To: Chair, Education, Employment and Training Committee, Queensland Parliament
From: Professor Stephen Billett, School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University
RE: Written submission to the Education, Employment and Training Committee to accompany my briefing on 23rd May 2022
Date 17th May 2022

Towards a more localised and inclusive assessment of need, and enactment and evaluation of vocational education and training for regional, rural and remote communities

The observations and conclusions advanced here are drawn from both practice-based engagements and the findings of over almost three decades of research projects that have quite specifically, or incidentally addressed issues of the provision of vocational education and training (VET) in regional, rural and remote communities, such as those in Queensland. These engagements and project include:

- policy work undertaken across Queensland enterprises during the microeconomic reforms in the early 1990s;
- curriculum development for BHP coal in Central Queensland (1993-5);
- an 18 month long study of a major Central Queensland enterprise's training needs and processes (1993–5);
- a national project examining the 'demand side' of VET in regional, rural and remote communities (1998);
- a two-year long study of a large country Victorian food-processing enterprise's educational and training needs (2000-1);
- evaluating the Local Learning Employment Networks for the Victorian government (2002-3);
- a national project on how social partnerships can support local provisions of VET (2003 -06);
- a national project of continuing education and training (2012-2014);
- a QLD project on enhancing the standing of VET (2017-2018);
- two current projects of medical-healthcare provisions and training in regional/rural QLD (2020 – ongoing); and
- two current projects on social partnerships and engagements to inform post-school pathways and attracting, preparing and retaining allied healthcare workers in QLD (2022 – ongoing).

Key points
- Regional, rural and remote communities have distinct needs in provisions of CET in both their focuses and educational processes.
- Characteristics of rural and remote communities and needs for/of VET have specific strengths and limitations.
- Need for more localised and inclusive assessment of need, enactment and evaluation of VET provisions.
- Considerations of how localised governance arrangements might progress.
- Evaluating the potential role of anchor institutions and place-sensitive VET provisions.

Each of these is discussed in turn.

Distinct needs of regional, rural and remote communities

The distinctiveness of regional, rural and remote communities is perhaps threefold: i) distinct kinds of enterprises and industry sectors; ii) distinctive forms of work and work requirements; and iii) community needs and requirements.

i) distinct kinds of enterprises and industry sectors

Regional, rural and remote communities have distinct kinds of enterprises and industry sectors that may not be found elsewhere in the state. For instance, the extractive and secondary processing industries of central Queensland often have very specific workplace and occupational requirements, and these are not always well aligned with nationally organise provisions of vocational education. Consequently, the needs of key industries in these communities are still not addressed by VET courses. This also means that those occupational requirements and demands for them and not captured in the kind of data provided by the NCVER. For instance, the enterprise specific processes of many of the larger enterprises in the Gladstone and Rockhampton areas. The secondary processing activities in these enterprises are often quite enterprise specific.

Amongst other things, this indicates a malapportionment of how publicly funded VET provisions are organised and enacted. This also emphasises a focus on enterprises – institutions that employ, develop the capacities of and wish to retain employees. This raises concerns about the efficacy of highly aggregated and abstracted national standards and curricula. Of course, some of these needs are not new and are being addressed through specific programs and educational efforts that are local in origin and enacted in conjunction with local partners.

ii) Distinctive forms of work and work requirements

There also likely to be distinctive patterns of work requirements that are distinct to these regions. For instance, in the metropolitan area, many automotive mechanics work for large dealerships, largely servicing relatively new vehicles of one specific kinds. Whereas, in the regional areas this may be less the case and automotive work will be far wider in its scope and different in its work requirements. In rural and remote regions, for instance, this work might extend to servicing and repairing farming and earthmoving equipment. Then, there are specific requirements for these kinds of work within large enterprises. Hence, servicing and maintaining the heavy earthmoving and coal/over burden-hauling equipment in the coal mining industry is very diverse from work done elsewhere. Moreover, other forms of work and work requirements are likely to be different because of the kind, size and nature of the industry sectors.

The key point here is that the enactment of occupations and specific workplace requirements in regional, rural and remote Queensland corner may be quite distinct from those within metropolitan centres where decision-making about constitutes occupational standards and VET requirements are made. It is these that are reflected in Training Packages and provisions of vocational education. Hence, there is a need to understand more fully those enterprise needs, how nationally-orders provisions of VET meet them and what changes need to occur to more closely align those provisions with localised needs.

iii) Distinctive community requirements.

The requirements of regional and rural communities can be quite distinct. For instance, they may have quite specific goals associated with preparing and retaining local people so that they are not attracted to leave these communities. This can include provisions that engage local workers in developing new facilities that may well sit outside of nationally based VET provisions. For instance, the building and operation of Callide B, and other enterprises in Central Queensland, benefits from such approaches and may need to made more orthodox. Moreover, there can be specific educational outcomes associated with retaining young people in the community rather than them going elsewhere to study and work. Then, there are issues about the age, mobility, ethnicity, and skill profile of the local workforce that warrant specific attention to their key patient on development (e.g., to become production workers, the nurse, small business owners and healthcare workers and aged carers).

Characteristics of rural and remote communities and VET
There are particular characteristics of these communities that shape how vocational education training. These can be seen as comprising relative strengths and limitations.

Relative strengths
Engagement - there seems often to be a higher level of engagement in work-related activities in local communities in rural, regional and remote communities than in metropolitan communities, often because they are built around them (e.g., primary and secondary production, agricultural work).
Partnerships - partnerships that initiate, and support VET provisions are seemingly often locally initiated and enacted, and stand to be organically sustained through localised imperatives and engagement, because these needs are more obvious and observable.
Local visibility - key institutions and workplaces are highly visible in regional, rural and remote community and stand to be key anchor institutions around which activities associated with vocational education can progress.

Limitation
Range of opportunities and forms of support - these communities may lack the range of opportunities and forms of support that can be found in larger (i.e., metropolitan) centres which means the kinds of offerings of tertiary education might be less accessible, obvious and present locally
Limits of specialisation - the availability of specialisation training or specialisms may also be limited and not accessible locally and some forms of expertise only available at a distance or remotely.
Low visibility - the needs of these communities may experience low visibility because they are often not obvious or observable by communities in metropolitan centres.

Need for more localised assessment of need and enactment of VET provision
Following from the above, there is a need for more localised and inclusive assessment of need and governance for the effective enactment and evaluation of VET provisions in regional, remote and rural Queensland. A reliance upon short-term programs, the efforts of individuals and dispersed effort across these communities is prone to limitations and weaknesses. Consequently, a structural response that sits within existing industry and governmental roles might be helpful in identifying and responding to these needs. However, such an initiative would need to be underpinned by an independent evaluation to ensure that whatever is generated is not rehearsing assumptions about people elsewhere knowing what is best for these communities.

Some of the questions to be addressed by such an evaluation might include:

What are the effective alignments between national training packages and existing VET provisions, and enterprise needs in regional, rural and remote communities?

What constitutes both the broad and the specific goals for VET in these communities, and how they are currently being met?

How might those alignments and those needs be more effectively realised?

What kinds of social partnerships and anchor institutions are most likely to provide leadership in enhancing the requirements for and provision of VET in those communities?

What kinds of place-based and place-sensitive VET provisions should be emphasised in these arrangements?

How can combinations of VET institutional and workplace-based provisions of VET be organised to meet the needs of regional, rural and remote Queensland communities?

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