

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

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20 January 2023

Ms Kim Richards MP  
Chair - Queensland Government Education, Employment and Training Committee

Via email: [eetc@parliament.qld.gov.au](mailto:eetc@parliament.qld.gov.au)

Dear Ms Richards,

**Submission to the Queensland Government Education, Employment and Training Committee's inquiry into the delivery of vocational education and training in regional, rural, and remote Queensland**

## 1.0 Executive summary

Cairns enjoys an excellent foundation on which to build a robust economy for the future but as the region grows, access to quality, supportive and affordable vocational education and training (VET) will be critical in building a workforce with the necessary skills to meet the needs of the region's priority industries.

Cairns Regional Council welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Queensland Government's Education, Employment and Training Committee's (the Committee) inquiry into the delivery of vocational education and training (VET) in regional, rural, and remote Queensland. Council's position and interests, are detailed in this submission, with key recommendations outlined below:

### The Queensland Government should consider:

- Facilitating greater collaboration between Cairns public providers of VET, key local industry representatives, and DESBT to proactively identify and address emerging skills and labour force needs with an emphasis on the priority industries outlined in this submission.
- Working with local industries (with an emphasis on the priority industries outlined in this submission) and employers to develop clear employment pathways with flexible study options to increase participation in VET by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Peoples.
- Addressing critical gaps in the Cairns workforce by encouraging enrolments in priority courses (aligned with in-demand jobs in priority industries outlined in this submission), through additional investment in subsidised or incentivised programs and increased investment in local education and training infrastructure.
- Facilitating greater collaboration between Cairns public providers of VET, key local industry representatives, a variety of employing organisations, and DESBT to deliver better localised and place-based training solutions and inviting Cairns Regional Council to be a stakeholder in this cohort.
- Supporting the Cairns Regional Jobs Committee's recommendation to prepare a Workforce Development Plan for Cairns to inform the provision of localised and place-based VET to help address critical skills gaps in the Cairns workforce with an emphasis on priority industry sectors.

## 2.0 Introduction

### 2.1 Background

Cairns Regional Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Committee for the Inquiry into the delivery of VET in regional, rural, and remote Queensland.

We understand the Terms of Reference (TOR) for the inquiry will examine:

1. the role of public providers in VET delivery in rural, remote and regional Queensland, including:
  - VET pathways, participation rates and outcomes
  - VET delivery for Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including enablers and barriers to VET
2. the major barriers to the provision of localised and place-based VET, and priority areas and cohorts in Queensland;
3. existing programs that might assist in reducing barriers or supporting priority cohorts in accessing localised and place-based VET;
4. examples of successful localised VET models and how learnings might be applied in other locations; and
5. opportunities for the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training to facilitate improvements in these areas.

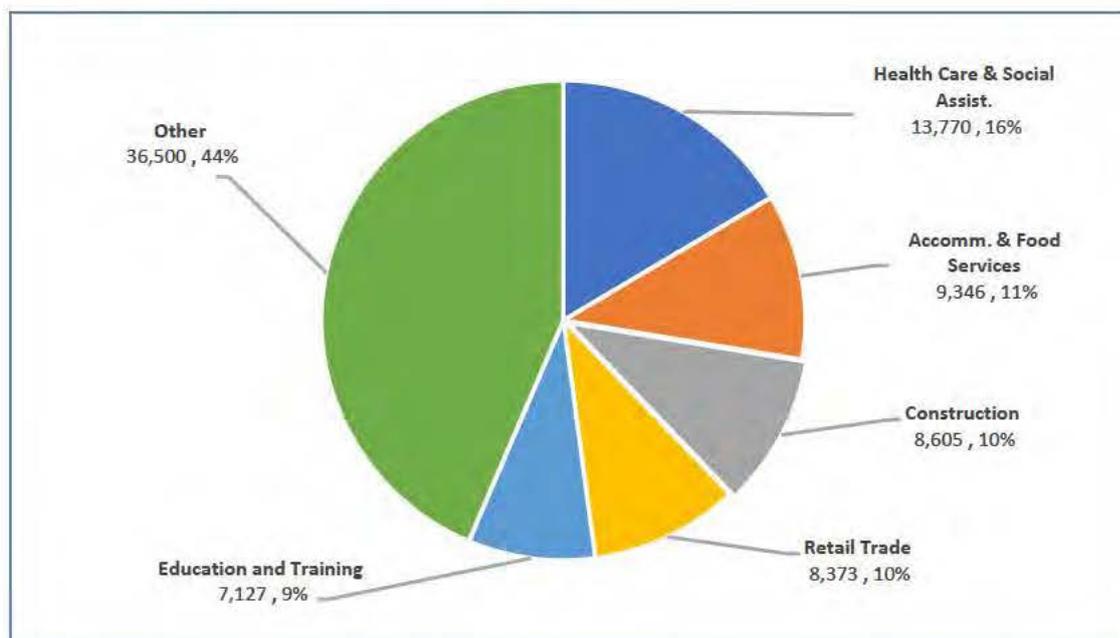
The Committee invited submissions from interested parties to address any aspect of the Inquiry that was relevant. Considering Council's position in the provision of VET in Cairns, TOR 1, 2 and 5 held the most relevancy. A response to each, including Council's position and interests, are detailed in this submission, with key recommendations provided in the Executive Summary.

## 2.2 Economic Overview

Cairns Regional Council's economic profile is represented by a \$10.3 billion Gross Regional Product (GRP) and a resident population of 169,312.<sup>1</sup> The region is supported by 13,801 local businesses, 97% of which are small to medium-sized enterprises.<sup>2</sup>

As the primary service centre for Far North Queensland, Cairns provides the base from which many regional services are delivered, such as Health Care and Social Assistance, Construction, and Education and Training. These industries, along with Accommodation and Food Services and Retail Trade, make up the region's top five employing industry sectors, supporting 47,221 local jobs.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1: Cairns employment by industry – Top 5\*



\* Tourism is not separately identified in the ANSIC industry codes (and this analysis) but employs 13,035 locally (direct and indirect) and contributes \$917 million of industry added value.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.3 Workforce Analysis

Similar to other parts of regional Australia, Cairns' unemployment rate is at a record low (4.1%, as of 31 Oct 2022).<sup>5</sup> With a tightening labour market, an acute skills shortage has emerged across a range of industries and occupations in the region.

Simultaneously, demand for workers has increased rapidly since 2020; best reflected in the number of jobs advertised online in Cairns, which reached 3,360 in October 2022, a 126.2% increase from March 2020.<sup>5</sup> In the 2022 Skills Priority List (SPL) Key Findings Report, the National Skills Commission (NSC) reported that Major Occupation Groups experiencing the largest shortfall of workers from 2021 to 2022 (across Australia) included, Professionals (up 20%); Technicians and Trades Workers (up 5%); and Community and Personal Service

<sup>1</sup> [NIEIR, 30 June 2021](#)

<sup>2</sup> [ABS, Counts of Australian Businesses, including Entries and Exits, 2016 to 2021](#)

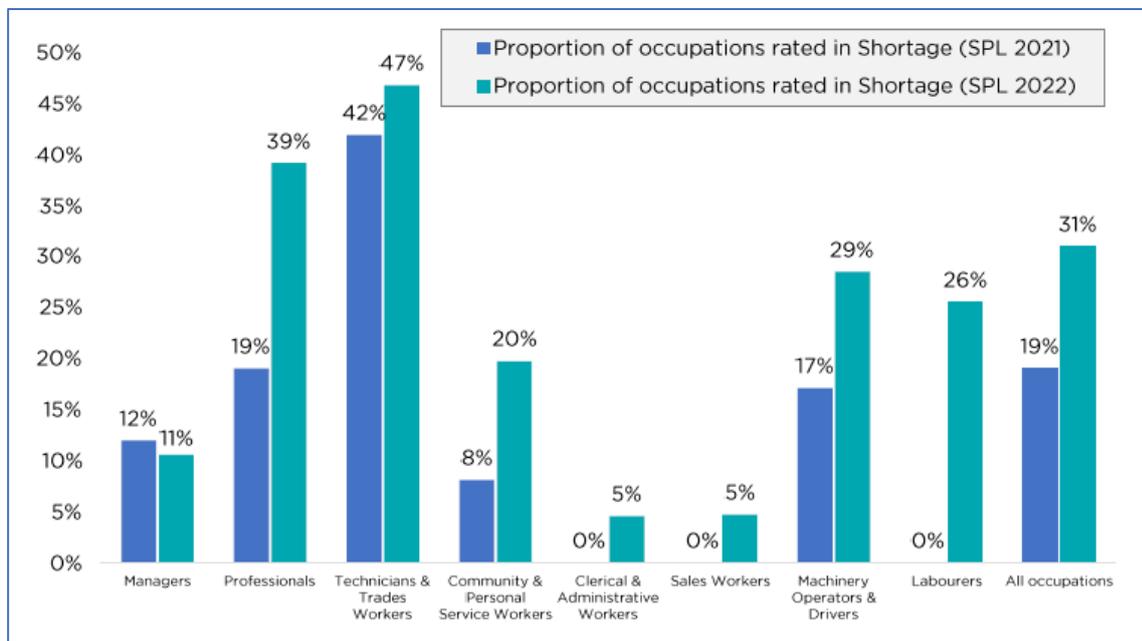
<sup>3</sup> [NIEIR, 30 June 2021, Employment by industry \(Total\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [NIEIR, 30 June 2021, Tourism Value](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Jobs & Skills Australia, Cairns Employment Region, 30 Oct 22](#)

Workers (up 12%).<sup>6</sup> These three groups also represent Cairns' three most popular occupations, accounting for almost half (49.6%) of the occupations of local workers.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 2 – Proportion of occupations in shortage on the 2021 and 2022 SPL, by Major Occupation Group.<sup>6</sup>



Servicing Cairns' employing industries is a highly skilled workforce with 67.4% of local workers holding formal qualifications from certificates through to bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.4 Cairns Economic Development Strategy 2022-2026

To support economic development in Cairns, a broad range of activities to attract, create and retain jobs is outlined in the *Cairns Regional Council Economic Development Strategy 2022-2026*.<sup>9</sup> In formulating this Strategy, Council conducted an in-depth analysis of Cairns' competitive advantages, local industries, potential geographic areas of focus and economic initiatives.

The result is a Strategy that clearly articulates the industries and other priority areas Council will focus on, in collaboration with key stakeholders, to achieve a \$13 billion economy (GRP), create 15,000 new jobs and be recognised as a leader in the Smart Green Economy. Growth will be driven by eight priority industries/sectors: Aviation; Marine and Defence; Healthcare and Social Assistance; Tourism; Construction; Manufacturing; Education and Training; and Arts and Culture.

## 3.0 Priority Industry Aligned VET Requirements for Cairns

### 3.1 Overview

The Cairns workforce is supported by two world-class universities and several public providers of VET including Central Queensland University (CQU), Aviation Australia's Cairns Aviation Skills Centre (CASC) and TAFE Queensland. TAFE plays an important role in

<sup>6</sup> [NSC, 2022 SPL, Key Findings Report](#)

<sup>7</sup> [ABS, Census of Population and Housing, 2021, Cairns local worker occupations](#)

<sup>8</sup> [ABS, Census of Population and Housing, 2021, Cairns local worker qualifications](#)

<sup>9</sup> [CRC Economic Development Strategy 2022-2026](#)

skilling the local workforce with industry specific qualifications at its Cairns Campus and through the Great Barrier Reef International Marine College (GBRIMC).

Cairns enjoys an excellent foundation on which to build a robust economy for the future but as the region grows, access to quality, supportive and affordable VET will be critical in building a workforce that meets the needs of the region's priority industries.

Increased investment is needed by the Queensland Government in subsidised or incentivised programs to support vocational pathways with job and career outcomes that align with the region's economic priorities. This investment should extend to the maintenance, repair, and capital improvements of local education and training infrastructure to ensure campuses provide fit-for-purpose and flexible learning environments.

### **3.2 Aviation**

Established industries such as Aviation (centred around the Cairns Airport) are experiencing significant growth in demand for Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO) services, fuelling increased demand for Licenced Aircraft Engineers in avionics and mechanical, along with qualified Structural Engineers. CASC, under the auspices of TAFE Queensland, are a Cairns-based provider of VET qualifications supporting the local and Australian aviation industry. Priority courses requiring increased enrolments include:

- Certificate IV Aeroskills Mechanical
- Certificate IV Aeroskills Avionics
- Certificate IV Aeroskills Structures

A limited VET offering is also delivered at CQUniversity's Cairns Aviation Centre. Both facilities are currently considered fit-for-purpose and are in appropriate locations to meet regional demand for associated training delivery.

### **3.3 Marine and Defence**

Marine and Defence is a growing industry in Cairns with significant development potential driven by major State and Federal investment in the expansion of the Cairns Marine Precinct and HMAS Cairns. This investment will see the Precinct's capacity to manage much larger vessels expand significantly, fuelling a surge in demand for workers with relevant shipbuilding qualifications in maintenance, refit, and repair occupations such as Welders, Boiler Makers, Hydraulic Fitters, Marine Electricians and Heavy Diesel Mechanics.

Cairns has long delivered the sustainment and maintenance of Guardian Class Patrol Boats, which led to TAFE Queensland securing a five-year crew training contract with the Department of Defence. This program is referred to as the Pacific Maritime Training Services (PMTS) and is delivered through GBRIMC. In addition to this, GBRIMC delivers short courses on safety, survival and security, certified courses relating to maritime qualifications for deck, engineering or cookery work and refresher courses for updating skills and competencies

Accommodating the public demand for maritime related VET courses and the requirements of the PMTS is becoming increasingly difficult in the current footprint of the GBRIMC. Additional investment in expanding the facility is needed by State and Federal Governments to ensure the College is fit-for-purpose.

### **3.4 Healthcare and Social Assistance**

Healthcare and Social Assistance is Cairns' largest industry by number of jobs and contribution to the economy. Major State and Federal infrastructure projects like the Far

North Queensland Health and Innovation Precinct are key drivers for growth in this sector and will add to the region's appeal as the perfect place to study and work.

The Cairns Health and Social Assistance industry is largely serviced by Community and Personal Service Workers Occupational Group. Within this cohort, a significant shortage exists in Aged or Disabled Carers and Child Care Workers, with employers attributing the shortfall to a lack of experience and formal qualifications from applicants.<sup>10</sup> In a bid to deliver qualified workers in this area, the Australian and Queensland Governments recently announced access to 37,000 Fee Free TAFE and VET places in study areas such as Nursing, Pathology, Ageing Support, Disability and Mental Health, to name a few.

### 3.5 Tourism

The Tourism sector accounted for 10.7% of Cairns' Industry GRP in 2020-21, contributing \$917 million of added value, and employing 13,035 people (directly and indirectly) within Cairns Local Government Area (LGA).<sup>11</sup>

The top five occupations in Tourism in Cairns are Chef, Waiter, Kitchenhand, Commercial Housekeeper and Café or Restaurant Managers.<sup>12</sup> VET qualifications are an important part of the employment pathway into these jobs, which are in high demand in Cairns and throughout Australia. The 2022 Skills Priority List reveals that Chefs are one of the largest employing Technician and Trades occupations in shortage in Australia and that the future demand for them and Waiters will remain strong for some time.<sup>13</sup>

Within the Australian and Queensland Governments recently announced Fee Free TAFE program, VET qualifications in Hospitality, Kitchen Operations and Cookery are among those on offer to incentivise enrolments and assist in reducing the national shortage of Chefs, particularly in regional areas like Cairns.

### 3.6 Construction

Construction benefits from growth across all industries and is Cairns' third largest industry by jobs and contribution to the economy. Growth will be driven by substantial public and private investment across the region, but infrastructure projects are at risk of being under serviced as Australia battles a national shortage of VET qualified Technicians and Trades Workers.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.7 Manufacturing

Manufacturing in Cairns is underpinned by an increasingly high-value manufacturing base. Supported by the Cairns Manufacturing Hub, this industry cuts across other sectors, specifically, Agriculture (food), Aviation, Marine and Defence.

The Cairns Manufacturing Hub, located at TAFE Queensland's Cairns Campus, promotes collaboration between industry and vocational, tertiary and secondary education providers. To support the growing demands from this industry, a variety of manufacturing qualifications are available in Cairns across various Engineering disciplines and in industry specific fields like Marine Mechanical Technology.

### 3.8 Education and Training

Education and Training is the fifth largest industry by jobs and contribution to the economy in Cairns. More than 3,700 Education Professionals work in Cairns, accounting for 53% of the

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<sup>10</sup> [NSC, 2022 SPL, Key Findings Report](#)

<sup>11</sup> [NIEIR, 30 June 2021, Tourism Value](#)

<sup>12</sup> [ABS, Census of Population and Housing 2016, Tourism & hospitality workforce](#)

<sup>13</sup> [NSC, 2022 SPL, Key Findings Report, Major occupation group findings](#)

total industry employment.<sup>14</sup> The labour market has tightened in this occupation group in recent years, with suitable applicants for Early Childhood (pre-primary) Teachers, Primary School Teachers, and Secondary School Teachers more than halving between 2021 and 2022, nationally.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.9 Arts and Culture

The Arts and Culture sector is an important contributor to the Cairns economy relative to the wider region, with strengths in Indigenous arts and culture, film and performing arts. Cairns has a high level of creative excellence, where culture and the arts are reflected in residents' everyday lives. A wide range of VET courses in digital, media and creative arts are available through CQU. TAFE Queensland also offers dedicated facilities for music, acting, visual arts, fashion, screen and media, graphic design, games design, jewellery, and photography.

## 4.0 Responses to the Inquiry TOR

The Committee invited submissions from interested parties to address any aspect of the Inquiry that was relevant. Considering Council's position in the provision of VET in Cairns, TOR 1, 2 and 5 (as per the table below) held the most relevancy.

*Table 1: Inquiry into the delivery of vocational education and training (VET) in regional, rural, and remote Queensland Terms of Reference (TOR)*

TOR	Description
1.	Role of public providers in VET delivery in rural, remote and regional Queensland including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>VET pathways, participation rates and outcomes</li> <li>VET delivery for Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples</li> </ul>
2.	Major barriers to the provision of localised and place-based VET, and priority areas and cohorts in Queensland.
5.	Opportunities for the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training to facilitate improvements in these areas.

A summary of key recommendations linked to the TOR has been provided in the Executive Summary, however a response to each, including Council's position and interests, are detailed below.

### TOR 1 – Role of public providers in VET delivery in rural, remote and regional Queensland including:

- VET pathways, participation rates and outcomes
- VET delivery for Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples,

Servicing Cairns' industries is a highly skilled workforce with 67.4% of local workers holding formal qualifications from certificates through to bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>16</sup> The Cairns workforce is supported by two world-class universities and several public providers of VET including CQU, Aviation Australia's CASC and TAFE Queensland. TAFE plays an important role in skilling the local workforce with industry specific qualifications at its Cairns Campus and through the GBRIMC.

*Cairns Regional Council's Economic Development Strategy 2022-2026*<sup>17</sup> details how growth in the region over the next four years will be driven by eight priority industries/sectors:

<sup>14</sup> [ABS, Census of Population & Housing, 2021, Cairns local worker occupation - Education & Training](#)

<sup>15</sup> [NSC, 2022 SPL, Key Findings Report, Spotlights on selected occupations](#)

<sup>16</sup> [ABS, Census of Population and Housing, 2021, Cairns local worker qualifications](#)

<sup>17</sup> [CRC Economic Development Strategy 2022-2026](#)

Aviation; Marine and Defence; Healthcare and Social Assistance; Tourism, Construction; Manufacturing; Education and Training; and Arts and Culture. Successful delivery of the Strategy and achievement of its targets is reliant on industry demands for a skilled and available workforce being met.

In Cairns, alignment of VET outcomes with the region's priority industry demands is the responsibility of individual public providers of VET. While Council facilitates regular discussions between these providers and key industry representatives to ensure strong communication exists on a local level, greater collaboration is desirable. Increased collaboration amongst existing stakeholders and Department of Education, Small Business and Training (DESBT) will proactively identify how VET can address emerging skills and labour force needs in Cairns, leading to better career pathways for local students and a higher employment outcome.

Cairns would also benefit from improved employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, both now and in the future. Public providers of VET need to reduce disparities by addressing social barriers to study. A one-size-fits all approach to the provision of VET is not enough and specific programs with clear employment pathways and flexible study options are required to deliver positive outcomes.

As the region grows, so too does the demand for skilled workers. Policies that focus on increasing regional enrolments together with wider access to quality, supportive and affordable VET is critical in building a workforce that addresses the employment and skilling priorities of both industry and employers. This is only achievable through greater collaboration and the continued investment in VET in Cairns by the Queensland Government.

Investment should extend to the maintenance, repair, and capital improvements of local education and training infrastructure to ensure campuses provide fit-for-purpose, and flexible learning environments.

## **Recommendations**

### ***The Queensland Government should consider:***

- *Facilitating greater collaboration between Cairns public providers of VET, key local industry representatives, and DESBT to proactively identify and address emerging skills and labour force needs with an emphasis on the priority industries outlined in this submission.*
- *Working with local industries (with an emphasis on the priority industries outlined in this submission) and employers to develop clear employment pathways with flexible study options to increase participation in VET by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.*
- *Addressing critical gaps in the Cairns workforce by encouraging enrolments in priority courses (aligned with in-demand jobs in priority industries outlined in this submission), through additional investment in subsidised or incentivised programs and increased investment in local education and training infrastructure.*

## TOR 2 – Major barriers to the provision of localised and place-based VET, and priority areas and cohorts in Queensland

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Cairns Regional Council is one of the region's largest employers and understands the value of providing employment pathway opportunities to job seekers within the community. We value our role in training the future workforce and our future city leaders, whilst contributing to reducing unemployment rates in the region.

Council offers a range of work opportunities and supports apprentices and trainees to gain skills through nationally recognised VET and on-the-job experience in a range of industries.

Over the five years to 2022, more than 380 apprentices and trainees have been engaged in Council's workforce. In 2022, a 100% completion rate of studies was recorded by Council's trainees and apprentices, 4 out of 5 trainees went on to enrol and be accepted by their chosen University and 5 out of 8 apprentices converted their position into a full-time role with Council.

Council accesses many of the programs and initiatives available to Queensland employers through DESBT, including Skilling Queensland for Work. Under this initiative, seven eligible young people were placed into apprenticeships and traineeships in the 2021-22 financial year, with a similar number achievable in 2022-23.

As an employer, Council takes a hands-on approach in supporting trainees and apprentices and employs a dedicated Employment Pathways Officer to oversee their VET learning requirements and provide guidance when needed. This allows for a greater understanding of student needs and the ability to identify where barriers and inefficiencies exist. Two areas of improvement are explored further below:

1. Sourcing Registered Training Organisations to deliver required training in Far North Queensland is challenging, specifically in the study areas: Arboriculture, Live Production, Electrical – Instrumentation and Water Operations. Council often sends apprentices and trainees out of region to receive their training through private providers of VET or, when demand exists, a trainer will be bought to Cairns to deliver to multiple team members at once.
2. A number of council apprentices and trainees are undertaking VET studies that are not fit for purpose because of the lack of study pathways delivered on campus, in Cairns. For example, those wishing to embark on a career within Council's library services are undertaking a business qualification when they should be enrolled in Certificate III in Library and Information Services, which is only available as an online course in Queensland.

As one of Cairns' largest employing organisations, Cairns Regional Council is a reliable barometer for regional employment issues and would be willing to be consulted, however no liaison currently exists with public providers of VET or within the Queensland Government.

### **Recommendations**

#### ***The Queensland Government should consider:***

- *Facilitating greater collaboration between Cairns public providers of VET, key local industry representatives, a variety of employing organisations, and DESBT to deliver better localised and place-based training solutions and inviting Cairns Regional Council to be a stakeholder in this cohort.*

## TOR 3 – Opportunities for the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training to facilitate improvements in these areas.

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Similar to other parts of regional Australia, Cairns' unemployment rate is at a record low (4.1%, as of 31 Oct 2022<sup>18</sup>). With a tightening labour market, an acute skills shortage has emerged across a range of industries and occupations in the region. Without action, skilled workforce shortages will potentially become a major impediment to regional economic growth and prosperity in the medium to longer term.

To address this, a detailed Workforce Development Plan is needed for the Cairns region to:

- Identify and analyse the medium to long term workforce needs of the priority industry sectors in Cairns.
- Analyse existing and forecast future labour supply (both volume and skills).
- Undertake a gap analysis and develop a plan with key actions to address risks and gaps.

The Cairns Regional Jobs Committee (Cairns RJC) was established in 2021 with the objective of the providing strategic and operational leadership, as well as insight into a place-based approach to skills investment.

Council understands the Cairns RJC has recommended the Queensland Government, through Jobs Queensland, prepare a Workforce Development Plan for Cairns (similar to *the Townsville Workforce Development Plan 2020-2025*<sup>19</sup>) with a focus on the priority industries outlined in this submission. This plan can then be used to inform the provision of localised and place-based VET and seek to address critical gaps in the Cairns workforce unlocking future economic and employment growth.

### **Recommendations**

#### ***The Queensland Government should consider:***

- *Supporting the Cairns Regional Jobs Committee's recommendation to prepare a Workforce Development Plan for Cairns to inform the provision of localised and place-based VET to help address critical skills gaps in the Cairns workforce with an emphasis on priority industry sectors.*

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry and look forward to continuing to work collaboratively with the Queensland Government to support economic development and employment growth within our region. Should you have any queries or require additional information, please contact Council's Director Economic Development and Advocacy, Nick Masasso on [REDACTED].

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]

Mica Martin  
Chief Executive Officer

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<sup>18</sup> [Jobs & Skills Australia, Cairns Employment Region, 30 Oct 22](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Jobs Queensland, Townsville Workforce Development Plan 2020-2025](#)