

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

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

Introduction

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 Centre Program and through local sponsorship.

We are a 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

CUC Maranoa exists to provide equitable access to higher education for our rural students. Since opening in June 2021, we are seeing a growing number of VET students utilising our centre, its facilities and its services. Currently, we have 37 VET students registered to use our fantastic study centre.

Many students across our region, who are studying a vocational qualification by distance or online learning, do not have high-quality internet access in their homes. Our experience has been that this factor alone is a crucial barrier to participation within the VET sector. However, by accessing our centre, students can utilise free high-speed internet and a suite of up-to-date computers.

It has also been our experience that, more often than not, the learning platforms of the VET courses are quite challenging to navigate. Many students would not have continued their studies without one-to-one personal support. Furthermore, as the digital delivery of courses requires a competent level of technological skills, which many of the mature-age students do not possess, this is another significant barrier to their ongoing attrition and success in their study journey.

Therefore, it is evident that whilst the flexible delivery of VET courses is positive at increasing the availability and inclusiveness of study for regional students, it is imperative that they can access face-to-face learning support. That is where the CUC model fits in perfectly. Our

dedicated Learning Skills Advisors are available to provide one-to-one support to students through their chosen study pathway.

We see the services provided by the CUC as complementary to TAFE Queensland. We collaborate in consultation to strengthen the uptake of and attrition rates for students undertaking a VET pathway within the district. As the CUC is accessible to students after the operating hours of the TAFE campus, between 5 am to midnight seven days a week, students have a quiet, dedicated learning environment at times that suit their life schedules.

When we have students visit the centre who wish to partake in study but are unsure of the right pathway, we often guide them to begin with a VET qualification as they can easily build on this as their confidence to study grows.

Support for local businesses

Like all regional areas, the Maranoa has a severe shortfall of skilled employees. In order to facilitate successful VET pathways into employment, the CUC facilitates 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 obtain or further their qualifications through engaging in higher education studies. This will have a lasting effect on the percentage of skilled employees available in our region.

Funding contribution for regional, rural and remote VET students

Over the short time CUC Maranoa has been open, 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 students 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 into eight different categories, with our region (the Maranoa) being categorised as Country, meaning training services delivered into our region will attract an additional 15% of funding compared to training services delivered into the South-East Queensland which attracts no loadings at all.

Disappointingly, the local categorisation for Roma, being Country, is also the same as Toowoomba. As you would be aware, this is exceptionally inequitable and has resulted in ongoing challenges, especially around Registered Training Organisation (RTO) attraction into our Maranoa region.

The Department must urgently review and re-align regional classifications to make our rural and remote communities more attractive for providers to deliver training services.

Conclusion

In other states across Australia, the CUC model is co-funded in partnership with the State Government. It is recommended that DESBT review its investment position in Regional Study Hubs to provide support to our network and local students within regional communities.

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