



# ***EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING COMMITTEE***

**Members present:**

Ms KE Richards MP—Chair  
Mr MA Boothman MP  
Mr N Dametto MP  
Mr JP Lister MP  
Mr BL O'Rourke MP  
Mr JA Sullivan MP

**Staff present:**

Mr R Hansen—Committee Secretary  
Ms R Duncan—Assistant Committee Secretary

## **PUBLIC BRIEFING—THE DELIVERY OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN RURAL, REMOTE AND REGIONAL QUEENSLAND**

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**MONDAY, 23 MAY 2022**

**Brisbane**

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### **The committee met at 9.29 am.**

**CHAIR:** Good morning. I declare open this public briefing for the Education, Employment and Training Committee on the delivery of vocational education and training in rural, remote and regional Queensland. My name is Kim Richards. I am the member for Redlands and chair of the committee. I respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging. We are very fortunate in this country to live with two of the world's oldest continuous living cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders whose lands, winds and waters we all now share.

With me here today are: the member for Southern Downs and deputy chair, Mr James Lister; the member for Theodore, Mr Mark Boothman; the member for Hinchinbrook, Mr Nick Dametto; the member for Rockhampton, Mr Barry O'Rourke; and the member for Stafford, Mr Jimmy Sullivan. The briefings today are to assist the committee to better understand the delivery of vocational education and training in regional, rural and remote areas of Queensland and to scope its future work in relation to VET. Today's briefing follows a briefing on this topic by the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training and TAFE Queensland on 28 March. The committee hopes to hold further briefings in June with a number of Commonwealth VET agencies that could not be here today. Today the committee is particularly interested to learn about what models for the delivery of VET are most effective outside our metropolitan areas, the role of public providers such as TAFE Queensland and the CQ University in providing vocational education and training and the particular challenges and opportunities for VET for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This briefing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. I remind members of the public that, under the standing orders, the public may be admitted to or excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the committee. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. These proceedings are being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the parliament's website. Those present today should note that it is possible you may be filmed or photographed by the media and images of you may appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. The media rules endorsed by the committee are available from committee staff if required. I ask everyone present to turn mobile phones off or to silent mode.

### **BILLETT, Professor Stephen, Professor of Adult and Vocational Education, School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University**

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Professor Billett, for being here today. Thank you for your paper. It will be published later this morning on our webpage. We look forward to hearing from you. If you would like to make a brief opening statement, then we will have some questions for you.

**Prof. Billett:** I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land upon which we meet, the Turrbal and Jagera people, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. Thank you for this opportunity to engage with you. This topic is obviously very important and central to the quality of educational provision across this very large state. As you have mentioned, I am a Professor of Adult and Vocational Education at Griffith University. My expertise is in the development of skills not only through educational provision but also how they arise through workplaces and work settings. Importantly, I am a VET graduate myself. I studied garment manufacturing in Manchester many years ago and I worked in this industry there and also in Australia. I was then a TAFE teacher, then a head of department and then involved in teacher education within TAFE and professional development. That role took me around Queensland, as you can imagine.

In the early 1990s I was employed in what was then called the Vocational Education, Training and Employment Commission. My role was to work between the unions and employers in trying to insert education provisions in industrial agreements. This was the era of what was referred to as award restructuring—the Dawkins reforms. That role was interesting because it took me to large parts of the state, particularly Central Queensland and North Queensland, perhaps less so to the Brisbane

Southern Downs. It introduced me to a lot of the industry sectors across Queensland and also brought to my attention the fact that, for many of those industries, there were not provisions of vocational education. These are central to the development and extension of the Queensland economy.

That was my motivation to undertake research and to do my PhD in how people learn through work. It was an experience I had at a sugar mill in Hinchinbrook, or not far from it, which led me to that particular pathway of activities which I pursued. I have a list here of some of the work I have done which informs my thinking for the briefing I am providing you today.

Firstly, I have mentioned the policy work I did around that era of microeconomic reform. I was then involved with BHP in Central Queensland trying to develop curriculum for their workers. There were no VET provisions for the vast majority of workers in BHP coal. They had a particular interest because they wanted certification which would allow their workers to be highly mobile, which included internationally. I also conducted an almost two-year study of a very large manufacturing plant in the seat of Rockhampton. I worked the night shifts with workers to understand how they worked and how they learnt. Again, that was an instance of a large and important sector that perhaps was not well served by vocational education provisions. I did—and I wish I had done this more recently—a national study in 1998 about how we respond to the demand side of vocational education rather than the supply side. That was a study in metropolitan, regional and what was called remote communities, but not in the Queensland sense. It was interesting to find the differences in the demand side from those communities.

The studies that follow are ones which have involved a consideration of what happens in what is broadly referred to as the non-metropolitan area, which includes an evaluation of the local learning and employment networks in Victoria, which I think are analogous to some of the initiatives currently being advanced in Queensland. There were recent projects on enhancing the status of vocational education—how young people might become more broadly informed about vocational education and post-school pathways associated with it.

Currently, two of four of my projects are in medicine. You are probably wondering why I am going to refer to those. That is because medical education has had to reach out and come up with a mode of delivery or education which meets the needs of rural communities. One involves the impact of the pandemic on general practice in rural Queensland. The other is round training in hospitals. It provides some insights. I have two new projects. One is looking at how we can attract young people, including Indigenous people, into the health sector. That work has just started. The other new project is looking at the way social partnerships can be used to inform young people about post-school pathways—the formation of social partnerships and then how that can be used to support that.

Having said all of that, I am constantly reminded of how little I know about this. That happened on Friday when I was up in Far North Queensland doing some field work for the first time in two years. I do not claim to be wholly competent in the area. There are understandings I have, but those things change all of the time.

In terms of the presentation, I will try not to go on too long. Some key points are that regional, remote, rural—and I guess you know all of this—communities have distinct needs for the provision of VET both in their focus—what they are about—and their educational processes in terms of how they are delivered. The characteristics of regional, rural and remote communities are often quite distinctive and have both strengths and limitations. There is a need for a localised and inclusive assessment of those needs and how those needs are responded to. There needs to be consideration of governance and the development of arrangements such as the rural job committees and the industry skills advisors and how they might progress and evaluation of the potential role of key institutions in regional, rural and remote communities to support vocational education. The other issue is how we champion vocational education across these communities. I see that as being important so that young people are interested in engaging. It is often not vocational education itself, it is often championing the occupations because it is the occupations which arise from vocational education programs.

What are these distinct needs? Certainly there are distinct kinds of enterprises and industry sectors. The committee would know this. The three headings are: distinct forms of work; work requirements; and distinct community requirements. In terms of the distinct kinds of enterprises, what we have is a collection of industries and enterprises which are represented in regional and rural Queensland which simply are not found in the Brisbane-Gold Coast conurbation. There are particular kinds of industries and there are also a lot of enterprises that have fairly unique operational requirements. These are often quite distinct and quite enterprise specific. That enterprise that I was referring to which is in the seat of Rockhampton performs a function of turning magnesite ore into magnesite crystals. There is only one of those in Australia. The processes it uses are unique to that workplace. By the way, there is a great example in that workplace where when the workplace was Brisbane

built the people who built it then became the operators of it, established it and worked in it. They built it, commissioned it and operated it. Their expertise is profound, but it came from that kind of localised initiative.

My experience—and I can be corrected on this—is that many of the requirements for these enterprises sit outside nationally derived vocational education qualifications or there is not a good fit for them. For instance, things like the certificate of food production struggles to meet the needs of specific enterprises. There are distinctive forms of work and work requirements in many of these enterprises—that is, simply the kind of practices in those workplaces are quite distinct and, as I mentioned, there are specific work requirements. It is not necessarily the kind of work being done and the expertise to it but also how the workplace is organised—rotating shifts, team work et cetera—which involves not just the occupational practice but also how the work is done. These are quite distinct in some ways. I always come back to the kinds of problem-solving that workers have to do. The kind of problem-solving that motor mechanics working in car dealerships in the south-east corner—I have a very old car—involves cars that are four or five years old.

**Mr DAMETTO:** It is a very fluid industry now, especially with the technology changing continuously.

**Prof. Billett:** Yes. In communities like yours, motor mechanics have to deal with large and small motors. They would perhaps have to deal with track vehicles or farming equipment in a way that simply would not occur in the south-east. There are requirements for that work which are quite distinct.

The third point is that there are distinctive community requirements. I remember when the Warwick college of TAFE, which now is called Southern Downs, was being established, there was a request that they had a clothing unit in it. I was asked to advise on that. What the community wanted was education for young women so it would keep them in the community rather than have them in Brisbane. There was a large enterprise in North Queensland that one year decided that rather than have its intake of five male apprentices it would do mature apprenticeships for its technical assistants, TAs. The community was most miffed about that because the community expected that each year that enterprise would take five young men and give them apprenticeships. There is an association there that comes from these communities which I think is different than in the south-east corner.

There are a lot of relative strengths that come from the provision of vocational education in these communities. I suspect that the committee knows these. There is a greater level of engagement in these enterprises. The enterprises often sit within the community which they are embedded in, people are associated with them and there are associated industries and towns around them. My experience is, and the research I have done indicates, that partnerships are far easier to develop and sustain in regional and rural communities because of the need—the local needs are obvious and observable—and people want to make a local commitment. Local visibility is important, that these institutions are known about.

The other thing, though, is you often find there is not the rivalry between vocational education institutions which you can find in, for instance, the Brisbane- Gold Coast conurbation. However, as you know, there are also a series of limitations and there is a limit of the ranges of opportunities in forms of support. For instance, when I was in Cairns on Thursday and Friday of last week, it was mentioned to me that they can bring health trainees down from the communities and give them preparation in Cairns, but when they go back to their communities there may not be experienced healthcare workers to guide and support them, so a different kind of provision is probably going to be required there. There are limits of specialisations obviously in these communities.

Another issue which occurs to me—and I am not quite sure the impact of this—is that many of these industries have low visibility in the state. If you go to go to the city of Essen, for instance, you cannot avoid seeing thyssenkrupp—it is there; it is the heartbeat of the community. Imagine if QMAG or Queensland Alumina was sitting on the south side of the river here, it would be very visible. I wonder the degree by which many of these large industries, because they are not in the south-east corner, are not visible; you have to go there to actually see them. I could be wrong on that, but I just wonder if that is not helpful in terms of them having their needs recognised in terms of the specific vocational education provisions for those kind of enterprises.

In terms of how this might progress, I think the industry engagement framework that has been proposed is really helpful. I think that is great. I would probably encourage you to go further and widen the strength and the role and the scope of the regional job committees. I think it is about more than merely enacting what is decided in the centre, that those committees should be the ones that actually advise back to the centre here.

It was interesting when I did the studies of the evaluation of the local learning and employment networks in Victoria. These were networks that are established across Victoria to help bring together social partnerships so to assist young people falling between the gaps of school and working life. However, in those LLENS there was not a feedback to Melbourne, a feedback to the department. It was about them doing the work of the department, rather than feedback to the department about what the needs should be. If you are going to keep up with local engagement, there has to be a sense of the communities being heard. That was seen to be something that would be important to augment the existing arrangements.

For instance, in respect of structural engagements for industry skill advisers to engage with regional communities, I am not being critical, but when I look at the location of the ISAs, they are all within four kilometres of here, except the one down at Eight Mile Plains. The industry skills advisers are physically located here.

I think we need to focus on place based responses. I think it would also be very helpful for the job committee to provide feedback into the national training packages so that these could be tailored for the needs of the specific regions and sectors, but also as to how they are delivered. There needs to be a greater focus on place based responses, both from workplace and communities. Those are the general points I would like to make.

**Mr LISTER:** Professor Billett, thank you for coming in. You are remarkably modest in saying that your understanding is limited to certain areas. We consider you to be the duck's nuts when it comes to advice on this sort of thing, so please accept that we take seriously what you have to say. My electorate of Southern Downs has a couple of registered training organisations, one of which is Gateway To Training in Goondiwindi. Like many other areas, particularly in social community services, the state government and the federal government provides funding for various program deliveries, and that seems to work very well in my electorate. Can you see that there might be scope for private or social enterprise involvement in the delivery of vocational training, but using the auspices and the RTO status of TAFE Queensland to provide that tailored regional specific training that is needed in the country?

**Prof. Billett:** There is a very wide provision of private based vocational education. As you know, it has a tarnished reputation. There have been some flaws in the system in its governance. I guess part of that is the extent of the role that is expected of the public provider because, particularly with these niche programs, the public provider, which is largely TAFE, may struggle to meet all of those needs. I like the idea of partnerships actually involving both the private and the public sectors in achieving those outcomes. The consideration is: who is best placed to provide the quality provision locally, but also in a way that is commensurate with what is provided elsewhere? People would be surprised, for instance, if your TAFE provider did not have a library and did not have support staff, other than teachers, yet we do not have those expectations of many of the private providers. I think it is a question of the quality of provision of the private providers and how we can manage that. That is perhaps something where the local governance arrangements need to respond. The key issue is who can perhaps provide the best provision in those circumstances and the way they can be supported, but in a way that is of a similar kind to what a student in Brisbane would receive as a student in Goondiwindi. That would be my key concern.

**Mr LISTER:** Certainly we are short of the trades you are talking about—mechanics, hospitality and so forth. I imagine that a social enterprise would be well positioned to understand the local needs and tailor the training specifically.

**Prof. Billett:** Yes.

**Mr LISTER:** Your concern is whether or not they have the wherewithal to be able to deliver consistent quality products at the end of the day?

**Prof. Billett:** Yes, so that those people are not further disadvantaged; we need to reach out and provide that support. There are facilitative ways in which these things can occur, for instance, whether we are talking about private or public providers actually reaching out into either workplaces or communities, so bringing in a particular kind of expertise. Particularly if we are talking about a publicly funded provision, if I understand the question, I think it is important that the same kind of experiences and quality of support is provided for somebody in Goondiwindi as would be the case in Brisbane or the Gold Coast.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** Professor, across Australia we have several universities which provide VET services. Thinking about regional Queensland, particularly Central Queensland, with industry, through your observations of the training system, do you have an opinion around how responsive universities are to those specific industries in comparison to TAFE delivering those services?

**Prof. Billett:** Yes, I think it is a different kind of responsiveness. In terms of the programs at TAFE, they are all set nationally. I have concerns about that because the degree of specification of the programs is not always helpful. There are those set of issues that, in some sense, the provision by TAFE might be more flexible, I am not sure, but what are the programs being offered. Universities are obviously stand-alone institutions, though they are often big institutions. Currently they are going through crises of which I am sure you are aware and are looking for new opportunities.

I am very much in favour of having a single tertiary education system. The best one I see is in the Netherlands where you have a set of tertiary education provisions which go from institutions which offer basic vocational education to higher provisions of specialised, of occupational courses at the diploma level. They have the applied universities that are focused very much on the industry sector and then they have what is referred to as the academic universities, which have their place. It is a country of 17 million people and I think they have something like 23 applied universities that have a focus.

In the current context, I think the universities are trying very much—the ones that I am aware of, anyway—to reach out, and part of that is the imperative which has arisen from a lack of overseas students. I think what is important is that the universities are able to conduct research in those activities and bring the research into the teaching. If the universities move into vocational education, I suspect some will struggle with the requirements, for instance, of training packages, as they are currently constructed because of the limitations. I could be wrong, but there might be some throwback from that. I think where you have good models—you have a good model in Central Queensland and there is a good model in Charles Darwin—they seem to be quite effective in blending those two sets of arrangements. There is also one in Victoria.

One of the issues is really the degree by which the vocational education curriculum is very much constrained by national provisions, and it has been long recognised that they do not meet the needs of communities because it is a one-size-fits-all arrangement.

Many years ago we used to have something called the non-endorsed components of training packages which allowed variations to occur in the content. The best model I see—and we are not Germany; I am not suggesting for a moment that we are in Germany—but in Germany, which is also a federation, vocational education programs have a broad set of goals which were established for each industry at a national level, a federal level, but at a local level, they are able to negotiate on the kind of content and focus of the courses. That is the kind of approach which I think I am hinting at here is required so that the needs of the local communities—we are talking big communities here and big distances—can be reflected in the curriculum arrangements, the training packages, and not be so specified. I think what happens at the local level a lot is that people subvert the curriculum; people actually know their needs and teachers change things accordingly. I know that I did that when I was a teacher in TAFE. However, that is relying upon individuals to do that. I think we probably need the greater flexibility with that work.

It is funny, that study I referred to which was about the demand side of vocational education, that was prompted by the collapse of the accord, and the idea is that there needs to be a more enterprise focus on vocational education. That was interesting to see the different kinds of demands and needs from the communities. Sorry, I have not really answered your question at all there. I have given you a lecture on provisions.

**CHAIR:** It is an interesting point that you raise, though. My takeaway from that is that there needs to be, at a national level, some consistency and strengthening in that framework which allows, as it comes down, a more tailored and nuanced approach, depending on local community needs that is driven by the industry sector, that is driven by the training facilities at a local level and driven by communities in a partnership model.

**Prof. Billett:** Yes. The heart of the German model is that at the local level you have chambers of commerce that are bipartite, they are not conflicted and they mediate all of that. This is not Germany, but it is still that idea of local negotiation. It brings the teachers into engagement with local employers. They each understand each other's needs and respond accordingly.

**CHAIR:** Which sort of fits that regional jobs committee model that you have identified in your papers.

**Prof. Billett:** Yes. I think it is just that that needs to be strengthened. One of the concerns I have when looking at these social partnerships over time is they often depend upon the energies of individuals. You hear 'so-and-so is a great champion', but people exhaust and programs are often short term and they exhaust. I think you need structures in place to try to build that capacity and get the feedback and perhaps adjust from these very prescriptive national programs to those that can be adapted locally.

**CHAIR:** Could there be better engagement with the industries that drive the demand for jobs as a result of the training?

**Prof. Billett:** You have a basis thereby to engage with local enterprises. Of course, everybody is going to have their own needs, but there are ways of addressing that. There is not too much point in having stipulated curricular experiences that you simply cannot provide. Going back almost 30 years it was said that every cooking apprentice in Queensland had to learn how to do French cooking and use all the French terminology for cooking. I do not know about the restaurants you go to, but for me they are not of that kind and I do not think they are well represented across restaurants. An idea came that this was the way that professional cookery had to be done but it was not responding to local needs. There were a lot of changes made to overcome that, but I think that is an example of where those changes are required.

**Mr BOOTHMAN:** That was very interesting. My question is more to do with the cape area and the more remote communities in the gulf and attracting professional trainers to those areas to give those students the best training possible. Say we have an electrician up there or a chef. There are only so many people that that community would need to be a sparky, a plumber or a chef. How do we get around those issues to create a situation where the community needs those individuals—that is the retention rate—to stay in those communities? My concern when I went up to Weipa a few years ago was that a lot of courses were not being completed because the trainer was moving on from the area. It would have been very demoralising for those students to get three-quarters or halfway through a course when that happened. What are your ideas about getting a better retention rate of trainers in those areas but also building it in such a way that the community needs those people and, therefore, retains them in the community?

**Prof. Billett:** It is a very tough question. For years the public provider has struggled with getting sufficient numbers of teachers. I do not have the simple answer to that. I think now we have means of engaging teachers in ways we did not have previously. We have access to electronic resources which, to some degree, overcome those distances. I suspect that the people who most need the face-to-face support are people in those communities, the ones to whom you refer. Perhaps it is a rotational model; I do not know. In the case of somewhere like Weipa, on the one hand they have a very large enterprise there, which is great. However, the training there will be related very much to that enterprise. The ideal, of course, is that the apprentice or trainee would be able to move around a number of enterprises, but in Weipa there is one. However, it is a big enterprise and there is probably a range of things there.

I notice that the education department is giving bonuses to teachers to go into some communities in Central Queensland that are short of teachers at the moment, so there might be incentives. Again, it is this issue of if people are given a challenge and given discretion to bring about changes, that might be something attractive. It is when somebody is told, for instance, to go and teach pre-prescribed material in a community that they do not know and that may not meet the needs of the community where I think you will have your greatest rubs. I think it is about the championing thing again, and that is trying to find a way that will attract perhaps younger people or older teachers to go there and engage. The actual tasks they have to do should be rewarding and they can see that they are going to bring about change through that.

I do not have a simple answer to your question because it is a tough one and I do not want to be trite about it. What I do think would need to happen is that any teacher going, for instance, from Brisbane or the Gold Coast would probably need some preparation, some halfway house, otherwise going to some of those communities would be overwhelming and potentially lead to them leaving. There are probably processes of support and guidance for those teachers, seeing a strategic program of rewards, support, guidance and perhaps rotation. These are some of the issues which obviously focus on medical education, medical provisions where you have rotations and people are going in. Young people I think particularly are getting very used—we are all getting used to it—to working with Teams and that sort of thing. The possibilities are opening up in ways that we did not have a few years ago and this has been brought about by the pandemic. For instance, I always held the view that you could do a lot of teaching of content online, but procedural learning—how you do things—probably needs to be done face to face. Now there is an increasing set of resources that you can follow online to do things. I am not saying that is the answer but there are things.

The thing is you ask how best can somebody learn that sort of thing and how can they be supported in that learning? That is when you make the decision about the kind of experiences that need to be provided. I suspect one of the other things is to get some of those young people out in the community so they can experience different kinds of workplaces in different communities so they have something to take back to their community.

**CHAIR:** YouTube has been revolutionary in teaching people a few tips and tricks around mechanics, carpentry and all sorts of things.

**Mr SULLIVAN:**—and grouting.

**CHAIR:**—and grouting.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Mine was genetic learning.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** I want to touch on your focus on industry based training and I think what you described as industry partnerships. You also referred to your history with industrial relations or HR negotiations around the state. Have you done any research or do you have any comments on the emergence in the regions or the trend towards labour hire firms and whether that has had any impact on industry based training? If it is an issue, do you have any comments as to how we can address that particular emergence and trend, particularly in traditional industries?

**Prof. Billett:** I have not done the research. One thing I have noticed, including work on my own house, is I do worry about—the apprenticeship pathway is one that should be organised so that the apprentice goes and engages in tasks that are increasingly more difficult and demanding. They build upon their earlier skills. Towards the end they should be increasingly autonomous as a worker left on their own. There should be a pathway. What worries me about the labour hire arrangements is that apprentices are being seen as cheap labour. In some sense those arrangements were a temporary response to a crisis of unemployment and a difficulty of employers not being willing to take on apprentices. Unfortunately, my suspicion is that perhaps employers have gotten too used to somebody else carrying the burden. When I see the television programs at night where I hear enterprises in Brisbane complaining about a lack of workers because the borders are shut, I would love the journalist to ask those restaurateurs or whatever, ‘How many apprentices have you got at the moment?’

I have two levels of concern. One is about the disrupted experience for the apprentice. In terms of the group apprenticeship scheme, when they are good I think they are fine; I think they are great. One of the best models I have seen is in hospitality—and this is a long time ago—where apprentices would spend time rotating through, for instance, a hotel where they would do banquet catering and then work in the bistro lounge. They would then be transferred to a restaurant where they would do lunch service. They would also perhaps have experiences in hospital catering or perhaps even with the military. That was a structured way that apprentices would get lots of different experiences of the occupation, which is dead important for adaptability. I think the opposite of that though is adhocery, when apprentices are given blocks of experience which are about expediency of the person who hired them. For instance, when the person was doing an extension on our house, he only brought in a higher apprentice when he was putting the roof trusses in which he could not do by himself, and so the apprentice came in. I just saw the interaction between the two and I did not think it was great. That is just an example.

I think there are two issues there. It is important that we provide sufficient numbers of apprentices. The whole number of apprentices in this state, as in other places, was knocked down by government departments and agencies when they stopped taking apprentices. Going back 20 years, the railways—QR—used to just take huge numbers of apprentices as did the electricity generating board. All that disappeared, which was a bad model because what government is saying to private enterprise is, ‘Hey, we’re not doing it.’ That is then not exactly a good model for private enterprise is it? Those actions to corporatise that have led to that situation. I think it is important that employers take up that responsibility and do not just seek to rely on others doing the work. I know it is difficult for some small businesses to carry the administrative burden of apprenticeships. They need to think about two things: firstly, the quality of the experience of the apprentices, which should be organised in a way that has development associated with it; and also that we need to provide arrangements so we have sufficient numbers of apprentices. It is about being not too strict that it kills the number, but finding ways to support the number of apprentices through mature group apprenticeship type systems where there are positive rotations.

A good example is what they used to have in hospitals with nurses. Nurses used to live in the hospital and they were not called students. They would rotate through all of the hospital wards, so they had time in a general ward, surgery wards, oncology wards and birthing wards. They would have this whole range of experiences. It is those kinds of experiences which allow them to understand the canonical knowledge of nursing—what Florence Nightingale referred to—but also how nursing is applied in a specific context. That means that when those nurses leave RBH or whatever, they can go to regional and remote communities because they have a greater range of knowledge.



I think it is finding diverse experience—I do not have a problem with having different kinds of experience; I do worry about the labour hire side of things where apprentices become cheap labour. When I have mentioned this to my German colleagues—and their apprenticeship system is very important there—they are horrified at the concept that apprentices would ever be used in that way. One of the points, by the way, in terms of Germany is that the training wage in Germany for an apprentice in their final year is about 30 per cent of the adult rate. It is part of a contract and that is that young people are paid very small amounts of money knowing their parents will sponsor them. At the same time the expectation is that the enterprise will provide them with very good training. It is not just one issue, being the training wage; it is a contract between the provision of the apprenticeship that is shared across the community, so the employer has to provide good training. Yes, they are getting somebody at a lower rate of pay and the parents are willing to support their children through it because they know they have good preparation. I think it is that kind of commitment—in Germany it is called the *berufskonzept* concept—the importance of skill. It is adopted in the community. It is not taken lightly.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Professor, thank you very much for giving your version of what is happening in training across Queensland at the moment, especially in rural and remote areas. It is great that you acknowledged the Hinchinbrook electorate. I think you were referring to the good work of CSR Victoria Mill back in the day. I happened to be an apprentice of that system. It is good to share the floor today with a fellow tradesperson.

I loved that earlier you were talking about autonomy with training. For example, someone in Weipa running a mechanic workshop is very different to someone in Brisbane running a specialised workshop looking at Teslas. How do you manage that as a whole through VET training to ensure that a mechanic is still a mechanic but a mechanic has specialised and localised training depending on the industry they are working in?

**Prof. Billett:** The way I view it is that any occupation has canonical knowledge to it. There is the canonical knowledge of the occupation. If you are a pilot, you have to know how to take off and land. If you are a nurse, you have to know what Florence Nightingale talked about a long time ago. That has not really changed too much. There are the canons of the occupation. That should be consistent. Then what there should be is how that is applied in practice. The canons are important. The workplace changes or the apprentice moves on, so I think the canons are important. A way of teaching canonical knowledge is how it is applied in the workplace and how you can adapt it. One of the things that we really miss out on is the opportunity that apprentices like you would have had *en bloc*, I take it.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Yes.

**Prof. Billett:** When you were *en bloc*, you would probably talk to your other apprentices about the work you do and what it was like. There is a great opportunity there to take the knowledge and the things that you do in your workplace and share them with the other apprentices in a structured way because that helps them understand the way that a motor mechanic works.

**Mr DAMETTO:** I was a fitter.

**Prof. Billett:** You were a fitter and turner. Someone in the mines probably does work that is not dissimilar, but you would probably find that someone doing precision engineering would use quite different materials. That is the way that we can build the adaptive capacity, which is so important. By the way, it has never been more important for us than now when we need to build national capacity. We need to build the capacities here and not be reliant upon overseas products. Vocational education all of a sudden I think is going to be centre stage in terms of our ability to be more self-reliant as a nation.

Today medical operations are being cancelled in hospitals in Brisbane because the supply chain from China is not providing the materials. We have to develop this capacity. Our capacity is developing canonical knowledge but also helping workers know how to adapt to other circumstances. One way you do that is by exposing them to different circumstances so you can understand how fitting is done here and fitting is done there, because they might not have the opportunity to go there. Sorry, I am going on a bit, aren't I?

**CHAIR:** We are all out of time on that note. Thank you very much, Professor Billett, for your submission and for your responses today. They have been extraordinarily enlightening for the entire committee. Thank you very much for your time today.

**Prof. Billett:** Thank you for the opportunity.

**Proceedings suspended from 10.18 am to 10.30 am.**

**MONRO Ms Davena, Business and Operations Manager, Wontulp-Bi-Buya College (via videoconference)**

**STEPHENS, Dr Anne, Cairns Institute, James Cook University (via teleconference)**

**CHAIR:** I welcome Dr Anne Stephens and Ms Davena Monro. Thank you both for your attendance this morning. Dr Stephens, would you like to make an opening statement then we will go to Ms Monro?

**Dr Stephens:** Yes, certainly. Thank you very much. I am happy to do that. Good morning everyone. Again, I am sorry about the video. I have no idea why it is not working. It is just one of those things, I suppose. I hope you can hear me just fine.

**CHAIR:** Perfectly, thank you.

**Dr Stephens:** Thank you for the opportunity to discuss my evaluative work around vocational education and training, particularly provided through Wontulp-Bi-Buya College in Cairns. The college provides training almost exclusively to Indigenous Australians and has operated since the mid-1980s. I note the committee's interest in understanding aspects of VET in regional, rural and remote Queensland that may be problematic or may warrant greater attention by governments. Whilst the college could use greater support from governments through governance and funding arrangements to help it be more agile and responsive to training needs, I would like to bring the committee's attention to the strengths and success of training delivery through this Indigenous controlled RTO.

I have evaluated courses designed to help in community capacity development since 2011. I have conducted theoretical and historical research into VET governance in Australia. All this work has pertained to Indigenous people's access, retention and structural delivery. Most of this work is derived from learnings of evaluations conducted with Wontulp-Bi-Buya College. Questions I hope to address today will be made from this applied research background. In the course of doing so, I can make some comment on the difference in delivery between the college and other training providers. I hope that opportunities to improve training delivery will become apparent.

Courses I have examined include community organisation and development, addictions management and community development and Indigenous mental health and suicide prevention. In short, Wontulp college achieves highly successful outcomes if employment was not seen as the only key performance indicator of achievement. I have found consistently high levels of course completion and very high levels of course satisfaction. The college enjoys high levels of staff retention and strong volunteer support. There is a health sector respect from employer groups, including Queensland Health, and industry demand for Wontulp college graduates. There is a high demand from Indigenous people to enrol in Wontulp college courses, including those discontinued due to funding shortfalls. It was found that even partial completion of courses has left an impact on the learner, with several returning. Reasons for early withdrawal are predominantly deaths of family or community members and sorry business obligations, students gain employment mid course and leave to take up that opportunity or a breach of Wontulp college's enrolment rules which include the non use of alcohol and drugs during block residential stays in Cairns.

Retention is high because courses are engaging, relevant, motivating and culturally safe. They are student centred, using a two-way approach informed by principles of adult education. They are developed and delivered by Indigenous people who are role models. There is wraparound support provided to all students to manage personal life circumstances. Courses necessarily tackle issues of Indigenous colonisation, displacement and intergenerational trauma. Students are challenged to confront those personal issues, but they do so with pastoral care, community and peer support. Students report personal growth, becoming better informed, the lifting of shame and motivation to support others.

The motivation to study is in this order. Firstly, to complete a course as 40 per cent of enrolments did not complete schooling beyond year 10. Secondly, to become better leaders or elders and to have the skills to provide a service for their community. Thirdly, to gain desired employment or promotion within their organisation of employment.

The student profile is generally mature age—over 40 years of age—fewer than 25 per cent completed year 12; more women enrolled than men; and the origins are urban, rural and very remote rural across Australia. People want training to support the following sectors and issues. These include: establishing a small business or a social enterprise; work in education and training themselves; better provision of parenting and children services; family violence prevention; counselling and healing; community controlled health; suicide prevention; mental health services; preventative health and sporting participation; youth and adult alcohol and drug management; diversion from jail and justice issues; housing; media; arts; language; and cultural revival.

Wontulp college supports whole communities to establish a network of trainee graduates. It remains a valuable resource for whole communities. It seeks to improve whole-of-community wellbeing through the empowerment of individuals and leaders. Graduates go into further education including certificates in public health, sea and land conservation management, early childhood, teacher training courses at JCU, certificate IV in community teaching and other degree courses at universities across Australia. Graduates contribute in volunteer and paid roles as board members of land corporations and managers and staff of community organisations, health services and local councils. They participate in Murri Court and social justice roles and Indigenous policing. They manage and facilitate men's and women's groups, Survival Day and NAIDOC Week organisation and celebrations.

In terms of government support, from the recommendations I have made in my reports I suggest the following would be very helpful to support Wontulp college scale up the delivery and reach of its work. Some courses funded by the federal government under specific programs are fantastic—Indigenous mental health, for example—but they do not cover full course participation costs, including travel and accommodation to Cairns for block training sessions. This precludes some students' eligibility and enrolment. Greater support to support auxiliary staff would be helpful. Literacy support is often dependent on volunteers. Literacy, including computer literacy, needs are very high in these cohorts. So too is the pastoral care required as courses provoke self-reflection on individual and community level trauma. This triggers grief, anger, sorrow and suffering and requires intensive counselling and support at periods during the training. Support for remote delivery in community and on site would be advantageous. Support to subsidise some students would be advantageous as some students complete their courses but cannot graduate until all course fees are paid. This conceals a higher rate of completion being recorded.

I conclude my opening statement with words from participants themselves, as their reports of the training speak to the power of culturally safe learning to change lives. One person said to me—

I'm a community organiser. I was empowered and energised to deal with my social and emotional problems. We lost three kids to suicide and two close family members and we'd had alcohol and domestic violence and all that. All I learnt empowered me to go forward and manage my project.

Another trainee said—

The training makes me feel important for once. I was the dumb man. I can't read/write. I'm useless. I'd say this to myself. Now I'm telling myself I can do it and I'm actually doing it. I never went to grade 8. I'm feeling I can do it. I believe in myself.

I am happy to take any questions from the committee.

**CHAIR:** We might hear from Ms Monro before we go to questions from the committee.

**Ms Monro:** Please bear with me. I have a bit of a head cold, hence why I am not there. I was really hoping to meet everyone in person. Anne has been a great, supportive person in our evaluations. Thank you for that, Anne. I have tried to come from another approach in my presentation.

First and foremost, galangoor djali. That means good morning in Butchulla language. I acknowledge Birral, the great spirit, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I pay my respects to the Yidinji people of the lands on which I currently work and reside. However, due to the expansive footprint of Wontulp and the connection we have formed, I wish to take this opportunity to pay my respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people throughout this nation of nations. I thank the committee for this opportunity to speak on behalf of Wontulp-Bi-Buya College. I hope that I am able to share my experiences and knowledge to ensure our VET sector can grow and develop appropriately for our future generations.

The way I decided I wanted to present today is that I will position myself and who I am and how I fit into the foundational systems of Wontulp-Bi-Buya College. My name, as you know, is Davena Monro. First and foremost, I am a proud Butchulla and Garawa woman who has been affected by displacement. However, I have reconnected to my country and culture which has lived through my family through our storyline and narrative.

I am the business and operations manager for Wontulp-Bi-Buya College. I have been with the college now for about 12 years. I fully believe that my connection with Wontulp has enhanced my 20 years of experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the training and education sector. I must admit that I totally believe that I have gained a better understanding in the last 12 years through my connection with Wontulp and this has contributed to my deeper understanding of who I am as an Aboriginal person—not just personally but in my teaching and research capacity in the educational space. It has been through this growth that I have acquired a greater understanding of my connection and disconnection. I have written a bit of a chapter on this that maybe you might like to have a look at in the future. It has given me empathy for my mature age students who are studying at Wontulp.

Public Briefing—The delivery of vocational education and training in rural, remote and regional Queensland

I have worked and lived in various communities throughout Queensland. However, I grew up under the Aboriginal act in the Brisbane CBD in early 1970s. It had so many benefits, but on the other hand there were so many genuine disconnection issues as well. However, as a young adult venturing out and residing, at times, in rural and remote locations, this expanded my personal attributes and knowledge that have contributed to my sense of knowing and observing the many barriers associated with people living in urban areas and the lack of support and services for people living in remote communities. It has been my observations firsthand and with open eyes that I now teach and overcome the obstacles that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are forced to face with little or no support.

Wontulp college has been training Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of mature age—those from 18 to 80 years old—within the Indigenous space for 39 years. All Wontulp studies are contextualised for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people while maintaining national VET standards.

It is true that this holistic method of study and training has contributed to the success of Wontulp today. It has also been through a culturally appropriate methodology and understanding the complexities of our social landscape not only for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures but also individuals and communities. This is a similar concept to relationality and the laws that still guide many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures from the creation of time. The law was directed by Birral, our great spirit. Our birthright as human beings is to assess every provision that our world has to offer. Since men and women first walked on land, the land has been their provider. Through her creation, through the ways of being and doing, the land and the environment dictated what she needed. Men and women were solely responsible for upholding her laws. However, through the ever changing social landscape men and women have chosen—or sometimes been forced—to travel their own ways, which has resulted in constant searching for new ways of being and doing. In my culture, we as human beings knew what was expected of us. Unfortunately, we have been subjected to changes to the social landscape, as we all know, which are constantly pushing people and society to continuously develop and constantly adapt to society's ever changing demands. Whatever cultural group we belong to, we are constantly needing to adapt to changes. This is not an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander ideology.

The other day I was reading the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I want to draw upon what I believe resonates with the methodology approach of Wontulp-Bi-Buya College and the responsibility we hold as educators and trainers. Article 26 of the declaration states—

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations ...

I understand that statement, as it describes education as being the development of a personality and respect for human rights. I see similar concepts with the Wontulp methodology. We as a college are constantly working with our students to draw out their own experience and knowledge. One aspect of the methodology we have chosen to utilise is the method of educare rather than educate. Educare is a method that draws out experience. Education, on the other hand, is about cramming in. We believe that our students all come from their communities, their lifestyles, with their own personal storylines and with much knowledge. Our teachers at Wontulp are required to care for each person personally—a person's personality—and, yes, to promote understanding with an holistic approach. Our teachers are trained and transitioned with this skill to assess and help their students not only individually but also on a larger community and family scale. It is true that this assists and trains students to piece together their own personal knowledge which, it is fair to say, we have been forcibly removed and disconnected from. It is true that this understanding of being an Aboriginal person gives our teachers and trainers a foothold already into two cultural spaces, and that understanding changes our social landscapes. We are forced as people to take that into consideration as teachers with different variations of geographical locations. This is the way we are unique in the way we deliver.

It has been so important to contextualise training materials, and this has been imperative to teach where many of us take it for granted. It assists how we operate in this new social landscape. It has been a critical aspect of supporting our students through their literacy needs. This is something that really goes hand in hand. As Anne was saying, our students come to us with levels of year 8 and lower. These two aspects have given students a great percentage in completing their award certificate. There is also a constant toing and froing, especially when trying to create units and passing accreditation processes, which we have always done, but they are always a bit of a struggle. For example, one of our units is to maintain and protect culture. This is utilised in two of our courses,

especially within the wellbeing space. This unit assists people who need to reconnect but it also protects their cultural obligations as well as the effects associated with their disconnection. We see it as imperative that students understand why they act or even think differently.

To ensure our students can become appropriate counsellors, community workers and leaders in their community and family, they are also required to understand themselves deeply. This is where they come from. However, it is something that we need to grapple with. There is a constant push for our college to adapt to generic study packages. Our completion rates are quite high, but there are a lot of issues around reporting. Most are focusing more on the quantitative rather than the qualitative data. Even though we are seeing results on the ground, the effects are broader within the family and community as a lot of our students are going into voluntary positions and working and becoming better leaders in their families. We as a college are drawing in and retaining our students in their training for longer periods compared to other RTOs. We were averaging completion rates around 86 per cent prior to COVID.

COVID-19 is another issue. Restrictions have caused havoc with our society. However, the restrictions affected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people even more in certain areas, especially remote locations. We have felt extra layers of restriction being placed on our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, which have been heavily mandated already through society. Wontulp delivers in remote locations, so the restrictions have made it difficult for us to come together. That face-to-face component is imperative to Wontulp's holistic approach. Wontulp is currently funded by the NIAA, the National Indigenous Australians Agency, under the IAS, Indigenous Advancement Strategy. The away-from-base students who come from remote areas have left Wontulp struggling to meet funding demands. We understand and have empathy for students who have to travel. The cost of travel from remote areas to Cairns for training is hard for Wontulp. We are currently delivering our courses under the away-from-base framework program, which has assisted our college immensely. The department was very supportive through COVID restrictions and assisted our college to strategise other avenues of study. The greatest advantage our college was given through COVID was the opportunity to create online training and the development of our learning platform. It was awesome that the department supported and varied our funding. However, there is still an issue with students who reside in remote locations due to the lack of internet and IT connections for our students.

There is also a big issue with many of our people—a lot of people have suggested this in so many platforms—and that is working to one size fits all. This is something that Wontulp struggles with all the time. As I said, each student is paid at a capped rate, and the remoteness and the very remote are still paid at the same rate. That affects how we can enrol and the number of students we can enrol. Over the years we have found that dealing with ASQA's obligations have pushed RTOs to utilise a lot of generic courses and units rather than courses and units that we have created and we have adapted and contextualised for our people and communities and our current landscapes. ASQA time frames are sometimes unrealistic. RTOs are required to have information, yet they expect our information yesterday. There is a real push that we are reliable and there are so many demands on RTOs, especially in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander space. However, the third-party companies that are creating and contextualising studies do not have an adequate and deeper expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and the issues that surround them. We as a college are constantly working over our duties, but this is our understanding of who we are and what we need to deliver with our training. We do not just have students coming and going from our studies. Especially in remote areas, we are bringing students in who come from communities with not a lot of services. We have to help students go to the dentist, get their medication and access specialised services they do not have in their communities. This is all about that holistic training as well. It is something that is helping us help them. There are a lot of things that need to be changed and we are ever changing.

I thank you for the time that I can come to you and speak to you. Yes, I would take any questions, and if I can answer them I will answer them. If not, I will come back and get an answer for you.

**Mr BOOTHMAN:** You spoke about bringing people from remote communities down to Cairns to stay. Are any of the courses onsite in the local communities? I am just curious if that is part of the courses.

**Ms Monro:** This is something that is critical as well, especially in the community development spaces. I have taken my students around their communities. It is strange because, of the services that are there, a lot of community members do not know they are there. It is about teaching them what is in their communities and also showing them the gaps and how they can develop and plan their future goals around that.

**Mr BOOTHMAN:** Does that allow them a higher retention rate to stay in those communities—this is part of my follow-on question—compared to those students moving to the bigger centres like Cairns or Townsville? How do you find that? Is that something that is a worry with the communities in those more remote areas, that they are losing individuals, or are they staying up there?

**Ms Monro:** It is different to a university or TAFE. These courses promote leaving because, in a sense, our course is on the ground. It is about developing on the ground and what they can do in their community and how they can assist in those spaces. I know from experience. I have learned about higher governmental all-around practical research, all that sort of thing. There is not really anything like that in the community. We are more grassroots, so this is where our studies and training are. It is concentrated on grassroots. That is where most of our students stay to build and create around the family and community. Did that answer your question?

**Mr BOOTHMAN:** Yes, it does. Working with the community elders, you work out the individual needs of those communities to have that higher retention rate?

**Ms Monro:** Yes, that is right. A lot of our students actually come as elders. In some of my remote communities I have senior law men and women. They are looking at issues not just on the ground but within their culture that are creating barriers. These are things that they are working together on as a whole community. It is also about engaging. Elders are very important. A lot of our students coming through are key people in the community already.

**CHAIR:** Of those students coming through, what is the most popular course pathway? I note that you have a Certificate III in Addictions Management and Community and Development, which includes alcohol and other addictions counselling; a Certificate IV in Indigenous Mental Health (Suicide Prevention); and then a certificate III, a certificate IV and a diploma in theology and ministry. Which are the most popular of those or are they pretty much on an even keel?

**Ms Monro:** I think they are pretty much on an even keel. What is actually happening is that theology and ministry is something that they know of. A lot of people have been pushed into communities that have been operated through the churches. We see a lot of theology and ministry coming through because they are searching for something. What happens is that when they do come through and learn about theology and ministry, there are other aspects they learn about such as maintaining and protecting cultures and all of that sort of thing. It has been contextualised so they can see that there is a bigger picture. Wellbeing is not just a place for people thinking, 'Okay. I am coming to learn to be a counsellor.' Realistically they are being cleansed and fortified. They are learning and developing and they are healing themselves so they can teach. We have a lot of people who are out in the community without any services in the wellbeing space who are looking for help who find us as a last resort. It is very sad.

**Mr DAMETTO:** I am of the understanding that most of the courses that you are putting your students through at the moment are more cultural and are working on literacy and numeracy so they can become better leaders in the community. I understand that there are some voluntary roles in the community that your graduates put their hand up for. Can I get a better understanding of some of the paid roles that are available to students who have completed your courses?

**Ms Monro:** There is counselling first and foremost. A lot of people go into Indigenous mental health. They also work in our Indigenous medical centres as project officers. Our students are also bridging the gaps in different departments in regard to consultations.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** My question is in regard to the VET system itself. Is there sufficient flexibility for participants to complete their studies when they have other things happening in their lives that disrupt their learning?

**Ms Monro:** Yes, there is to a certain extent. Abstudy has limitations as to how long you can get Abstudy to determine different certificates at any one time. Sorry, I have lost my train of thought. Could you please repeat the question?

**Mr O'ROURKE:** It was in regard to whether there is enough flexibility within the system for students to finish their courses when they have disruptions in their own life.

**Ms Monro:** Students can defer their courses. Like Anne said in our report, a lot of our students have really been hit personally by some of the content and they find it very hard to grapple with. They virtually step away, but then they all come back because of our understanding and the cultural appropriateness. We also have that strong understanding for our students and we allow that flexibility. There is always continuous talking with the departments or Centrelink and also with our (inaudible) provider in these cases.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** My question is to Ms Monro or to Dr Stephens. Dr Stephens, in your testimony you spoke about the fact that the cohort is usually over 40 years old or they may have left school at year 8. I imagine you have a combination of people who did not graduate from high school and/or a high degree of women who are trying to return to the workforce after raising a family, for example. I wanted to ask about the annual processes for the intake of those sorts of students. Do you try to work with Skilling Queenslanders for Work or with those sorts of community-based training organisations to get them ready to enter the VET system or does your college provide the entry level skills and entry level training as part of your VET program?

**Ms Monro:** It is part of our program. We do not cap. We do not discriminate on levels. It is quite amazing because when we do bring them into that space there is a way that the teachers are able to—maybe it is a cultural thing—work together. It is all about relationality. We have our literacy support in the classroom. We are targeting who needs what help. We have employees and volunteers who go far above their job description. It is just amazing what can be achieved when we look at the individual in that sense but bring them into a whole collective in the classroom.

**CHAIR:** When we talk about vocational education and training, the skills and employment outcomes, there is this piece here that is not well identified—it is that pastoral piece, that literacy piece, that foundational building block within those communities to help. It is that first step, that first piece before being able to look at the other aspects of skills and training development and what that looks like in terms of employment outcomes.

**Dr Stephens:** Through the extensive interviews I have done with many students, they have tried other pathways prior to coming to the Wontulp-Bi-Buya College and found that those other more traditional delivery systems have failed them. When they arrive at Wontulp-Bi-Buya College they are often feeling very nervous and lacking in self-confidence, but the delivery and the style of teaching meets their learning styles, and the community and the culture that is immediately formed within a cohort is incredibly supportive. Then the materials that they encounter are presented in such a way which demystifies English for them. They then find a basis on which they can start to succeed. That success is celebrated and it compounds and builds upon itself so that people are intrinsically motivated to get the certificate, to complete it, and to not be left behind the cohort that they have joined. Strong bonds are formed between students, and those tend to persist well beyond the training.

**CHAIR:** What would some of those other pathways look like, Dr Stephens, that have not brought them to the place where they can develop those foundations? Are we talking about services that are delivered maybe through neighbourhood community centre work? What do those pathways look like?

**Dr Stephens:** I would be reticent to name any other RTOs, but there are other RTOs that they have identified to me that do not deliver the training with an Indigenous person at the front of the classroom, for example. They also described TAFE traditionally as not being receptive; moving too quickly through a curriculum; a more chalk-and-talk style of pedagogy. They just feel left behind. They might be isolated and not be with a group of people with whom they can form a peer group. Those systems just do not work for them in that their learning style does not meet the pedagogy that is required of people who are delivering a service in a very short amount of time. It is very funding bound and those sorts of restrictions happen. The college provides more space. It provides more identification—'These are my people. This is who I am. I fit here.' I think that is the difference between this and other services.

We genuinely try to do a very good job. We are also interested in these particular social courses that are equipping people for community development and health, employment and volunteer pathways. We are not looking at some of the other delivery out there that might be for other trades or other vocations in life.

**CHAIR:** Obviously Wontulp-Bi-Buya College is based in Cairns. What is the geography of the catchment? How far are students coming from when they come to do the course blocks? Is it a big catchment?

**Ms Monro:** There is not a catchment. They come from all over Australia—from the top of the Torres Strait and from Western Australia. We have had students from South Australia and from New South Wales. They are coming from everywhere. This is where we are finding ourselves spreading really thin too. Because of the uniqueness of the college, the word is spreading. A lot of our Indigenous people are going on to universities and it is great. A lot of them may not need this sort of training, but we have a lot of university students coming back and doing this training because they feel that there is that missing on-the-ground work.

**CHAIR:** Given that you have students coming from across the country, do you have a rough indication how many of those would be Queenslanders?

**Ms Monro:** The majority of our students would be Queenslanders.

**CHAIR:** How many students would you have enrolled in any one year? Do you have any rough the numbers on size?

**Ms Monro:** It can vary from 120 to 180. It fluctuates a bit—not very much.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** This is either to Ms Monro or to Dr Stephens. Dr Stephens, you mentioned that one of your observations was that many of the people entering the college had had previously poor experiences with other providers in the VET space or training space more broadly. I know that, particularly under the VET FEE-HELP process, there were some pretty unscrupulous providers who really targeted Indigenous communities in that way and let them down. Had that been your experience previously or had you noticed that previously? Has that been cleaned up a bit now in terms of some of those dodgy providers?

**Ms Monro:** Honestly, it has been. There has been a big change within the VET system. I know some of those providers—I will not mention names—who promised people computers and all of that sort of thing but never delivered.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Yes—a free iPad and then no actual certificate at the end of it.

**Ms Monro:** Exactly. With the processes around ASQA, a lot of those RTOs have been filtered out. Like I said, we have been going for 39 years. We must be doing something right, but it has been a hard slog to get here.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Dr Stephens and Ms Monro, for your submission. We are very grateful for the on-the-ground knowledge you are sharing with us on this very important topic. Thank you very much for your time today. We are very grateful.



**HEILBUTH, Mr Peter, Deputy Vice President, VET Operations Growth, Central Queensland University**

**CHAIR:** I now welcome our final witness, Mr Peter Heilbuth. I know we have a very excited member for Rockhampton who has some very interesting questions to ask. Would you like to give us a brief opening statement and then it will be over to the committee for questions?

**Mr Heilbuth:** Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Please excuse my voice. I have been a bit breathless ever since having COVID. Thank you so much for this opportunity. My role currently is at CQUniversity. I have been at CQUniversity for about five years and the role covers the vocational education and training section of the uni. I also directly look after the College of Trades, which is our traditional trades area. My background is that I have been a CEO at TAFE across two TAFE institutes in Victoria, one in New South Wales and now here in Queensland. Thanks to Rob for steering the slides.

I will tell you a little about CQUni. As the map suggests, CQUniversity has a presence across Australia. The reason I have put in the map on the right of the slide is that vocational education and training, which is my area, is predominantly delivered from four main campuses in Central Queensland: Mackay, Emerald, Rockhampton and Gladstone. We have a range of higher education campuses in other states, but predominantly our vocational education and training is delivered in Queensland.

The next slide: a classic teacher no-no is trying to cram too much on to one slide so please excuse this one, although I tried to keep the slides relatively brief. I have mentioned point No. 1. We have approximately 150 VET courses but it varies according to what is happening and which courses are being changed over et cetera. That would include full courses, diplomas, certificates et cetera but also some short courses and micro-credentials.

Our key delivery areas are apprenticeships, which is particularly strong in the Central Queensland region, driven of course by its location and by industry. My experience of running regional TAFEs across Australia is that CQUni has one of the highest levels of apprenticeship traditional training that I have seen. Usually it is around 25 per cent of what the TAFE does, which is often misunderstood as people think TAFE is all about apprenticeships. While it is not only about apprenticeships, at CQUni particularly it is very strong. About 40 per cent of what we do in the VET or TAFE areas—and I use those terms interchangeably because we are a TAFE—is apprenticeship and traineeship based. Obviously there is a range of other areas. As the public provider in the Central Queensland region, we offer a range of other areas, which are on the screen.

We are strong in what we call VET in Schools or Start TAFE Now. That is our terminology. That is where students study in either years 10, 11 or 12 and usually they complete a certificate II but it could be a certificate III course. About 110 schools use us and we have about 10,000 CQUni TAFE students a year. I had to put this statistic in. Students are relatively satisfied, as you can see: 89 per cent satisfaction and 79 per cent in employment after training, which is high. I have talked about point No. 7.

I put in point No. 8 because I think it is one of those things that often is a bit misunderstood. People also tend to think that TAFE is all about young people. That is obviously a significant cohort coming straight out of school. But at CQUni the average age of our TAFE student is 30. That means obviously there are a number of students who are older and are using vocational training as a way back into the workforce or to upskill.

Approximately 30 per cent of our students who study during secondary school go on to another course with us, which is usually vocational but can also be higher education. There are a couple of other facts and figures there.

Going on to the next slide, this shows relative growth across the past four or five years, driven particularly by additional government support—making TAFE courses free or much cheaper—and also by industry. It is not called vocational education and training for nothing. It is very much linked to industry. As mining, particularly, and the services that support mining have taken off in our region so have our numbers. Again, apprenticeship growth is particularly strong in there.

Turning to the next slide, currently we are investing in a number of new facilities and I have listed them there. Some of those are federally funded and some are state funded. We are delighted, obviously, wherever the funding comes from. It is a fabulous opportunity for our region. Of course, we are particularly thankful to the state government. A number of those facilities are about to be completed or are in the pipeline, so to speak.

I should point out a particular focus around Gladstone and hydrogen. We are gearing ourselves up and trying to think of some sort of metaphor for that. We are putting our foot on the gas for hydrogen in Gladstone. That new facility will be ready in the next month or two. We are also delighted to have received some promises from both the LNP and Labor in the recent federal election campaign.

This is my final slide, you will be delighted to know, and then I am happy to take questions. These are some of the trends that we are seeing that are particularly affecting vocational education and training at the moment. Staffing and resourcing is a particular challenge. What I mean by that is TAFE teachers. TAFE teaching is very much linked to industry. You want a teacher who has recently come from industry and brings that knowledge. You want someone who is up to speed and up to date. Yet when industry takes off so too do apprenticeships and so too does competition for those very teachers whom you want to be training the next group. In some cases those teachers are very much in demand by industry. Competition for workforce is affecting that issue I have just raised.

Obviously there are significant emerging and changing work trends—for want of a better word—whether it is industry, economic or societal. We are seeing a lot of demand for an increasingly automated workforce, whether that is in agriculture or mining, and similarly energy needs are changing as well.

Point No. 4 is probably entirely relevant for me—‘Continuing impact of Covid’—but it is not intended to be a personal reflection. It is the fact that our students, in particular in 2019 and 2020, struggled and could not in some cases get work. That affected students in areas such as health and apprenticeships who could not get placements. More recently, the issue is that those same students have become sick themselves and have not been able to attend placements because of COVID. It is an ongoing legacy, if you like.

Industry partnerships is a core one: you cannot ever talk about vocational training without mentioning industry. It is absolutely intrinsically linked. An RTO that does not have links into industry is going to suffer. We work closely to try to build and develop those.

Point No. 6 is just talking about the changing nature of training delivery, which is a lot more just in time, a lot more just on me, a lot more micro-credential skill sets et cetera.

No. 7 is the perennial challenge with regional education—that is, the tyranny of distance, the costs associated with that, the small numbers of students and yet the public good and the public requirement to provide, ideally, an equal level of service wherever you live. I am going to stop there and catch my breath again. I am happy to take questions.

**Mr LISTER:** Peter, you are certainly excused for your voice. You are probably not the only one who has lingering COVID effects. Because of my own electorate and interactions that I have had with industry there, at a personal level I am very interested in the mining aspect of your TAFE. Has there been a growth in the number of geology and mining assistants needed in the mining industry? Feedback I have been getting is around people who have broad training in being able to assist mining engineers, prospectors and so forth. Have you altered your training provision to meet that need?

**Mr Heilbuth:** That is a great question. One of the great strengths of CQUniversity is that we are a dual sector so stretching training across vocational and higher education is always an opportunity. Most things are challenges as well as opportunities, but there is always an opportunity there. As far as the demand that we have seen for mining and mining related training at the vocational level, it has largely been in traditional areas with some exceptions. What I mean by that is heavy, automotive, diesel fitting, welding et cetera, but also at the higher degree level. That is not my particular area but I know that there is a huge shortage of mining engineers. We probably have a couple of hundred mining engineering students every year in the higher education space and they are snapped up. There is a distinct shortage of those.

In the mining space particularly, we have been focusing on looking at how our vocational programs can start to integrate automation because that is the reality of what is happening now at mines in our area, whether it is at Clermont, Dysart, Moranbah et cetera. We are running programs particularly in schools at certificate II level for what I call VET in Schools or Start TAFE Now. We have a new program that we have developed called Certificate II in Autonomous Technologies, which is aimed particularly at mining. It is sponsored by BMA and delivered by ourselves and TAFE Queensland.

Going to your particular question of whether we are training people who might assist those geologists et cetera: not particularly. We do not have a particular course that focuses on that.

**Mr O’ROURKE:** Peter, earlier we heard from Professor Billett who talked about the importance of making sure that training meets the local needs of the community. As CQUniversity is such a big organisation, I want to explore how your organisation is responding to local industry at the right time.

**Mr Heilbuth:** As I said earlier, it is a must in as much as vocational training is linked in so many ways to what is happening in industry. The course content is designed by industry. That is often misunderstood. People will say, 'Why is CQUni running that course? It doesn't suit us.' We are running a national training package that is developed nationally by industry. The requirement to work directly with industry is incredibly important. Do we always get it right? I do not think we do. However, there are huge connections into industry. We have something like 4,000 apprentices a year through CQUni. It is really high. Each one of those apprentices has an employer. They cannot have an apprenticeship without being employed, of course, as you would know. Therefore, we engage with those employers and those students directly.

More broadly, for example, with the programs that I just mentioned around new courses in automation in mining, those were developed directly with industry. Ourselves and TAFE Queensland are going to industry and saying, 'We know you want new courses in automation. We know the challenge of the training system is such that sometimes it is three or four years before you see a new course and by the time the new course comes on the technology has changed et cetera. So you tell us what training you want and we'll design it for you in a short period.' It is about a year to get new courses up and running, which is very quick in the training sphere.

**CHAIR:** Why is it easier to work with an industry directly, rather than in the broader sense where you are saying it will take three to four years?

**Mr Heilbuth:** This is the world according to Peter Heilbuth! The nature of the national training system is like most things. On the one hand, it is a fantastic mechanism and opportunity. On the other hand, it is an Achilles heel. When you are trying to design training that will be consistent across the whole of the country, across all of the different industries, across all of the subsectors within that industry and across all of the jobs within that industry, of necessity it becomes quite a large piece of work. You then obviously want input from all of the sectors and subsectors of the industry. Almost by default—leaving aside committees et cetera—it takes a while. In other programs, we have gone straight to industry ourselves as the training providers and said, 'We will work with you to get these courses through AQF where we need to and we do that quite quickly'—that is one of the differences.

**CHAIR:** One of the big challenges, by the sounds of it, is how you streamline and improve the ability and not reinvent the wheel.

**Mr Heilbuth:** Indeed.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** Having worked directly in the TAFE system and in the dual sector with CQU, are there pros and cons for working with a university?

**Mr Heilbuth:** There are obviously pros and cons of everything. The pluses of a dual-sector university—because it is not about me—include services that act as a one-stop shop for regional students, as opposed to 'Hang on, you want to do a certificate IV, no, go away, that is not us. Go down the road to the TAFE.' That does not happen in dual sector; it is a one-stop shop and vice versa. If you want to do a degree, generally speaking but not exclusively, TAFEs do not offer many degrees. Customer focus is the same point, I think. It removes that competition, particularly at the AQF 4 to 6 level, where both entities—TAFEs and higher education—play in that space. What I mean by that is certificate IV to diploma and either an associate degree or advanced diploma which are those AQF levels. There is a crossover. Both entities, universities and TAFE and VET, offer courses in that space and so you remove some of that competition.

There is a great opportunity for pathways in a dual sector, inasmuch as you do the certificate IV or this diploma and that gives you a year off your degree, if you are doing it in child care, for example—and vice versa. You finish your first year of your degree with us; that means you are entitled to exit at that point if you want to with a diploma or a certificate IV. You cannot obviously double dip from the funding, but from a student perspective that is incredibly attractive in some cases. Those are some of the real advantages.

**Mr DAMETTO:** My question is regarding the quality of apprentices in traditional trades. When I am talking to tradespeople who are working with some of these newly-fledged tradespeople as well as employers, they are more focused on the quality of the tradesperson they are getting as a whole. When I say quality, it applies to everything from their technical knowledge through to the attitude that they bring to the workplace. I see that you have very high rates of satisfaction within your programs. How are you achieving that satisfaction, and how are your programs run to ensure employers are satisfied with the training?

**Mr Heilbuth:** That is an interesting question, because an apprenticeship is a real partnership. It works well when all of the parties—the apprentice, the employer, the training organisation and indeed some of those other instrumentalities that help with the paperwork et cetera, which is

somewhat challenging—all work together. The average apprentice in their first year as a block might come to us as the training provider for eight to 12 weeks. It progressively narrows or becomes fewer weeks that they come off the job over the years.

The quality is as much about the employer's input, as it is about the training. I obviously represent the training aspect. We try not to cut corners. We try to retain a significant amount of training opportunity for our apprentices. We are quite traditional, but I would argue that that is not a bad thing.

**Mr DAMETTO:** No, not at all.

**Mr Heilbuth:** We still retain blocks. We still retain on-the-job and off-the-job training, in most cases. When we think about quality, in my experience it is often to do with the teacher. The individual teacher—whether they be a tradesperson training a first year plumber or somebody who is training a diploma of business—and their expertise, particularly if the teacher has come out of industry and has the industry knowledge and experience to share with their students, is often the difference in quality. To be fair, that can be the difference in quality from one organisation to the other, irrespective of the shingle above their door. I personally think a lot of it is to do with the teachers and how we support those teachers.

**Mr DAMETTO:** I completely agree. Coming from a fitter and boilermaker background, I like to think that once you become a tradesperson you join that fraternity. It is similar to, say, someone who wants to become a doctor.

**Mr Heilbuth:** Yes, indeed.

**Mr DAMETTO:** I hope that Queensland doctors would like to see other great Queensland doctors beside them, as well as in the electoral fraternity, the trade fraternity, or the fitting fraternity. I think that is very important.

**Mr Heilbuth:** Indeed. Some jurisdictions have master tradespeople. Germany is often put forward as an example. To your point, one of the things that we sometimes do at the TAFEs that I have worked at is on World Plumbing Day we make the connection of recognising and thanking our plumbers, because plumbing is a fundamental platform for good societal health, as we all know. We try and make that link to raise the profile. It is not just somebody digging a hole in your garden. This is somebody who is fundamentally important to the regional health and wellbeing of society.

**Mr DAMETTO:** I say this in jest, because I have a few plumber friends. They feel that it is plumber's day every day when they send an invoice!

**Mr Heilbuth:** No doubt.

**CHAIR:** I note that in the slide on the key trends, you talk about distance. The challenges are obvious, but what are the opportunities for improvement? Given you have had experience in both the Victorian system and the New South Wales system, are there any comparisons or opportunities that could be drawn from other jurisdictions?

**Mr Heilbuth:** Certainly. First of all, distance is not very far in Victoria when you come to Queensland, but I know the parochial amongst us would feel slightly happy about that, although that is a bit weird. Yes, distance is a perennial issue—it is costly. You often struggle to find expertise and teachers for example in a small town. Of necessity, you have to fly or usually drive people in, pay overnight for accommodation, pay for meals et cetera and truck things in and out. That is often the reality. Distance is usually linked with what we call thin markets, so you are often not going out to small towns to teach 20 people in a room, which may be financially challenging. You might start with 10 people and by the time you get to the end of the course there are six or seven left. It becomes quite challenging to make that work.

Obviously, there are issues with communication as well. Even today, we make assumptions, 'We will just put all the material online.' Then you go into some remote secondary schools and not all of the children have great internet access in those schools. Again, that is improving over time and it is far better than it was, but those are some of the key challenges. When you think about the value of putting people into a learning situation, whether that is online or in a traditional classroom, the value is often in the learning that those students will get from each other, in some cases as much as from the teacher or the educator. How do you put people ideally in front of those students? One option, obviously, is online. Teams and Zoom have revolutionised how distance education is seen. It is far more palatable these days as a result of COVID.

**CHAIR:** There has definitely been an improvement in terms of how you can deliver differently using technology.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Do you have a percentage of how many students would relocate to fulfil their study? When it comes to other regional areas in Queensland, do you encourage students to relocate to your four main campuses or do you try to use your smaller outreach campuses across Queensland to provide that training?

**Mr Heilbuth:** That is a good question. CQUniversity is in a very interesting position in that we are the TAFE in Central Queensland, yet everywhere else it is TAFE Queensland. We have worked really hard—and I particularly as well—to develop those relationships with TAFE Queensland because there is sometimes not a lot of point in saying to Susan or Dave, who live in Cairns, ‘No, come and study with us,’ when actually their local TAFE, this is TAFE Queensland, is literally just right next door to them. We work quite closely and we encourage people to access their local TAFE wherever possible. That is not to say that people do not relocate. Of course they do if there is a specialist area or specialist area of interest.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Are there a couple of specialist areas or niche areas because of the local industry that you think CQU provides that others do not?

**Mr Heilbuth:** I think it varies. In the higher education space, absolutely, but in the vocational space we deliver mostly the same sorts of courses that TAFE Queensland does. It is not as if we have one course that no-one else offers. That is a good place to be if you do have that area of specialisation, but we tend to be more generalist. I sometimes say we are a bit like the local IGA: you can come to us for a broad range of courses, but if you want something really specialist you may not find it on our shelf. You may have to go to another larger provider.

**Mr LISTER:** Where were you before your TAFE role? I see from your CV, and you mentioned, that you have been the head of a couple of different TAFEs. Where in Victoria was that?

**Mr Heilbuth:** One was East Gippsland, the next was south-west Victoria out of Warrnambool, Portland, Hamilton and then more recently TAFE New England, which is Armidale, Tamworth, Moree et cetera. A lot of those TAFEs have changed their names and in some cases been amalgamated into bigger entities.

**Mr LISTER:** I recall the Chisholm Institute of TAFE. I am a former Air Force officer, and lot of the catering training for the ADF was outsourced to Chisholm. I just wondered if you had any exposure there.

**Mr Heilbuth:** I was in Victoria for 20-odd years working in TAFE—starting as a casual teacher. I certainly worked with Chisholm. They are a well-known and well-established entity, yes.

**CHAIR:** We know how important the relationship is between our secondary schools in terms of their connections, whether that be taking a VET pathway or a university pathway. You mention here that CQU and the VET in schools is delivering for 110 secondary schools, which is a large number. What does that process look like? What is engagement between Gladstone State High School or Rocky state high and CQU? What does that look like?

**Mr Heilbuth:** It is one of a couple of different options. In some cases schools are their own registered training organisations. These days not as many because there are quite a lot of compliance, quality and other requirements that go along with being an RTO—for good reason. I think somebody mentioned earlier there are dodgy brothers or dodgy sisters RTOs. As governments of various persuasions have tried to tackle that, it has meant that some of the compliance levels and quality levels have grown. It is difficult sometimes for a secondary school to do their core business as well as be an RTO, so they will often subcontract to us. That can take the form of ‘come and deliver training to our students in our schools or on your campuses’. For traditional trades, for example, it is often on our campuses because we have better facilities. In other areas, often teachers will go to the school and train there. Another option that is quite popular is what we would call a third party or auspice agreement, where the school’s teachers teach the certificate II in whatever it is—certificate II in animal studies, for example, or certificate II in business—and we are the auspicing RTOs, so we maintain responsibility and oversight of the quality, the compliance, making sure that the teachers have the right tickets and certificates to teach. It could be any one of those arrangements that covers those 110 schools.

**CHAIR:** I am particularly interested in renewables and hydrogen, which is obviously a very big opportunity, particularly in Central Queensland. In terms of the training provision for that, where are CQU and TAFE placed in terms of what you are thinking about in terms of delivering in that space?

**Mr Heilbuth:** We are working hard with industry and a range of government and large players particularly in the CQ Gladstone region. It is obviously a particular focus as a hydrogen hub. In the vocational space we are about to roll out a pilot hydrogen introduction course which is what we call a Brisbane

microcredential. It is for people who go, 'I've heard about this hydrogen thing.' Obviously they might know that hydrogen is a gas, but what is it used for? What are the different methods of production et cetera? It is an introductory course.

**CHAIR:** How long does the introductory course take?

**Mr Heilbuth:** The one we are offering is about four hours. It obviously touches on a whole range of things, but you would not expect to be playing around with hydrogen at the end of it. It is introductory. There are obviously significant safety issues with hydrogen as well, as a gas, as the *Hindenburg* would attest. Beyond that there are a range of units that are being developed for existing training packages. For example, in the plumbing area there is an acknowledgment that there needs to be different standards and different approaches for pipes and the transmission of hydrogen. I am no expert, but I gather it leaks easily. You cannot just bung together a couple of pieces of plastic with some duct tape—not that any plumber would do that. There are those sorts of realities we are looking at. As those units are developed nationally we will start to offer them.

Beyond that there are obviously opportunities in terms of research for hydrogen. We are trying to position our new centre in Gladstone such that it is not just a training facility but also a facility for industry to come and test out new equipment, as they develop a new electrolyser. There are some major players who want to position themselves in Gladstone to either produce hydrogen or produce electrolyzers, for example. No doubt you are aware of who they all are. We are working directly, CQUni, with those people to say, 'Have we got a facility for you!' That is the plan. We think we are pretty well placed.

**CHAIR:** That was very helpful. Thank you very much for your time today. We are very grateful for that contribution. That concludes our briefing today. Thank you to everybody who has participated. Thank you to our Hansard reporters and secretariat. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. There were no questions taken on notice today. I now declare this public hearing closed.

**The committee adjourned at 11.50 am.**