I understand that the Maranoa CUC has the support of the Maranoa council in terms of a financial benefit piece. Do you have that, too?

Ms Hurse: We have that, too. We are housed in the same building. We have a massive amount of in-kind support from the council, and in fact our initial costs are capital works costs because most of it was covered by council—in the vicinity of about \$85,000, so we have massive support from council. They are our major partner. There is a lot of small support from a lot of other industries and community organisations but not to the same extent.

CHAIR: It does not look the same. The two CUCs look different in the sense of what industry engagement looks like.

Ms Hurse: Having said that, industry does use our centre quite a lot for running short courses. We do get buy-in from that, so we do that in-kind support and share across.

CHAIR: As we just said in the previous session, in terms of skin in the game and collaboration, the output of CUCs, whether it be in VET or academic, is providing a skilled and trained workforce for the companies that are in your region and contributing to your economy.

Ms Otto: Our major industry is different in Balonne. It is the irrigation agriculture industry. They certainly have been part of the founding board as well as the key people who have been on that board. Notably, the CEO of the council is also the chairman of the board, so that connection is certainly there. The industry and dynamic of the community looks different to what the Maranoa does.

CHAIR: I think it is really good to understand what the differences are and how you are delivering under that model, so I think that is very interesting. Member for Stafford, we are well and truly over time and I have not gone to the floor yet. Member for Stafford or member for Kurwongbah, do you have any questions that you want to ask?

Mr SULLIVAN: I did, Chair, but that exchange has really answered all of my questions, so thank you very much.

Mr KING: I am fine. I am conscious of the time as well. Thank you all very much; it has been very informative.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing before us today. We are very grateful for your time. I know that we are over time. Does anybody in the audience have anything further they want to contribute? I just want to make sure we provide that opportunity to anybody who is here who may have wanted to share.

TUCKER, Mr John, Chief Executive Officer, TAFE Queensland

Mr Tucker: Today is World Teachers' Day! We are invested in so much of what we have been discussing here and the committee's work around the state. I think everyone in the room can think in their own lifetime of an experience with a fantastic teacher and the power of their ability to change people's lives. That should be recognised today, so thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you so much, John Tucker, and thank you to all of the incredible teaching staff that TAFE Queensland offers Queenslanders. We are very lucky in this state to have the powerhouse that TAFE is, so thank you. I remember Mrs Boucher; she served me very well. I think everybody has the teacher they remember most for making a difference. To all of our teachers out there, happy World Teachers' Day! Thank you for all that you do for our community. I now declare this public hearing closed.

The committee adjourned at 1.15 pm.