

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

Submission No: 24

Submitted by: Country Universities Centre (CUC) Balonne

Publication:

Attachments:

Submitter Comments:

Submitter Recommendations:

18 January 2023

Committee Secretary
Education, Employment and Training Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000
eetc@parliament.qld.gov.au

RE: Inquiry into the delivery of VET in Regional, Rural and Remote Queensland


CUC Balonne is a not for profit company governed by a board of nine directors representing community interests in education, training and employment. CUC Balonne is affiliated with the Country Universities Centre (CUC) network of Regional University Centres across NSW, Queensland, and Victoria.

The CUC Balonne has campuses in St George and Dirranbandi, servicing over 130 remote and very remote students. Students who utilise the CUC Balonne receive face-to-face academic support, study spaces, exam support, access to high-speed internet and technology, wellbeing support, and a local learning community of other students. CUC Balonne employs a Centre Manager, Learning Skills Advisor, First Nations Community Engagement and Support Coordinator, and Administration Assistant.

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. Key objectives of the organisation are to pursue opportunities that 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 students up for success, as part of a supportive, encouraging, and inclusive learning community.

CUC Balonne has just commissioned a VET analysis and option scoping study to investigate the education and training needs of our community and inform pathway development and potential business delivery model. The timing of this inquiry and acknowledgement by the Queensland Parliament of the unique challenges in rural and remote communities is welcome, and we look forward to collaborating with all stakeholders for better delivery models that support equitable access to place-based learning.

Our submission to this inquiry provides an overview of the specific challenges and opportunities for improvement to the provision of localised and place-based vocational education and training in the rural, remote and very remote communities of the Balonne region. Directors and other community members were consulted in the preparation of this submission.



Mathew Magin
Chair, CUC Balonne

Phone
1800 OUR CUC

Address
112-118 Victoria St, St George QLD 4487

Email
degrees@cucbalonne.edu.au

Website
www.cucbalonne.edu.au

1. The role of public providers in VET delivery in rural, remote and regional Queensland.

- *VET pathways, participation rates and outcomes*
- *VET delivery for Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including enablers and barriers to VET.*

Pathways

There is no public VET provider campus located in the Balonne Shire and services are accessed when trainers travel to the region or via courses that are available online. The closest TAFE campus is at Roma, 165 km from St George, Toowoomba (385km) or Brisbane (500km). Private providers similarly are not locally based and travel by trainers or students is required to meet course requirements. Student travel to campus facilities for block training requirements is the least preferred option and barrier to participation.

Navigating and development of VET pathways is dependent on individual circumstances and access to support. The options to access support in the Balonne region to navigate VET pathways includes the schools for enrolled students, employers who have this experience, employment agencies, CUC Balonne, or self-service. An individual, without experienced assistance, would find it very difficult to navigate the courses, fees and subsidies, and source an appropriate provider for the preferred course who offers local place-based training. The local schools, employers and CUC Balonne, who have experience with the system, all expressed difficulty sourcing appropriate VET delivery services. The support services and identifying suitable providers are not coordinated locally and respond to individual needs. I.e., there is no 'shopping list' of courses or providers available for local delivery for students to choose from.

The St George State High School (7-12) and Dirranbandi State School (P-10) both support students with a number of pathways for learning and training programs leading to improved employability. Options include Certificate programs incorporated into subjects, and student learning plans that incorporate work experience, Apprenticeships or Traineeships. Staff are tasked with sourcing appropriate courses, providers and placements for individual students, with limited available options for local based providers and suitable employers. The schools are not Registered Training Organisations. Staff provide student learning support and resources.

Local employers who engage Apprentices and Trainees have established pathways and relationships with preferred suppliers that meet the needs of their business and employees. Minimising the need for student travel is a major consideration for cost, student participation and business operations.

CUC Balonne have students registered with the centre who are enrolled in any level of qualification where they can access facilities, resources and learning support to complete their studies. CUC Balonne supports VET pathways by responding to individual enquiries, collaborating directly with the schools and employers, participation in careers days, and engaging with training providers to coordinate the delivery of accredited and non-accredited courses locally. CUC Balonne is not a Registered Training Organisation and is complementary to VET providers by providing wrap around student support for local based delivery.

In the absence of local public VET training providers or services, the schools, CUC Balonne and employers have navigated the VET system through necessity to find the best solution for their students and employees. COVID restrictions created opportunities for increased availability of online delivery options. However, entry into VET pathways is resource intensive and delivery mechanisms are often a

negotiated compromise of services compared to what is available to students where VET providers are locally present.

Participation rates

Balonne Shire Demographics

In 2021, 4,320 people were living in Balonne Shire, 57 less people than in 2016. There are seven towns in the Balonne Shire - St George, Bollon, Dirranbandi, Hebel, Mungindi, Nindigully and Thallon which are considered rural, remote and very remote.

87.4% of the population are Australian Citizens, 95.7% are employed. 20.5% of the population are Aboriginal, compared to 6.1% for Regional Queensland.

7.7% of the population earned a high income (\$2,000 per week or more), and 30.4% earned a low income (less than \$500 per week), compared with 9.4% and 32.4% for Regional Queensland.

In 2021, 13.2% of 15 to 24 year olds in Balonne Shire were disengaged with employment and education, compared to 10.6% in Regional Queensland.

Balonne Shire Education statistics

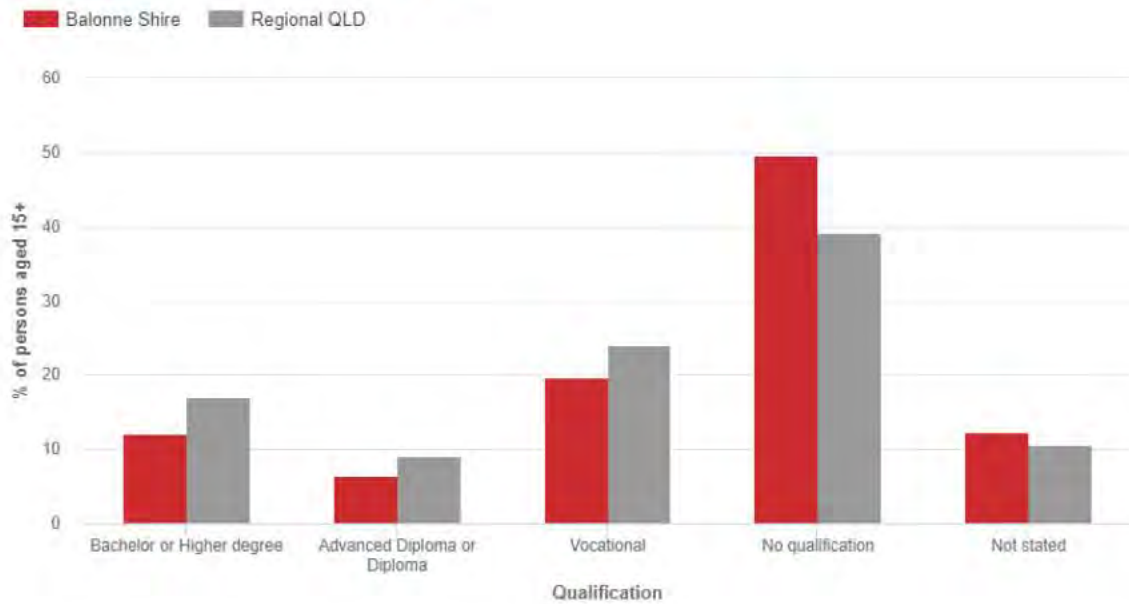
19.6% of people in Balonne Shire had a Vocational qualification in 2021, lower than Regional Queensland. This represents an increase of 82 people since 2016.

In 2021, 38.1% of the population aged 15 and over held educational qualifications and 41.4% had completed Year 12. 79 people were attending university, 11 more than in 2016.

No qualifications	49.6% Balonne	50.7% Regional QLD	37.5% QLD
Education qualifications	36.1% Balonne	45.5% Regional QLD	53.5% QLD
Bachelor or higher degree 417 people (+40 from 2016)	Advanced Diploma or Diploma 220 people (-51 from 2016)	Vocational 677 people (+82 from 2016)	
Completed Year 12 1,432 people (+73 from 2016)	Completed Year 10 935 people (+9 from 2016)	Completed Year 8 236 people (-70 from 2016)	

Source: ABS data 2021, 2016 from profile.id.com.au and economy.id.com.au, at January 2023

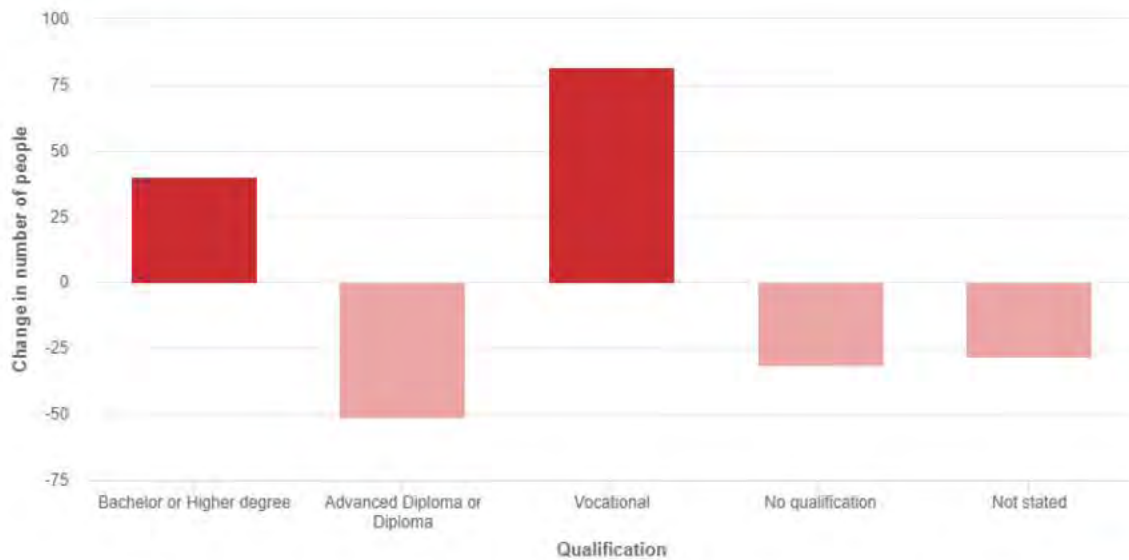
Highest qualification achieved, 2021



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2021 (Usual residence data). Compiled and presented in profile.id by id (informed decisions).

Change in highest qualification achieved, 2016 to 2021

Balonne Shire - Total persons



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2016 and 2021 (Usual residence data). Compiled and presented in profile.id by id (informed decisions).

From 2016 to 2021 there was an increase in the completion of vocational education and higher education qualifications. CUC Balonne commenced enrolments from Semester 1, 2021 and completion data would not be captured in the ABS data.

CUC Balonne participation snapshot

In the first year of operation of 2021, CUC Balonne had 46 students enrolled in 19 different universities.

- 36% of these students were the first in their family to study
- 70% female and 30% male
- 65% students over the age of 25
- 11% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage
- 48% part time and 58% full time study
- Top areas of study – 31% health, 18% business and management, 15% education

It is important to acknowledge the instant demand for services offered by CUC Balonne and appreciate the significance of what these local enrolments mean in the community.

Between April 2021 and December 2022 CUC Balonne organised 19 accredited and non-accredited short courses ranging from fee for service, fully funded, or partial funding. A total of 80 people attending the offered courses. TAFE Qld was booked to deliver 10 of the short courses, of which four were cancelled due to lack of participants. TAFE Qld delivered to 53% of the total 80 participants in the short courses offered.

Between April 2021 and December 2022, CUC Balonne had 24 students registered with the centre who were enrolled in 21 different Certificate II, III, IV courses as well as RPC/RPL/PPL, provided by 19 organisations. Of these students, three were enrolled with TAFE Qld.

During this same period CUC Balonne had 109 students registered with the centre who were enrolled in 63 tertiary education courses, including Doctor, Masters, Bachelor and Diploma levels, provided by 29 universities. Five of these qualifications were delivered by TAFE Qld and Central Queensland University.

Barriers to participation

The major barriers to participation in VET in the Balonne region are cost of student or trainer travel, availability of VET options delivered locally, accessibility to resources, placement and support, and suitability to meet individual student needs.

A large discrepancy in equity for rural and remote students to access VET is cost. TAFE courses that require block training on campus immediately generates excessive and prohibitive costs for the student and the employer, particularly for Apprenticeships and Traineeships which attract long term commitments. The cost of travel and accommodation, meals etc far exceeds any government incentives offered when students need to live away from home at Toowoomba or Brisbane. Employers have identified the gap costs as prohibitive. Students still have financial commitments that need to be met while living away from home and also need to cover additional incidental travel costs on minimum Apprentice wages.

Paying for trainers to travel and deliver place-based training and assessment is similarly cost prohibitive for employers. Overall excessive costs limits the availability and participation in Apprenticeships, Traineeships and other placement VET opportunities for students in small towns. Schools will cover the cost of training, and also dedicate significant resources to providing VET pathways for their students.

The gap costs, as well as staff time and provision of learning resources and support are funded from school budgets. Location and excessive travel requirements means attendance to TAFE, block training or non-local work placement is simply not an option for Balonne school students.

The next barrier relates to the availability of VET that can be delivered locally. Student interest in particular VET pathways may be excluded as an option as it simply not available without travel. Local participation rates in VET could be higher if the same suite of VET options were available to rural and remote students. Where providers may have options for local based delivery, another barrier is the need for students, or support services, to identify and source these providers. There is no list of providers and VET for individual communities to help identify what the potential options may be. The process instead involves identification of the potential interest in a VET course and contacting all of the listed providers until one is identified that has suitable delivery and associated costs. This is the case for schools supporting students, CUC Balonne supporting individual enquiries, employers engaged in Apprenticeship programs, and individuals.

For school students, availability also relates to the options available for courses to be delivered locally through the school, with access to local mentors and placements. The school provides examples where students may have a strong interest in a trade or course, however there is no suitable local placement workplace, and the delivery of the course does not accommodate remote students.

The availability of placements also relates the small number of workplaces that are present in the local community. Students have limited options, and employers need to be willing to be approached on an ongoing basis to accommodate student placement. Relationships between the schools and local employers is important. Similarly for local content experts and mentors, who may or may not align to student interests. The schools are very good at adapting to the local situation and doing what it takes to ensure all students are supported in the best way possible.

Suitability barriers relates to student preference to stay at home or school to study, and not move away or attend block training. Going to university or TAFE are simply not options due to the financial burden and desire to continue local employment, family commitments, or preference to not relocate. Where VET options do not accommodate local place-based delivery, the courses available to students diminishes.

Having access to suitable support services is essential to student participation in VET. VET pathways already outlined demonstrate access to local support. Something as simple as getting all the necessary paperwork together for enrolment can be a barrier to participation. Resourcing capacity to provide the right support is important to address foundational skills and needs, particularly for at risk and Indigenous students. The students who receive the support they need are demonstrating capacity to transition into higher learning pathways. There is an ongoing need to resource literacy and numeracy to establish foundational skills.

Balonne Shire Council engaged Hall Chadwick Qld to conduct a review of educational issues after multiple concerns were raised about the impacts of those issues on the community. The review involved a broad community consultation focusing on the seven schools in the St George cluster, the drift of families from the region, and the social and economic impacts on the Balonne Shire. A 10 point plan was proposed as an outcome of the review, which looks to create positive action in the areas of leadership and behaviour management, stakeholder collaboration, and building community confidence in the local education system. The review has provided understanding and clear direction particularly

for Council and CUC Balonne on issues that were impacting educational experiences and participation in the community.

Other situations that are affecting participation has been the impact of weather and flow on impact to local jobs in the agriculture industry. Extended drought resulted in cuts to not just farm jobs, but service businesses and flow on job cuts in the general business community. This directly impacted the availability of Apprenticeships and Traineeships, and cash flow to invest in skills and training development. The difficulty in retaining staff has also led large employers, such as Balonne Shire Council, to move toward engaging contractors to deliver specialised works and services. This again reduces the availability of Apprenticeships and Traineeships opportunities as experienced trade supervisors, such as engineers or mechanics, are not necessarily internally appointed.

VET delivery for Aboriginal peoples

CUC Balonne prepared a business case and has now engaged a First Nations Community Engagement and Support Coordinator to close an identified gap between Higher Education opportunity and First Nations People in South-West Queensland. This is an identified at-risk group that forms a significant portion of the Balonne Shire's population (20.5%) receiving very little in the way of appropriate and culturally relevant support for their education journey across all fields in a meaningful way.

The business case highlighted many barriers that are already identified and persist, including financial pressures; living away from home; health related problems; racism and prejudice towards indigenous people; low-levels of academic readiness and aspirations; and high academic demands of study with insufficient academic support (Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011). Conversations with Elders and indigenous leaders in the community raised that there is a great deal of consultation that needs to occur to start to make meaningful headway and develop a culturally relevant program and support system. The First Nations Community Engagement Officer is the vital local link between Institutions and willing students.

The newly appointed Coordinator position aims to overcome barriers and provide the necessary support for Indigenous students to improve overall education outcomes and increase participation particularly in tertiary education. The successful candidate is a St George local who grew up in Thallon and completed year 12 at St George State High School.

Two key delivery aspects of the position are a) community consultation and building key stakeholder relationships to identify needs, key pain points and areas for collaboration; and b) developing key programs and projects including engagement activities and events, workshops, one-on-one support or other based on discovery from consultations that will contribute towards improved participation and educational outcomes.

CUC Balonne strategic objectives specifically aim to make study accessible, close the gap with pathway options into education and training, and to learn on country. CUC Balonne is the first in the CUC national network to engage a dedicated First Nations Support Coordinator. The CUC Balonne goal is to have Indigenous students represent 20% of its student cohort. Current Indigenous participation is 8%, versus the national average of 4% participation in higher education (<https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-06-educational-participation>).

The CUC Balonne First Nations Community Engagement Role is a pilot program, funded by the Department of Education Regional University Centre Program to 30 June 2023, and will be monitored

and reviewed within the CUC network as a potential model for other communities. A similar position is proposed for the new CUC Cape York Centre.

Role of public providers

Section 27A of the *Human Rights Act 2004* says that: Every child has the right to have access to free, school education appropriate to his or her needs. Everyone has the right to have access to further education and vocational and continuing training.

The role of public providers, namely TAFE Qld, in VET delivery, along with incentives offered to private providers, should offer equitable access to students to vocational and continuing training. Public investment in programs such as the Fee-Free TAFE and VET places for Queenslanders aims to further increase enrolments to support priority industry needs and address skills and workforce shortages.

However, the public funded system has yet to consistently offer a model that facilitates true flexibility and suitability for place-based delivery that achieves equitable access in rural and remote areas where TAFE campus are not present. TAFE Qld is often not the preferred supplier in the Balonne community due to the barriers based on their delivery model. Similarly, public funding investments in private providers to deliver in rural and remote areas does not guarantee accessibility to individual communities. It is at the discretion of the public or private provider if they offer services to an area with conditions or costs often making it prohibitive for the employer or student, resulting in postcode discrimination.

Public providers and public investments should fill the gap where private providers cannot deliver commercially viable services into rural and remote communities. There should be a level of reporting and accountability that demonstrates how all students can gain access to equitable vocational education and training. Models for delivery and distribution of funding should consider partnerships with local social structures, support networks and placement providers, and fully embrace and overcome barriers to technology-based delivery options.

In 2021/22 nine students were enrolled in seven qualifications with various providers that are now listed on the Fee-Free TAFE list, out of 84 eligible qualifications. Interest indicates that more students will likely enrol in eligible courses now they are free, and only if they are available online. It is not easy to filter a list of courses that are delivered online for students to choose from.

Outcomes

CUC Balonne has exceeded all expectations with over 133 registered students with the centre since its opening in 2021 and additional 80 attendees in short courses. This success, combined with the previous ABS data, demonstrates a clear increase in enrolments in both higher education and vocational education training, and demand for student support services in the Balonne region.

CUC Balonne can demonstrate how its local based services and engagement with the local community has facilitated a functional relationship with public and private VET providers, to be able to successfully offer qualifications and courses to rural and remote place-based students.

The portion of VET delivered by public providers is low compared to the courses delivered by private providers. TAFE Qld has not yet demonstrated how it can provide more flexibility in its delivery mechanisms to offer increased accessibility to remote based students. Based on current enrolments in eligible qualifications under the Fee-Free TAFE program, there will likely be limited uptake locally due to

the on-campus training requirements. The significant government investment channelled through traditional TAFE Qld delivery mechanisms will fail to deliver intended outcomes for priority industries in the Balonne region. Lack of enrolment is not representative of the need for this program, which if provided in a way that was more accessible, would offer critical development of skills to fill significant gaps in the local workforce. These courses and skills development is sought by students and employers through other mechanisms, such as on the job training, other private providers, and short courses.

Students are supported within the school system, to year 12 in St George and year 10 in Dirranbandi, to access school based VET pathways leading to further learning or employment outcomes. Whilst the systems are in place to support these pathways, a number of factors (discussed above) limit equitable access to opportunities available to students in larger centres. A disproportionate amount of time and resources are dedicated to each student to source and deliver suitable, but not always preferred, VET courses and placements as a direct impact of remoteness.

70 persons, or 13.2% 15 to 24 year olds were disengaged from employment or education in 2021. For high risk students in small rural communities the barriers and challenges with VET pathways from school are compounded resulting in diminishing opportunities for meaningful employment. The lack of year 11 and 12 in Dirranbandi and additional challenges due to remoteness places pressure on the school to provide students with the support they need to transition.

2. The major barriers to the provision of localised and place-based VET, and priority areas and cohorts in Queensland

The major barrier to the provision of place-based VET in the Balonne region centres around the current requirement for trainers to travel for in person training and assessment. The barriers are cost, accessibility, availability, and suitability.

Additional costs for trainers to travel include travel time and wages, vehicle and kilometre, accommodation and meals and other oncosts. Whilst there may be subsidies and incentives for trainers to travel outside of major centres, the loading to Toowoomba is the same loading to travel to St George or Dirranbandi. This leads to accessibility barriers, where trainers become unwilling to travel further distances and taking additional time for no higher incentive offer. The ratio of cost per student becomes uneconomical compared to the metropolitan and regional cost ratio and for private providers does not make commercial sense.

Trainers travelling to provide local place-based training and assessment ties up trainers with often only one student for an extended period. This makes that trainer unavailable to deliver more economical training at a higher student to trainer ratio. The converse usually happens, where trainers prioritise group training making them unavailable for travel for one or few students.

A major barrier relates to the suitability of delivery for local place-based VET. TAFE facilities are set up for the provision of training for trade courses, with industry standard specialist facilities offered for automotive, building and construction, electrotechnology, engineering, manufacturing, and rail, as well as hospitality, health, and technology. TAFE Qld requires block training at on-site purpose built facilities for the delivery of training and assessment. Translating this delivery model to local place-based VET for students in rural and remote areas can become difficult. First, there needs to be available employers with the necessary workplace to fulfil the training requirements. For an employer to work with a VET

provider, the schedule of training, delivery mechanism for theory and practical training, and conduct of assessment on-site are going to be variable for each situation. A hybrid of online theory, video conferencing, local supervisors, learning support, all becomes dependent on the student needs, employer capacity and trainer requirements and delivery mechanisms, and the course requirements.

Employers will tend to establish a relationship with a provider that can meet their unique requirements. Barriers to finding suitable delivery models are a barrier for both providers and employers. Technology has a key role to play, however it is evolving and needs to be underpinned with consistent and suitable delivery models, equitable access, and student support services.

A critical factor in the provision of local place-based VET is accessibility to appropriate student support services. Schools provide this support for their students to set students up for success in their learning and training and have capacity to provide individualised support based on needs. However, students in the workplace who require assistance may not have access to this support from their employer, and trainers are not present to provide on-demand support when it is needed. Students who need additional literacy and numeracy or technology assistance may not have access to the support they need. The fly in fly out model of training without wrap around local student support for place-based delivery potentially impacts student success.

3. Existing programs that might assist in reducing barriers or supporting priority cohorts in accessing localised and place-based VET.

There is a range of existing programs that support VET pathways which are accessed and provided by schools, employers, CUC Balonne and individuals to offer various assistance. What is missing in the community is resourced positions that can coordinate and consolidate the availability of support programs and importantly navigate the VET system to identify and help facilitate local place-based delivery options. The process is resource intensive, with multiple organisations trying to overcome common barriers to help individual students in an ever changing environment.

4. Examples of successful localised VET models and how learnings might be applied in other locations.

The CUC network model, as demonstrated by CUC Balonne, has successfully facilitated delivery of localised VET within the first year of its operation. CUC does not compete with Registered Training Organisations rather it strives to offer complementary wrap around student support services that sets students up for the greatest success. Ideally, the CUC will partner with the RTO to provide access to local training facilities, or local workplaces with suitable facilities, for place-based training delivery. Students have access to digital and technology support, learning support, study spaces, an importantly the opportunity to interact with other students.

CUC Balonne is filling an identified gap in the Balonne community where there is no public TAFE facilities, private providers need to travel, and students who are not within the school system or existing workplace apprenticeship programs, have limited access to navigating VET pathways locally.

The CUC Balonne VET analysis and option scoping study will further investigate the specific education and training needs of the Balonne community and identify barriers, gaps and opportunities to better

support pathway development. The ideal business delivery model will be informed by the outcomes of this study, however the critical factors that the model will seek to achieve includes:

- leveraging the locally established facilities, experience, governance, community ownership and support, and extended CUC network, and student success
- a partnership based approach between the CUC Balonne, TAFE Qld, RTOs and universities to deliver VET, with facilitation services provided by CUC Balonne to source suitable local facilities, placements, mentors and supervisors for place-based training
- continuing to offer the high quality of facilities and services offered by CUC Balonne
- working with local education institutions to identify and develop appropriate pathways and transition from the school system as well as adult learning
- mutual benefit for local employers and workplaces
- supporting high risk and Indigenous groups to identify and address specific needs
- close the gap to pathway development and overcome barriers to participation
- leveraging resources and government funding partnerships to maximise student participation and outcomes
- improve local place-based VET access and suitability, and resources such as VR and AR technology equipment to better connect trainers and students in workplace training and assessment
- overcome minimum student enrolments to offer VET and seek cost effective delivery
- sustainable delivery that develops resilience to local job fluctuations in agriculture
- local delivery of Language Literacy and Numeracy (including digital literacy) Programs with local accredited trainers or online with support
- continued support for the First Nations Community Engagement and Support Coordinator program
- establishing a lifelong learning hub

CUC Balonne services communities with the lowest population within the CUC network and serves as a pilot to inform how the CUC model can continued to be applied to remote communities, whilst considering each unique situation. The scoping study will benchmark an approach to establish local needs and shape service requirements and offering. CUC Central is currently working with RAPAD (Remote Area Planning and Development Board) to explore what these opportunities may look like for Western Queensland.

5. Opportunities for the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training to facilitate improvements in these areas.

Recommendations

- Improve delivery mechanisms of TAFE Qld courses for equitable access to communities where there is no campus, such as adopting flexible delivery and technology solutions.
- Reduce duplication of effort and resources to source and facilitate VET providers in local areas by supporting human resources to provide coordinated local facilitation services.
- Support delivery models that foster partnerships with local organisations who can provide the infrastructure, resources and services, and social anchors, to facilitate student participation and enrolment in VET.
- Establish equitable and accountable funding incentives that result in real availability and accessibility to VET public and private providers in rural and remote communities.