

Inquiry into the delivery of vocational education and training in regional, rural, and remote Queensland

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Dale Last MP **Member for Burdekin**

Shadow Minister for Police and Corrective Services, Shadow Minister for Fire and Emergency Services,
Shadow Minister for Rural and Regional Affairs

Kim Richards MP

Chair

Education, Employment and Training Committee

Parliament House

George Street

Brisbane Qld 4000

Dear Ms Richards,

As the Member for Burdekin I write to make a submission to the *Inquiry into the delivery of vocational education and training in regional, rural and remote Queensland*.

The Burdekin electorate is the fifth largest in Queensland and spans an area from North Queensland's east coast south of Townsville down the coast to south of Bowen before extending inland to incorporate the majority of the Isaac Regional Council area encompassing the coal mining towns of Moranbah, Middlemount, Dysart and Clermont.

According to the 2021 Census, the Burdekin Electorate was home to 55,948 people with major industries including coal mining in the Isaac region to cattle grazing, horticulture farming and sugarcane growing and manufacturing in the Burdekin and Bowen areas. While the Isaac region is home to more than 25 operational mines, the Burdekin is the largest sugar cane producing area in Queensland. Both of these regions require a workforce of skilled and unskilled labour working directly and indirectly with these respective industries.

Having consideration for the fact that the Burdekin is one of the most economically diverse electorates in Queensland, there is an immense need for vocational education and training opportunities to be situated within the townships where these industries operate. Currently in the Burdekin electorate there is a TAFE centre at Home Hill (Burdekin) and another in Bowen, at the same time some opportunities for TAFE learning have been sporadically offered at high schools within the Isaac region in a school-based platform.

While Bowen has recently benefitted from the investment of a \$3.4million Agriculture Centre of Excellence, Burdekin's TAFE facility has for a significant period of time, been considered under-utilised and students in Moranbah and Middlemount have been unable to participate in school-based TAFE programs because the facilities the program relies on have either been closed or deemed unsuitable for use. On behalf of my constituents, I ask that your review take into consideration the information and recommendations outlined within the following pages.

Yours

Dale Last, MP
Member for Burdekin



The current situation

Major industries in the Burdekin electorate including manufacturing, mining and farming heavily rely on strong access to vocational education and training (VET) opportunities within the townships that these industries operate.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Burdekin Electorate holds a percentage of technicians and trades workers 3.1 per cent higher than Queensland, emphasising the need for strong access to VET programs right across the electorate both now and well into the future. Statistics further showed 18.3 per cent of people over the age of 15 had obtained a Certificate III and lived in the Burdekin than compared to 15.3 per cent across the state.

As the state's largest producer of sugar, the Burdekin LGA is home to four sugar mills, Invicta, Kalamia, Pioneer and Inkerman which are owned by Wilmar Sugar and directly employ 719 tradespeople, labourers and skilled workers. According to the Australian Sugar Milling Council a further 958 jobs within the Burdekin LGA are supported by the sugar industry, from on-farm employment to manufacturing and retail industries.

In 2022 the sugar milling company, which is considered one of the district's largest employers, employed 21 new apprentices across electrical, fitting and turning, boilermaker and diesel fitting disciplines. However of these disciplines, only apprentice boilermakers and fitters and turners are able to complete their TAFE training at the Home Hill TAFE campus while electrical and diesel fitting apprentices are forced to travel an hour north to Townsville to complete their training at the TAFE Queensland Townsville Campus (Trade Training Centre Bohle).

Looking at the Isaac region, Moranbah State High School offers VET for a number of certificates including engineering pathways, fitness, hospitality and childcare. The Moranbah Senior Training and Education Program (M-STEP) was established in 2008 and up until recently, has offered vocational educational opportunities with training partners. Without these opportunities within school environments, those in Moranbah wanting to study a TAFE course, would need to travel more than 2 hours one way to Mackay.

Barriers to VET studies in the Burdekin Electorate

As mentioned above, industries that operate across the Burdekin electorate rely heavily on having the ability to train future tradespeople as efficiently as possible to support those industries.

In the Burdekin LGA we are fortunate to have a dedicated TAFE campus which has the ability to provide training for a number of industries, however despite 178 residents over the age of 15 living in the Burdekin and currently studying a TAFE certificate, not all are able to study at the Burdekin campus with a large majority forced to travel to Townsville. A further 243 Burdekin residents are currently also studying at university however with no opportunity to attend required subjects locally, these students are forced to either study online or travel to Townsville on a daily basis to study at either James Cook University or CQ University.



As a result, the Burdekin community largely views the Burdekin TAFE campus as underutilised and many who may not be able to travel to Townsville for TAFE studies are unable to complete the certificate they may require for employment.

As at September 2022, the Burdekin LGA's unemployment rate was at 2.6 per cent, compared to Queensland's 4.6 per cent. While the unemployment rate has been for sometime at record lows, it is my belief that barriers such as travelling 100km to the next TAFE campus to complete training that may be required for potential employment, should be removed.

Having more than 25 operational mines as well as infrastructure businesses that support these mining operations means that opportunities for apprenticeships in the Isaac region are boundless. However, the gateway to undertaking these apprenticeships has recently been made all the more difficult for students and school leavers. As mentioned, the nearest TAFE campus is more than two hours away, requiring any students who need to study at the TAFE to travel.

While efforts have been made to create gateways from school to industry, some programs have failed leaving a cohort of potential students no other option but to leave the region.

Despite the demand for skilled labour and apprenticeships within our mining industry, the Moranbah State High School's M-STEP program was recently closed after the teacher facilitating the program left and is yet to be replaced. This has resulted in those students who were looking to step into that program, or who had already commenced studies at that centre missing out on potential job opportunities.

Likewise, a similar opportunity has been looked at for Middlemount Community School, located 150km from Moranbah, however a VET instructor has inspected the facility at Middlemount Community School and has deemed it unsuitable to deliver this level of training.

Both of these instances create significant barriers to school leavers or those looking to secure school-based apprenticeships who are, as a result, unable to undertake practical hands-on learning as part of their school curriculum.

Possible solutions

I am incredibly proud of the economic diversity of the Burdekin Electorate and believe that in order for this strong economy to continue, it requires the support of a strong TAFE and vocational education training platforms.

In the Burdekin LGA, we have a fully established TAFE campus which is failing to meet the needs of the industries that support the town and as a result, students are faced with travelling 100km to study a VET course with the result that the community is left feeling the facility is severely underutilised.

A review of what is available to study at the Burdekin TAFE campus, the number of students studying at the campus as well as gathering feedback from industry employees as to what courses they believe need to be on offer at the TAFE would assist in providing a framework to increase the utilisation of the facility into the future.



Further benefits would be to also consider whether access for university students could be considered. While students may not need to attend lectures every day, having the opportunity to study at a facility nearby to home may open opportunities for the facility to be utilised by those additional 243 students currently studying a university degree. In the Burdekin the only alternative locations to study outside of their home environment is at a public library.

Despite the number of operational mines in the Isaac region, the support to ensure that youths who grow up in the region have a pathway from school to a job in these mines through the VET pathway is severely lacking. While consideration needs to be given as to whether a TAFE facility should be built in the Isaac Region to service the 325 people currently living in the Isaac and undertaking VET programs, collaboration is required in the immediate future between the Department of Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills Development and Department of Education.

This collaboration, paired with investment to ensure school-based programs which incorporate VET has the potential to ensure these programs are funded and resourced in an appropriate manner so they are able to operate. This is applicable to the current situation in Middlemount Community School where investment is required to ensure their industrial learning space is at a standard where VET programs can be conducted in a school-based manner.

Further, this level of collaboration would also assist in the situation faced by students at Moranbah State High School who were, up until recently, undergoing the M-STEP program before its cessation due to staff shortages. The impact of this closure has not only meant that students who were already undertaking the course were unable to complete it, but students who were seeking to undertake the M-STEP program in the coming year are also left without any pathway into school-based VET study. This then impacts the gateway these students have when transitioning from school learning to training for employment.

Conclusion

As the state member for one of the largest and most economically diverse electorates in Queensland it gives me great pleasure to see our industries thriving, whether it is horticulture in Bowen, sugarcane farming in the Burdekin LGA or our mining industry in the Isaac Region.

With a percentage of tradespeople living in the Burdekin electorate that is higher than the state average the Burdekin should be a priority electorate for further investigation into how our VET opportunities can be better tailored to promote employment gateways into our major industries. In some areas this assessment needs collaboration between other government departments while in others the solution is about collaborating with major industries and employers of that region.

Given that 178 people living in the Burdekin LGA are currently studying a VET certificate, combined with one of the region's largest employers being unable to send apprentices to the Burdekin TAFE, a review into the Burdekin TAFE which incorporates local industries and employers would provide valuable feedback as to what can be done to increase the utilisation of the facility. In order for industries to grow within the Burdekin electorate it is necessary to ensure that the next generation of farmers, fitters and turners, boilermakers, hairdressers, electricians and mining operators are equipped with the training and knowledge they need to do their jobs.