



ECONOMICS AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr LP Power MP (Chair)
Mr RA Stevens MP (via teleconference)
Mr ST O'Connor MP
Mr TR Watts MP (via videoconference)
Ms KE Richards MP (via teleconference)
Mr LR McCallum MP

Staff present:

Ms L Manderson (Committee Secretary)
Mr J Gilchrist (Assistant Committee Secretary)

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO THE QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC RESPONSE TO COVID-19

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

MONDAY, 17 AUGUST 2020

Brisbane

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The committee met at 10.20 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare this public hearing open. Today’s proceedings are being conducted using videoconference facilities so I ask all participants and anyone watching the live broadcast to please bear with us if we encounter any technical issues. I would like to begin today’s proceedings by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we participate today and pay my respects to elders past and present. My name is Linus Power, the member for Logan and chair of the committee. The other members of the committee are: Ray Stevens MP, the member for Mermaid Beach and the deputy chair, joining us on the telephone; Lance McCallum MP, the member for Bundamba; Trevor Watts MP, the member for Toowoomba North, who is also on the phone; Sam O’Connor MP, the member for Bonney; and Kim Richards MP, the member for Redlands, who is also joining us on the phone.

The purpose of today’s hearing is to assist the committee with its inquiry into the Queensland government’s economic response to COVID-19. The hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the standing rules and orders of the parliament. It is being recorded and broadcast live on the parliament’s website. Provided you are not joining us via videoconference on your mobile, I ask all those participants to please turn off mobile phones or switch them to silent and also place microphones on mute unless you are speaking. That will help us as much as possible prevent audio interference and background noise.

ANDERSON, Mr Scott, Chair, Townsville Region Indigenous Business Network (via teleconference)

PIPER, Mr Terry, Chief Operating Officer, Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation Pty Ltd (via videoconference)

WATEGO, Ms Leesa, President, South East Queensland Indigenous Chamber of Commerce (via videoconference)

CHAIR: I welcome our first witnesses to today’s hearing. In view of today’s hearing being broadcast via videoconference, please, if you can, announce your name before speaking and please identify yourself when speaking to a question that was addressed to others. Committee members will also be endeavouring to ensure they clearly identify themselves when asking a question to minimise any confusion for any members of the watching public and also to assist Hansard in their transcription of proceedings. I now invite you to make an opening statement. Afterwards committee members will have some questions for you. We might start with Leesa, followed by Terry and we will see when we can fit in Scott. Leesa, if you would like to begin.

Ms Watego: Thank you. I am the president of the South East Queensland Indigenous Chamber of Commerce, sometimes I refer to it as the SEQICC, co-founder of the national Black Coffee networking group, co-founder of Indigenous Business Month, a member since its inception of the Queensland government’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Business and Innovation Reference Group and owner and managing director of Iscariot Media. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the regions we are in today. I am on Ngaro country here in the Whitsundays and I acknowledge the unseated sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the state. I also acknowledge all the health workers across the state and country, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who have played a key role in keeping our communities safe and healthy. Thank you for having me.

Firstly, I would like to talk about context—where are we now and what do we know. While there are approximately 3,000 Indigenous people who are ABN holders in Queensland, there are approximately 540 Queensland Indigenous businesses registered or certified with Supply Nation. At different times in South-East Queensland we have had up to about 150 active members of SEQICC. We know the majority of Queensland Indigenous businesses are located in South-East Queensland where there is also the largest Indigenous population, though Indigenous businesses are in every corner and region of the state. We also know that Indigenous businesses span every industry, are in Brisbane

all different stages of business, from start-up through to growth and exit, and are of varying sizes from nano through to SMEs. We also know that there is no independent, community controlled organisation resourced to support Indigenous business in Queensland. The organisations we have are volunteer run and volunteer led. We also know that there are four or five Queensland government departments that play a role in Indigenous business and this can be very confusing for ordinary business owners. This includes DATSIP, a traditionally social policy focused department that was given responsibility for the QIPP, the Queensland Indigenous Procurement policy; DESBT has, I think, now ended; Advancing Indigenous Business Program; OCAP, the Office of the Chief Advisor Procurement in HPW; and the Department of State Development, Tourism and Innovation which has the Deadly Innovation Strategy.

How effective has Queensland been in addressing the needs of Indigenous business through the pandemic? In mid March the Victorian Indigenous Chamber of Commerce, Kinaway, began calling all their members. Their organisation is fully funded by the Victorian government. This enabled Kinaway to gather information about their members’ experience to publish the report, the Kinaway economic conditions report, in late April and allowed them a say in policy discussions. Were we able to do the same in Queensland? No. Again there is no independent community controlled organisation resourced to support Indigenous business in Queensland. Queensland’s response has been from our volunteers in the community and was limited to Facebook groups. Our community was sharing information and resources as the crisis was evolving. It was not until the Department of State Development, Tourism and Innovation launched the Indigenous business to business support hotline that a discrete program to address the needs of the Indigenous business sector in Queensland was created. To my knowledge this is the only dedicated program for our sector and I am happy to take questions on this program.

Are our businesses accessing programs? The ABS tells us that 59 per cent of Australian businesses generally earn less than \$200,000 per annum. As an emerging sector anecdotally we know that an even greater proportion of Indigenous businesses are micro and nano businesses and what this means is that there are very few federal and state government COVID initiatives that applied to any of our businesses.

Finally, I would like to address the opportunities moving forward and how we can prepare for the next crisis. We can support community controlled and community-led Indigenous business sector organisations. The 2018-21 Reconciliation Action Plan, section 1.2 point 5 states that it will, ‘Engage with Queensland’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Chambers of Commerce and local business networks to determine appropriate support and assistance measures’. To my knowledge, and despite our best efforts both here in South-East Queensland and also in the north, we have not received this commitment outlined in the government’s own RAP. A coordinated approach to Indigenous business sector growth in partnership with Queensland government is essential for us to rebuild and to face the next crisis. We can reduce the inconsistency and duplication. The procurement advisory note released by OCAP on 9 June this year demonstrates a significant duplication and inconsistency in the way that Indigenous businesses are found or located in Queensland. This has been an ongoing discussion and is yet to be resolved. For our businesses to be able to rebound quickly they need to be found quickly. There is also significant inconsistency in the way that QIPP outcomes are recorded with Indigenous councils and grant expenditure recorded as business spend.

There are many fine people in the Queensland government. A global pandemic was something that we were not expecting and we fully appreciate how we are all working together but outside our comfort zones. However, if our sector, a community controlled sector, had been supported we would have been able to respond more effectively to this crisis. I am hoping that this inquiry and other reflections in the coming 12 to 18 months will see more targeted, meaningful support so that we are better prepared for the next crisis. Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

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Mr Piper: Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation has been in existence for probably getting on towards 25 years now. We are an economic development corporation that supports Cape York. We have quite a lot to do with business support on Cape York. A lot of our work is in a transition between getting land back—we work to get land back for traditional owners—and then work with traditional owners supporting them on how they develop economic enterprise and business opportunities on their land.

I must say that the whole area of economic development for Indigenous people on Cape York has been lacking government support. The priority of government often seems to be to lock Cape York up rather than support Indigenous people in economic enterprise. Our particular focus is on finding real jobs and developing a real economy on Cape York that can support Indigenous people to move from welfare to work. It is very difficult to do that unless you have real jobs. We see that there

needs to be a diversified economy on Cape York. We recognise there are natural values on Cape York that need to be protected, and there are jobs and worthwhile work in that. There is also carbon that is happening on Cape York, and that is good, but it is also important to support the pastoral industry, the mining industry, the fishing industry and that diversity of interest on Cape York.

I would very much like to support what Leesa said. We found a real lack of coordination across government in government support and a recognition that economic development on Cape York is a long haul matter. We are working on investment ready tenure areas. To build economic development you have to mediate within groups, you need to do native title agreements, you need to get water resources, water outcomes, vegetation clearing permits and all those kinds of things that build to somebody being able to conduct an economic enterprise on their land. It is not something that can be done by short-term ad hoc consultants coming in, and generally it is not something that government can do either. We see Balkanu as that independent support that helps people through this.

We are also an advocacy organisation. We have suffered at times as a result of being an advocacy organisation. We were funded by the Queensland government many years ago for business hubs on Cape York, and that funding was removed when we objected to the wild rivers declaration. There is this lack of consistency as we go forward on Cape York. It is one of those things where we suffer a lot because of what happens in South-East Queensland when the policies that are developed in South-East Queensland are applied to Cape York. This morning on the news I saw that the Premier is looking at supporting a type of Bradfield scheme, which is good. On the other hand, it brings trepidation to us up here because it means there will be pressure from the conservation movement to balance the scales and lock up areas of Cape York. What we need to be doing is looking at how we can deliver jobs for people on Cape York.

The economic impacts of COVID will be felt strongly on Cape York. Luckily, there are some sectors that have continued. Mining has continued, but the Indigenous people who have been involved in tourism or fishing, for example, have been heavily hit by COVID. We supported the Queensland government in locking Cape York up to protect people on the cape from COVID because the communities on the cape are very vulnerable to the impacts of COVID, but we need to be looking at how we support businesses on Cape York going forward and how we develop the broader economic context on Cape York where people can get jobs and where there is a real and diverse economy.

Mr Anderson: I am the chair of the Townsville Region Indigenous Business Network. I am also a business owner—the managing director of Synergy Facility Services, which is an electrical and HVAC company. I also work as a manager and consultant employed by IPS Manager Consultants, which is an Indigenous owned and controlled management (portion of audio missing) consultancy business based out of (inaudible) New South Wales. Through everything we do and with all of the various hats that we wear we have a really good understanding of what is happening within the Indigenous business sector. I want to acknowledge Leesa’s comments, and I really thank her for that level of depth in her analysis. I would like to provide some supporting comments and information around that and particularly just really concur with everything that she has said but also outline the impacts for us here in North Queensland.

The further you go out of South-East Queensland, the more difficult it is to get access to good and relevant information and programs and the eligibility to impact and impart change for our business owners in our network, of which there are around about 60 individual businesses at this stage across a whole range of industries at all different levels of maturity. It is really difficult to get that coordination. We also know there has been significant investment right across the country—not just Queensland—around growing the Indigenous business sector. This has been going on for a long period of time and has predominantly been driven by government, both at the federal and state level. Now we see more and more that local governments are also getting on board. They have an appetite for growing their representation and the number of Indigenous businesses they represent as well.

When we look at what is happening in Queensland and what is happening in other states, Queensland is a long way away from things that are happening in other states. I particularly want to highlight the Victorian example and also the New South Wales example around the work they are doing. I am not too sure around what happens in New South Wales, how they are funded or operated, but it has brought to light the fact that we do not have a community owned and controlled representative body representing the significant industries and sector here in Queensland. I also want to raise other concerns and issues around traditional owner led businesses and opportunities that are there. There are often conflicts around state governments in terms of getting opportunities. Certainly, the issue around water, access to country and particularly where there are national parks—I am
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talking about where native title has been determined—is still very problematic, and it is again because there is no consistent approach. There are government agencies that have all had their own agenda, and there seems to be a lack of cohesiveness to support that business sector. The investment that has gone into the Indigenous business sector over the last five years at least has been significant.

The issue that we find with COVID is that, if we are not responsive to it, all of this hard work and everything that has gone into the Indigenous business sector growing and developing to the stage that it has—you just need to read some of the reports coming out of Supply Nation that indicate the effectiveness of the Indigenous business sector—we are at real risk of losing and losing all of that impact. What we do know is that obviously Indigenous businesses are more likely to employ our own mob, so it is much more than just procurement. It is social economics, it is about working with mob and family and traditional owners and maximising those opportunities. As I said, as a result of COVID the Indigenous business sector is more at risk. We talk about a lot of the closing the gap targets, but we are more at risk of falling further and further behind not just from an economic perspective but from a social and community perspective as well. I think that is probably the main focus that I would like to place on this today.

My role within IPS Management Consultants is that we are actually delivering the federal government’s COVID business package on behalf of IBA, and what we are finding through that process is that there is still a lack of information, a lack of coordination of Indigenous businesses even accessing that program. We know there are hundreds of businesses still to come through the process, and they are all at differing stages of maturity to access some of those programs. It is great having programs and facilities available for Indigenous businesses, but we must be able to access those. Indigenous businesses suffer as much as mainstream businesses through lack of information or lack of expertise. As a small business owner, you have to have literacy in legal, financial, commerce and marketing matters. They are the types of areas that particularly our nano businesses and our small to medium businesses can often struggle in. There is a real risk that through COVID we will lose a greater percentage of businesses that will just not recover and recoup and find a way to move forward. That is where I think we really need to focus, but also to have a representative body—a community owned and controlled governing body—that can really manage that process as well.

We know that our mob look to us for leadership. We know that our mob gets confused by mainstream government programs and activities, and I know that a lot of the COVID packages, particularly from the state government, were highly subscribed and a lot of our mob missed out. That is just the nature of the beast, but we need to support them. We need to continue to come together and we need to find a way to ensure that we regain and certainly do not go backwards in terms of the growth of the Indigenous business sector.

CHAIR: Thank you for your overview. We will now turn to questions.

Mr STEVENS: My question really is to the panel as a whole or to whomever wants to answer. How would they assess the assistance—because this is an inquiry into the Queensland government’s economic response—the Queensland government has provided to businesses and organisations as part of the economic response to COVID-19, and have they had any feedback from their regions on the uptake of measures such as payroll tax, grants or interest-free loans? Is there any other assistance that could have been provided or where they would like to have seen that assistance offered?

Ms Watego: In terms of initiatives like payroll tax and a number of the DESBT programs, the issue is that you do not have employees—and you probably do not if you are a nano or micro business—you are not going to be able to access it, so it is about eligibility. I said in my remarks that most of our businesses are nano and micro businesses. If our businesses are ineligible for the programs, we actually cannot apply for them. If our businesses are too small to apply for them, then we are not going to be eligible. They are the kinds of things that make it difficult. The adaptation programs that were developed were fine. I was lucky: I will declare that my business, Iscariot Media, won the opportunity to deliver the Open for Business support hotline, so we were able to find out about every single program that was available. We have spoken to over 600 Indigenous businesses across Queensland. The issue is that they are just not eligible for those programs.

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We did a lot of work around sharing information around COVID-safe work practices. That was huge. It has become normalised now. I feel like there was definitely a wave of requirements as people were coming through the last—let’s assume that we are not going to have another wave—that this is it. There was definitely a wave of need. In the beginning it was a high-stress emergency situation. Now I feel like the conversations that we are having are really about how do I activate and how do I get going? Some of those digital adaptation opportunities would have been fantastic. Our businesses simply were not eligible for them.

Mr Anderson: I certainly agree with what Leesa has presented. I think there was a failure and a lacking from the state government to not specifically target Indigenous businesses. That was probably the only way we would get higher representation in terms of access to those support programs. Whilst there were mainstream programs—again that was great. If our mob were eligible, they certainly tried. As I mentioned, by the time a lot of our mob got around to applying the quota had already been taken up.

I think we really need to look seriously at how from a state government perspective we can continue to support the Indigenous business sector. Every little bit of literature that comes out of state government will indicate the importance of the Indigenous business sector, but that does not line up to the programs and activities. I think through the COVID package that was certainly lacking.

Again, I acknowledge the federal government’s package. They came up with \$100 million specifically for Indigenous businesses. They are being taken up. That support is getting to Indigenous businesses. Queensland businesses will be accessing that, but this is about the response from the Queensland government. If we are ultimately serious, and we should be—again, every little bit of policy and every little bit of legislation that comes from the state government would indicate that—I feel that the programs, particularly around COVID, fell short in that regard.

CHAIR: Our responsibility as a committee is to look at both the Queensland government’s economic response and the federal government’s economic response when it comes to Queensland. What I am reading was last updated on 8 May—

Indigenous Business Australia set up with a series of grants for \$100,000 for information and funding.

Given that that is already in place, firstly, how is it going and what would the Queensland government add to that specifically that the federal government is not doing? Scott, you made reference to it. Given that it is in place, firstly, how is it going and, secondly, what would be the benefit of a secondary program by the Queensland government specifically? What is missed by that program?

Mr Anderson: In terms of the IBA product, it is capital investment into an Indigenous business up to \$100,000—50 per cent of that will come as a grant and 50 per cent of that will come through as a loan. Loans, if they are drawn down, will be suspended for 12 months—interest and repayments will be suspended for 12 months. It is really about getting capital into those businesses.

Other states have had similar programs to Queensland. What we have found when dealing with those businesses from other states is exactly the same as what has happened in Queensland—they are missing out. Our Indigenous businesses are missing out because they are not quick enough. They are not nimble enough to get activated. They are not nimble enough to provide the relevant level of information in the application. When applications are called for, we have to be able to respond but we also have to have access to that information and just know that these programs are available, so we miss those opportunities.

I am not necessarily saying that there is a gap in terms of what has happened between the state and federal level. As Indigenous businesses we miss those opportunities if they are not targeted specifically to Indigenous businesses. Our mob, for whatever reason—right or wrong—generally tend to not look at those mainstream programs. We also know that there are a lot of Queensland and federal government programs out at the moment that our Indigenous businesses just will not access. There is an issue around cultural appropriateness. There is an issue around the ability for our businesses to have a comfort level with those types of programs. There probably needs to be some work done around that.

Generally speaking, outside of COVID, the state government in particular has always had an interest in providing funding as a fifty-fifty arrangement. You as an Indigenous business, or as a business—because they are generally not Indigenous specific programs—will come up with 50 per cent and then the state will provide the other 50 per cent. Often as nano and small businesses our mob will not have the capacity to come up with that level of cash to be able to access the programs.

I think a real philosophical change needs to happen in the way that state governments, particularly if we are saying we need the Indigenous business sector and particularly if we acknowledge that Indigenous businesses are generally behind the mainstream business sector nationally or globally—however you may want to look at that. We generally tend to limit Indigenous businesses’ uptake to those types of programs. From a Treasury perspective, it does not make a difference to Treasury if they are releasing \$10,000 to a business regardless of whether that business puts in \$10,000 or not. Really it should be around how do we maximum uptake, how do we continue to support, how do we ensure that we get the right level of support to our Indigenous businesses?

Recently—it was not recently; it was some time last year—the implementation of the Queensland Indigenous procurement policy was reviewed. Again, we had a lot of input and participation from Indigenous businesses as business networks and chambers of commerce. We had direct input into that process, but the findings were not released. We raised these types of issues back then as well. I have been advised that those findings will not be released. I do not know the reasons why. Again, we are in a situation where we are trying to get the right level of support—when I say ‘we’ I mean as business advocates, as business networks, as chambers of commerce—to our Indigenous businesses, but we still have not an able to maximise those opportunities as yet.

CHAIR: Leesa, do you want to add anything to that?

Ms Watego: Yes. What could we do that we have not done? I think one of the issues with the IBA opportunity, as great as it was, is the degree of documentation required. Scott might be very deadly, but the documentation inhibits people applying. Sometimes all people needed was a \$10,000 project to get their website up and running. Sometimes either you are not eligible for the programs or the required amount of documentation is so phenomenal that it makes it really difficult to apply.

Another program was announced late July by First Australians Capital. They are a philanthropic organisation that had developed a support package. They are starting to roll out those packages as well. It is the barrier to entry to the program. With IBA, yes, there was a registration form but then the list of documents that you needed to provide was just incredible. Even people who are experienced with their finances struggled with it—it was so massive. Whereas the First Australians Capital support package, which is much smaller obviously and is based on philanthropic support, is very simple and very easy to use and much more manageable for people.

I think Scott’s point about the fifty-fifty grants—the normal DESBT grants, which are the fifty-fifty digital grants and those kinds of packages—can be prohibitive for many of our business owners. One of the problems with the fifty-fifty is that you have to pay your 50 per cent and then you get your 50 per cent back. You are out of pocket. It may take you two or three months for that project to be finished. That is my response.

Mr Anderson: You are 100 per cent right, Leesa. The other component of the IBA package was outside of the grant loan component. They did provide business support and a lot of the things that we were saying, but again you had to get through the process. We were saying to those businesses—and they were well-established businesses right across the country, and Queensland is no different—we are providing a level of recommendation around business support. It could be as simple as your website or your strategic plan or whatever it was. We had an opportunity to work closely with them.

We have had a first wave of businesses come through. Obviously they were the ones who were able to respond to the package. There will be a second wave coming through. What we do know from IBA is that there are literally hundreds that are still waiting. When I say ‘hundreds’, based on some information that we have received from IBA, there are a minimum of 300 businesses that are still waiting to get through the next phase. Some of them are also ones that struggle to get all of the relevant documentation together.

Again, we have to acknowledge that we need to provide that level of support to our mob to get them to where they need to be. Whilst they have been operating for a number of years, our mob will continue to struggle around those four areas of business literacy. The biggest one is financial literacy, being able to respond in the most appropriate and effective way without having to outsource that because outsourcing costs.

They are the things that we will need to continue to focus on. With this next phase, we believe that we will also need to work with a number of businesses to get that level of information from them before they can even get through the application stage. That is some further insight around that level of work we are doing.

CHAIR: Terry, did you want to add something?

Mr Piper: At Balkanu we focus on Cape York. We pretty well know all of the Indigenous businesses on Cape York. We have been engaged with those businesses for many years. We know those people who are interested in developing businesses. We can provide that kind of support to businesses that are wanting to apply for funding. We are a resource that is not used by government in that respect. Government tends to have consultants come in to do that work who do not actually know the businesses, who do not know the backgrounds, who do not know the people and who do not know the context on Cape York. There is quite a lot of investment from government into its own departments and the people who come and go there and into consultants who come and go from Brisbane

Cape York, rather than investment in those organisations that are in it for the long haul, that know all of these people, that work with them and that are in a position to help them apply for funding and to help them get over their issues of not having time or needing to pull documents together.

Mr McCALLUM: I want to follow on from the comments around the bureaucratic paperwork with IBA, which I take to mean Indigenous Business Australia—and that is a perfect segue to my question. One of the things that this inquiry is also looking at is federal government programs and their response to COVID. How has JobKeeper and JobSeeker impacted businesses in your organisation?

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Ms Watego: In the conversations that we have had with Indigenous businesses over the last 12 weeks as part of the hotline many of the businesses, as they are not employers, did not necessarily qualify for JobKeeper but JobSeeker was certainly valuable. Many businesses were going into hibernation, particularly the tourism businesses and those that relied on visitors, so a lot of them were accessing JobSeeker. I think we have had a lot of conversations that are highlighting that people are stressed about the reduction in JobSeeker after September and that kind of thing. JobSeeker allowed people an opportunity to really survive. They may not necessarily have been working because their clientele may not have been there, but a number of businesses were able to use this period over the last couple of months to think about their business and what they want to do. It gave them space to be able to adapt or pivot if they needed to. I think JobSeeker was incredibly valuable, and the response I have had is that they do not know what they would have done without it. It was the life raft that kept everything going, but people are concerned that JobSeeker may be cut in a few months and life is not necessarily back to normal. I think JobSeeker was absolutely a lifesaver for people, and that is certainly the response that I have been getting.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your participation today. Given the time allotted has expired, we will finish this session. Thank you for your submissions. If anyone wishes to make any further supplementary submissions—as we know, this is changing very quickly—we would appreciate it.

DAVIS, Dr Georgina, Chief Executive Officer, Queensland Farmers’ Federation (via teleconference)

GUERIN, Mr Michael, Chief Executive Officer, AgForce (via videoconference)

MILLER, Dr Dale, General Manager, Policy, AgForce (via videoconference)

PARKER, Mr Cam, Grains Policy Director, AgForce (via videoconference)

SHANNON, Mr Richard, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Growcom (via videoconference)

CHAIR: Good morning. I welcome our next panel of witnesses from AgForce, Growcom and the Queensland Farmers’ Federation. I now invite you to make an opening statement, after which committee members will have some questions for you. We might start with AgForce, followed by Mr Shannon and Dr Davis.

Mr Guerin: We would firstly like to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear today to provide our perspectives on the state government’s response to the challenging circumstances that COVID-19 has brought to the nation, to Queensland and to broadacre industries. By way of introduction, AgForce is the peak organisation representing Queensland’s cane, cattle, grain, sheep and wool producers. The cane, beef, grain, sheep and wool industries in Queensland generated around \$7.3 billion in on-farm value of production for the 2018-19 year. Our purpose at AgForce is to advance sustainable agribusiness, and we strive to ensure the long-term growth, viability, competitiveness and profitability of these industries.

In comparison to other sectors such as tourism and food retail, broadacre agriculture has been relatively less impacted by COVID-19 to date, noting that the current and final cost is yet to be calculated and there are significant concerns about the current much harder border closure and a repeat of limited proactive consultation before it. Despite this and the ongoing severe drought, our sector is in a reasonable position to help act as a base for the economic recovery task in front of Queensland. With supportive government policies in place, we will be able to do so much more effectively.

As all stakeholders seek to understand and respond to this unprecedented challenge, we would like to acknowledge the state government’s efforts to engage with agricultural stakeholders and provide information, particularly by Minister Furner and his department. Good proactive communication is vital for AgForce to keep our members well informed. A positive was the response to industry’s calls to be designated as an essential service provider which has greatly helped minimise the impacts of movement controls on our supply chains, noting significant disruptions to some of them such as labour and machinery parts suppliers that resulted in production loss, particularly for our cane members. As existing stockpiles wind down and international supply chain disruption continues, these impacts are likely to continue. Despite this, agriculture seeks to reliably continue to supply our customers and consumers with high-quality and, importantly, safe food and fibre products. The sight of empty supermarket shelves during the first wave highlighted the importance of agriculture and we are happy to be able to support urban communities that continue to support the bush through drought and other natural disasters.

We have had representation on the Premier’s Industry Recovery Alliance which has enabled us to have input into the economic response strategy at the highest levels and in the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries’s agricultural coordination group and supporting subgroups. We welcome the strategy’s focus on the need to create jobs, stimulate regional economies and improve agricultural productivity. In these conversations AgForce has promoted a five-point COVID-19 recovery strategy which includes, very quickly, bringing forward investment into critical regional infrastructure, bringing forward investments in irrigation and town water supply projects, investing in state land management and maintenance, maintaining and improving our market opportunities, and creating a practical, secure natural capital marketplace.

Consistent with these requests, we welcome the investments within the state government’s economic recovery strategy including the focus on building infrastructure, such as the \$5 million for cluster fencing, which promotes jobs in regional Queensland and revitalises our sheep industry. We also have welcomed the \$12.5 million stage 2 investment as part of the Strengthening Queensland’s Agribusiness and Food Sector plan aimed at continuing trade relationships, digital transformation of Brisbane

supply chains and \$2 million for agribusiness diversification assistance beyond COVID. We see that investment as a first tranche in supporting our sector help the economic recovery and look forward to further investments into agriculture and ideally in further supporting our five-point plan initiatives.

The department is currently working on rolling these initiatives out. AgForce is keen to ensure that announced supports by government actually deliver the outcomes promised and that benefits are sustained—for example, in consistent support across government for the ethanol-producing Dalby biorefinery, a vital market for Queensland’s sorghum growers. There have also been some bumps along the way in the government’s charting a pathway through COVID. These have largely been associated with the need for fast response times to emerging public health risks and have included initially inadequate exemptions for agricultural businesses and slow information flows. This has included the need to negotiate exemptions or relaxations to public health directives after the event rather than proactively—for example, the closure of firearms dealerships which had the potential to impact on farmers’ control of pest animals and the humane destruction of sick or injured animals; the need to negotiate access for primary producers with property and operations on both sides of the New South Wales border in both the first and now the second closure; and now again working through the current much more stringent border restrictions to clarify restrictions on the movement of ag workers—for example, including enabling vital contract harvesting teams to travel into Queensland to support the winter crop harvest.

The changes that COVID has brought about are an opportunity to increase investment in regional employment and should definitely not be seen as an opportunity to bring about a reduction in government service delivery in regional centres. We are also raising with the state government the opportunity to deliver a competitive regulatory environment through further streamlining of regulation so that our industries can get on with the job of supporting the economy while ensuring environmentally sustainable outcomes are achieved. Significant examples include the reform of the Vegetation Management Act to enable high-value developments to occur as well as taking a stronger partnership approach to reef regulation.

In closing, given the unprecedented nature of the challenge and the uncertainty around how the future will unfold, AgForce stands ready to work with the government to support our sector to do some of the heavy lifting required to grow employment, continue essential economic activity and safely and reliably feed our population. We are happy to take questions and welcome the chance to be involved this morning. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. I now turn to Growcom and Mr Shannon.

Mr Shannon: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the rest of the committee for your time this morning and the opportunity to appear before you. As AgForce has noted, this is a particularly pertinent time to conduct an inquiry into the matter of how Queensland is responding economically to COVID. I appear before you on behalf of Growcom and also more broadly on behalf of the Queensland horticulture industry, an industry that contributes around \$3 billion annually to the Queensland economy. We are Queensland’s second largest agricultural sector and the fastest growing of those sectors. We also employ a large number of people in rural and regional Queensland and, as such, many rural communities are in large part dependent upon the success of our industry.

I might just take you through a few opening statements in this particular order. I want to highlight some of the impacts that COVID has had on our industry firstly. I want to then talk a bit about Growcom’s interaction with government through this event. Then I will finish on a few of the opportunities that we feel are available to Queensland horticulture and also to the Queensland economy more broadly as a result of COVID that we should be capitalising on.

In terms of the impacts initially on our industry, those impacts were quite severe. We had the immediate closure almost of the food service market. Those markets are really important to our industry and comprise anywhere between 20 per cent and 30 per cent of the market for our produce—that is, restaurants and cafes closing, conferences and cruises cancelled. That had an immediate impact on many of our growers. As an example, let us take limes. Far fewer limes were being muddled in bars. As another example, think of the melon industry. How many times would you go on a cruise or a conference and find a platter of melons as part of morning or afternoon tea? All of that trade immediately closed and so the impact on our industry was significant and right up-front.

On top of this, the closure of international borders had an immediate impact on our export trade. Most of our perishable goods are freighted overseas as cargo on passenger aircraft, which might be something that the committee is unaware of. The almost immediate closure or cessation of a large amount of passenger traffic obviously reduced dramatically the amount of space available to

our industry to send our produce overseas without any alternative option. Obviously the federal government has stepped in there with some subsidisation of that, but that was another significant impact.

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The third impact on our industry is one that is continuing to evolve, that is, access to a secure pool of labour. Initially, obviously along with the reduction in air traffic, passengers and tourists into our country, we anticipated a significant drop in the number of, for example, backpackers that were available. We rely on that particular cohort to harvest our crops, so we anticipated a shortage. Then as other parts of the economy also shut down, like hospitality and tourism, where a number of those backpackers are employed, we experienced a bit of a glut of workers. A number of backpackers were turning up on farms speculatively looking for work, because they had lost their jobs in other urban centres. In terms of this labour issue, preliminary analysis suggests that there will be shortages of workers in Queensland over the next six, nine or 12 months. This is real concern for our industry and something we need to address very quickly. We need some solutions on the table. Those have been the impacts.

In terms of our engagement with government, it has been fantastic. I support some of the comments made initially by AgForce. Our engagement with the department of agriculture in particular has been fantastic. They have been an excellent conduit to other parts of government, including Queensland Health, which has been great. The horticulture industry by its own initiative has set up a recurring weekly and now fortnightly briefing. The department of agriculture has routinely presented in great detail to that group and kept our industry across all of the changes have been happening over time. That has been greatly appreciated. We also appreciate the upcoming investment of \$12½ million in agriculture. I think that is also a fantastic opportunity. We need to make the most of that money and put it to good use. Some \$12½ million will not go a long way. We need to invest in solutions that will return to the Queensland taxpayer, the Queensland resident, as much value as we possibly can. That is a process that Growcom is actively engaging with the department of agriculture on as well.

Lastly, in terms of some of the opportunities, we need to make the most of that \$12½ million. There are other changes in consumer preference that we need to capitalise on. We have seen consumers look more for local food and food directly from the farmer as a result of COVID. This is a really important change in the market. It has accelerated those consumer preferences. The perspective of the Queensland horticulture industry is that we need to capitalise on that change and movement. We need to look at more localised and more decentralised supply chains that connect growers more directly with consumers. This will have the added bonus of improving margins for growers and also possibly reducing prices for consumers at the same time. This is an important initiative. We anticipate that there will be increased unemployment in Queensland over the next 12 months and longer.

Food is an essential part of the picture. At this particular time, we need Queenslanders to be eating more fresh fruits, vegetables and nuts. There is a direct link between the consumption of fresh fruits, vegetables and nuts and improved wellbeing, in particular improved immunity. Any particular initiative that the Queensland government can deliver that puts more fresh produce on Queenslanders’ tables during this time will be a good thing. This is a real opportunity that we need to capitalise on. Those are my opening statements. I welcome questions later on.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. We now turn to the Queensland Farmers’ Federation.

Dr Davis: Good morning. Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to speak today. Apologies that my video is suffering some technical issues. I will not dwell on some of the risks and opportunities that have already been identified by my colleagues at Growcom and AgForce. For background, Queensland Farmers’ Federation is essentially the united voice of the intensive and irrigated agricultural community here in Queensland. We represent 21 peak state and national agriculture organisations that collectively, in turn, represent around 14,000 farmers across the state. Our role is to engage in economic, social, environmental and regional issues that are strategically important to the productivity, sustainability and growth of Queensland’s agricultural sector.

To put where Queensland Farmers’ Federation has been in these discussions, we are a member of the Queensland Industry Recovery Alliance, which we are very grateful for. We also sit on two of the subgroups: the competitive business environment subgroup and the cleaner energy industry and market subgroup. We believe there is great potential for agriculture in both of those. We acknowledge the group and the ongoing dialogue that the department of agriculture has facilitated for our sector. A lot of those initiatives that the agricultural sector is taking to these groups seek to

promote economic development, to ensure we have regulatory reform or streamline some of the regulatory and policy settings that we have, and stimulate economic growth and take the handbrake off agriculture going forward. Some of these initiatives are not new.

There is a sense of optimism across the industry that this COVID-19 situation and a lot of dialogue that is occurring at high level will expedite some of the regulatory and policy reforms that our sector urgently needs. That will also look at the development of new programs and at existing programs and will fast-track some of that critical infrastructure, particularly around facilitation of potable water to our regional communities and also irrigation water to our irrigators. QFF, along with our members, has provided quite detailed briefings and business plans on a range of initiatives not only to streamline that competitive business environment but also to really grow and strengthen the green credentials in the industry and adopt new technologies. Really, as I said, we are just highlighting the criticality of some of that infrastructure we must see in our regional areas.

As highlighted by the speakers in the slot prior to us, there are small business grants for COVID-19 adaptation. SEQ small business grants were oversubscribed very quickly but we still see the regional grants being undersubscribed. I suppose there is a note of caution that, while some of these grants are fantastic and we welcome that business support, regional communities and other elements of the business community need additional support in order to access these grants, to know that they are available to maximise their potential within their business. This is where industry associations and other regional development authorities play a critical role at this time. Thank you for the chance to speak today.

CHAIR: Thank you. We really appreciate the work of our agricultural industries.

Mr STEVENS: I have a question to Dr Davis in relation to the Queensland Farmers' Federation. I saw a program on the ABC in relation to how the seafood sector of the agricultural industry in Queensland was severely impacted by border closures, particularly through the restaurant industry et cetera. They were giving away a lot of their product and so on. Dr Davis, could you outline what effect those border closures had on the agricultural industry broadly and how those particular sectors could have been better handled? What is the longer term effect, if you like, of border closures et cetera on particularly those aquatic agricultural industries?

CHAIR: Just to clarify, are we talking about international borders or the state borders?

Mr STEVENS: Both.

Dr Davis: I will preface my answer by saying that we do not represent specifically the aquaculture industries. In relation to those border closures—I will start with the state borders—there are risks about our logistics and supply chains. As Michael previously stated, we have been deemed an essential service provider, so we are able to transition some of our specialist workforce and some of the critical supply chain equipment across the border. I would not say it is an easy process. It is complex and it has changed more frequently than it probably needed to. It has led to some confusion for both workers and deliveries coming over the state border. We also in future are concerned about things like port access and the capacity of our exports, particularly for some of those bulk containerised exports.

My colleague Richard did allude also to some of the impacts that those fewer commercial flights have had, particularly on the export of our high-value, high-quality export products, particularly to those niche and very valuable markets overseas. There is indeed a risk. As my colleague Richard Shannon also mentioned, we believe the critical risk now will be our workforce. It is not just about backpackers. We are seeing demand for backpackers now increase as the tourism and hospitality industries are reopening. There is a greater competition out there for labour.

We have been talking with the federal government in particular about getting new visa classes into places like the Northern Territory for mango picking and about how those workers may be able to then transition into Queensland. We have seen areas of acute semi-skilled supply shortages. To give you an example, in a couple of weeks some of the grape producers will need semi-skilled workers who usually transition up from Mildura as the season finishes there. They will travel up to places like St George. We are critically concerned as to how those semi-skilled workers will be able to get over the border in a timely fashion, given obviously the quarantine periods. It is a difficult situation because, obviously, we do not want to do anything that will jeopardise the wellbeing and safety of Queensland communities but we do have that significant and very timely need for particularly the semi-skilled labour in some of our farming communities.

Mr O'CONNOR: Does anyone on the panel have any estimates of how much product was lost? I think Growcom said there was a 20 per cent to 30 per cent reduction. Do you have any estimates of how much produce was lost by your growers? Has demand recovered, or at what level is demand at the moment?

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Mr Shannon: There is no accurate figure on product lost. Some of that product has gone into other markets. Product that was once destined for a restaurant might end up in your supermarket. Product that was once destined for quite a niche lucrative overseas market, again, has arrived on the domestic market. Of course, that has a downward pressure on prices all around and that is obviously a terrible result for all of horticulture. No, there is no accurate estimation of product lost. It is likely to have either been left in the field or picked and gone elsewhere at a far reduced price, so there are a couple of different impacts there.

In terms of recovery, there are no firm figures but the restaurant and that part of the food service sector has picked up again, although not to the same level. Obviously we are still missing conferences, cruises and events. A large amount of the food service sector remains in mothballs, so those impacts continue.

CHAIR: We will have to order some individually packed melons for our lunch this afternoon. Obviously labour issues are important. In some cases, due to the nature of picking and the huge growth in workers required for picking, the workforces are itinerant. We also see in regional centres underemployment and unemployment of workers. This is a long-term question: is there a way that the agriculture industry could better connect with workers in the local region rather than having a great dependence on either workers from interstate or workers from overseas, whether that is backpackers or special visa classes? Is there something that we can do to make that more sustainable and local for the foreseeable future?

Mr Guerin: I have a couple of immediate thoughts. One is that there are, for example, some things going on in other states that I think we could take on that are very helpful. One example that I am aware of at the moment is airport workers driving heavy machinery. They can go on a five-day conversion course to be able to drive harvesters and other specialist equipment for the upcoming harvest in Western Australia. In Queensland, in the grains industry we are a number of weeks away from starting a harvest up north where our normal supply of specialised labour—drivers and operators of heavy equipment—is not available. They normally start up north and head south. A lot of those contractors are New South Wales based. There are some things we can do immediately around that, learning from other states.

The other suggestion that I have is that, for the different commodities in different industries, we have a seasonal story about harvest time and planting time and the need for workers, traditionally from interstate or different skilled workers. If the peak bodies—in the case of our commodities it is AgForce but also Growcom, QFF and others—were able to somehow provide a sense of these seasonal challenges coming up, say a month or two out, and some guidance and thoughts about how we can train local people to fill in the roles where we will need people across borders and why, and allow us to have something in place ahead of those points in time, that would make an enormous difference to us. For example, four weeks out from starting the grain harvest or the stripping up north we could be describing things we could do to train local people for roles in the things where we do not have the ability to do that and why and what we might need from outside. If we could stay a little bit further ahead of the seasons—if the peak bodies, certainly in the case of AgForce and I am sure the others, could do that—we could be a lot more planned and a lot more aware of what was coming several weeks ahead, on the assumption that these hard border closures will stay in place and that COVID will be with us for some time.

Mr Shannon: That is a really good question. Employing Queenslanders has been the first preference of our industry always. We want to engage locals as our first preference. It is not true to suggest that backpackers displace Queenslanders from these harvest roles; it is that we find it difficult to attract Queenslanders to our industry. We have a long history of attempting to engage particularly longer term unemployed. There have been a number of programs that have tried to achieve that. One I refer to quite commonly involved the strawberry industry just north of Brisbane where 1,000 folks registered an interest. Down the line, only 100 ever turned up on farm and 12 months later only one person remained in our industry. It is difficult to attract and then retain those people.

To answer your question, this is another opportunity. There is a new cohort of folks who might find themselves unemployed for the first time and quite unexpectedly. A proportion may be able to be mobile enough to work in our industry. I am thinking particularly of younger people who are more interested in an experience and an adventure. They like being outside and getting their hands dirty. Whatever we can do to attract that particular part of recently displaced persons as a result of COVID is an important initiative.

However we cannot rely on attracting enough Queenslanders to fill the gaps that we anticipate. Our advice and recommendation to government has been that we need a range of options on the table, and that includes an ability to bring in seasonal workers, whether that is from interstate or Brisbane

overseas. Queensland will be well served by having a protocol agreed by the Chief Health Officer in place and ideally tested before the harvest really kicks into full swing and we find ourselves short, and by that time it will be too late. That is something that we are in close communication with the department of agriculture on currently.

Mr WATTS: Firstly, I want to let people know that there are some more international flights flying out of our airport in Toowoomba. I hope that your various members who might need that export capacity make contact with the airport. My question more broadly is in relation to COVID-safe practices. In the various environments that exist at the coalface of primary production, on the property itself on a day-to-day basis, how have COVID-safe plans impacted economically? How is the industry dealing with the interactions that people might have?

Mr Guerin: As far as I am aware, the COVID-19 plans have not created an economic impost. In fact, they are a good, quick way of thinking about this challenge and preparing the property to act in a way that best respects the community management of COVID in the best way that we can. The plans themselves are a good and easy way of thinking about integrating it in. One of the elements of those plans—and we just touched on it—is labour from interstate. That becomes the bigger challenge and has the bigger economic impact. Labour is the big one for us to date. The COVID plans themselves on properties are fine. We do have challenges, for example, in isolation periods if we brought in New Zealand shearers for the wool industry in Queensland. That relates to labour challenges and cross-border challenges more than it does to the COVID planning itself on properties, if I have answered your question correctly.

Mr Shannon: Growcom supports the COVID health plans. As AgForce rightly points out, they are just good business practice, in our view. There is some impost required of those employing seasonal workers. This includes taking daily checks of symptoms and also recording folks’ movements for the past 14 days. There is some record-keeping impost.

One observation that I might make there is that the seasonal worker directive, when issued, was made at that time when it was far easier for seasonal workers to enter Queensland. That seasonal worker directive was designed in that particular circumstance. The Queensland border has changed and the movement of seasonal workers into Queensland is now impossible at scale. It might be a good time for the Chief Health Officer to review all the directives in total and ensure they align with each other. The seasonal worker directive was addressing a risk that perhaps is not quite as high now, given that the borders are much harder. That is one observation that I would add there.

On the compliance side, there has been an amount of activity focused on horticulture more recently. It found a good level of compliance among growers in the Burdekin, for example, and also the Gayndah-Mundubbera area. That is good to see. Perhaps where there is some more work required is amongst labour hire providers and not so much individual growers as employers.

Mr McCALLUM: How have the federal government’s JobKeeper and JobSeeker schemes been of assistance, particularly around the scope of application in your industry in terms of eligibility?

Mr Shannon: Horticulture has missed out on a lot of these incentives. Because so much of our work is seasonal, we have missed eligibility for this. Because of how we go about sourcing our labour, we have also missed out on a large amount of the payroll tax holidays and subsidisation from the Queensland government. We have missed out there quite significantly. Perhaps the greater interest from horticulture in JobKeeper and JobSeeker is the disincentives they provide to Queensland and Australian residents and citizens to take up work in our industry going forward.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. The time allocated for witnesses for this session has expired. We really appreciate you appearing before us. Each industry that we meet has a different set of challenges and a different set of opportunities, so thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. Although we had a date to encourage people to submit by, if there is anything additional that you think would be useful for the Queensland government’s response to COVID-19 or, indeed, the response of the federal government in terms of feedback we could give, please do not hesitate to put it in.

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BENEDET, Mr Gerard, Branch Director, Pharmacy Guild of Australia, Queensland Branch (via videoconference)

PERRY, Dr Chris, President, Australian Medical Association, Queensland Branch (via videoconference)

TWOMEY, Mr Trent, Branch President, Pharmacy Guild of Australia, Queensland Branch (via videoconference)

CHAIR: Good morning. In view of the hearing today being broadcast via videoconference and given the slightly more limited visual cues and absence of nameplates, I ask you to please identify yourself by name when speaking, particularly when speaking for the first time or when giving an additional answer to a question not directed to you. Committee members are also endeavouring to do the same to minimise confusion for anyone watching the public broadcast and for the assistance of Hansard in the transcription of proceedings.

I invite you each to make an opening statement, after which committee members will have some questions for you. I note that the health committee is separately dealing with some of the health responses. It is difficult given your entire core business is about health—and the health response is very important—but we would like to focus more on the economic response of the Queensland and federal governments in relation to Queensland. We might start with representatives from the Pharmacy Guild and then hear from Dr Perry.

Mr Twomey: I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I would like to thank you and the members of the committee for taking the time to listen to the views of the guild and community pharmacists in Queensland. We should also congratulate the Chief Health Officer and the employees of Queensland Health. They have performed in a stellar way over the past several months since this pandemic hit us. I have to say that the level of communication and engagement, not only with the Pharmacy Guild but also with the community pharmacy network, cannot be faulted. We look forward to continuing to work with the Queensland government on system reform. It is system reform that I would like to focus on.

I will take our report as read. As you can see, there are two recommendations. The first focuses on ensuring that Queenslanders through this pandemic and on the other side of this pandemic have a stronger health system than we entered it with. Community pharmacy has 6,000 community pharmacists and 16,000 pharmacy assistants who are under-utilised. They have a range of skills and knowledge to perform more tasks to ensure that the primary healthcare network steps up to the plate to ensure that Queenslanders are not only living happier and healthier lives but also placing a lesser burden on the secondary and tertiary healthcare systems. We stand here not with an arm out asking for a handout but with an arm extended in partnership to ensure that you know we are not asking for any world firsts or any Australian firsts; we are just asking for you to remove all the unnecessary red tape and regulatory burdens that prohibit us from practising to our full scope of practice.

The second recommendation is specifically about economics as it relates directly to commercial leasing. The mandatory code of conduct nationally relies on two particular measures. One is a reduced turnover of 30 per cent and the second is being eligible for JobKeeper. The Pharmacy Guild of Australia has made recommendations to the Australian Taxation Office because we believe this is too much of a blunt instrument to truly assess whether or not a tenancy in the community pharmacy space is under undue pressure. What we mean specifically here is the fact that many of the molecules we dispense, which traditionally may only have been made available through the hospital network, are high-cost, low-volume drugs. We have HIV medicine and hep C medication that can cost \$22,000 a month. This is skewing the turnover of community pharmacy. We are paid \$99 for dispensing something that may cost \$22,000. If we removed these from our turnover figures, which would normalise our profit-and-loss statements, it would show that we would be eligible in any other circumstances for rental relief.

What we are seeing is community pharmacists being placed in an awkward position. We do not want to say no to these patients who are presenting to our pharmacies for this important treatment. We do not want to send people back unnecessarily for potentially preventable hospital presentations when they can receive this treatment from the community pharmacy network. Unfortunately, our members are being unduly penalised financially because they are ineligible for things like JobKeeper or even rental relief. I am happy to leave my introductory remarks there and take the paper as read. If you have any questions, I would be more than happy to answer them.

Dr Perry: Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee. I am the president of the AMA in Queensland. In that role I represent 9,600 medical practitioners in the state out of the 23,000 that are here. We would like to start by congratulating the government on what they have done to date. I think they have made some recent choices which are very bad, and I will talk about that during this presentation.

During the initial six-week shutdown, people stayed away from doctors and from retail in droves. I remind people that over 2,000 healthcare workers in Victoria have been infected, and about 36 per cent of those infected in Victoria are healthcare workers. In Italy, when their first 100 doctors died there had been 30 nurse deaths. Doctors bore the brunt of the deaths from this disease, not other healthcare workers. Being an ENT surgeon, I point out that when there were 147 deaths in Italy, eight of them were ENT surgeons; we are one in 200 doctors.

With the initial shutdown, many older GPs and specialists just closed down and retired. When the practices started to reopen, there were fewer GPs and fewer staff in those practices. The public-private partnership caused a complete loss of income for those without public sessions. Personally, I do two days a week in the Children's Hospital in Brisbane and at the PA Hospital. Between those public hospital payments and JobKeeper, I was able to keep paying my staff and keep open, although there were very few people coming in.

I turn to the issue of COVID testing in pharmacies. That occurred in Italy when the whole of that country closed down and people were absolutely terrified. People could not walk very far down the street. It was difficult to get COVID testing and so it had to be done in the pharmacies. That was fine. Italy, though, was not a great example of controlling the disease amongst healthcare workers, as I said earlier.

I cannot understand how a chemist shop is safe to conduct COVID testing. Patients with coughs, coughing out COVID virus everywhere, walk into the back of the chemist shop past thousands of bottles and boxes. Then elderly and disabled people come in and handle those boxes. This could be the *Ruby Princess* and the quarantine debacle of Victoria coming to Queensland if we have an uptick in the number of cases. I think it is crazy to even think of this at the moment. It is going to open the government and people who push this line to Slater and Gordon and Shine Lawyers in the future. Will the shopping centre owners allow the retail places to do these tests? Will they want the coffee shop to be walked past by people coughing due to COVID? Will the patients and the local doctors be warning people to stay away from those chemist shops that have potential COVID contamination of their shelves? I think you have to be very careful about this COVID testing. I think the Premier made a couple of bad calls last week; one she has corrected and this one she has not.

Professional Pharmacists Australia, the association representing the nonowners of pharmacies, do not like this. The young pharmacists do not want to be at the front line. Will they get proper PPE? Is the testing going to be done in the back of the shop or the front of the shop? Is it going to be done on the footpath? If so, will the footpath be closed and who is going to close the footpath? Is there going to be private security or is it going to be police? Is the PPE going to be put on properly and, more importantly, is the PPE going to be taken off properly? If you talk to Professional Pharmacists Australia, they want nothing to do with this. When you look at the Premier's Facebook page you see that the replies from people about COVID testing in pharmacies are quite negative.

Returning to the topic, we are very happy with the expanded access to telehealth, even though the payment is really quite low; \$35 for sometimes a half-hour consultation goes nowhere near covering the cost of the typist, let alone other office costs. Doctors found it quite hard to get PPE. We were told that it was available through the primary health networks. The primary health networks usually had none. During the peak, often the primary health networks were working from home using Zoom meetings and they had no storage space for PPE, so the PPE did not get to the doctors often.

We would like to see the telehealth reforms stay for the long term in the health system, especially for psychiatry. Mental health has been a big issue. The National Mental Health Commission was very slow in getting going. There are many groups in the community who are very prone to a flare-up in mental health issues: pre-existing mental illness patients, underemployed and unemployed people and frontline essential workers. They are quite terrified of coming in contact with COVID virus, which I think the Pharmacy Guild needs to take quite a lot of note of. The elderly, especially those in aged-care facilities, and also young people are finding it is quite difficult to work out their economic future.

We believe that the general practitioners should have a stronger role in Australia's mental health. We would like to see mental health consultations able to be conducted via telehealth and charged in Brisbane. Currently it is really only rural places that can do that. We have to see more funding going towards mental health and addiction medical services.

We would like to see some more money for the Wellbeing at Work for PGY2 to 5 doctors. They have been hit badly by the COVID viruses, much like young pharmacists will if there is more pharmacy involvement in the COVID space. For future pandemics we need better communication and better PPE. They need to go to the frontline workers, who are the GPs. The GPs were not regarded as frontline workers during the early days of this.

We are pretty okay with most other things. We would like to see an expanded role for the senior doctors. Some of them were involved in contact tracing, but counselling and mentoring of young doctors and teaching medical students and pushing the vaccinations—by the way, I hope the state government will push on with the public education program about the vaccinations. I do not think we will need it. When the COVID vaccines come through, which may be sooner than we think, I do not think there are going to be too many anti-vaxxers left in the community. I would like to see the state government take a strong line with any celebrities who push an anti-vax line.

We would like to see the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities better supported. They need their own pools of PPE and training for their staff. We do not want the Aboriginal communities to be like the old people’s homes in Victoria and be underprepared. I am quite happy to take questions, thank you.

CHAIR: On behalf of the whole committee I want to express our appreciation for the entire health profession. You standing on the front line but also providing information to all of your patients has been a vital part of Queensland’s response.

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Mr STEVENS: Dr Perry, the measures that have been imposed to limit the spread of COVID-19 have been predicted by some, particularly through the media, to increase the incidence of poor mental health within the community.

Dr Perry: That is true.

Mr STEVENS: Have your members seen an increase in those patients with mental health issues? What financial assistance have you been given or have you requested from the government to assist with that increase in mental health problems?

Dr Perry: Trent Twomey could probably give you off the bat the increase in antidepressant use in Australia. It has increased something like 10 per cent to 14 per cent, I think. Certainly people are going along and getting some help with their depressive illnesses. We would like to see further support for young doctors. We would like to see telehealth expand. We really do not have a firm budget on these proposals. We can put something together further over time. I do not think anybody who takes an interest in current affairs will fail to hear mental health mentioned in all COVID responses. We just need to see what the government can do for that. There is no doubt that there is a significant upturn in the number of people needing mental health advice and treatment. I am sorry that I cannot be more specific.

CHAIR: Trent, from a pharmacy perspective, have you noticed an uptake in those sorts of prescriptions?

Mr Twomey: Yes, we have. I suppose if there was a specific action the Queensland government could take it would be to assist the Pharmacy Guild in holding the Commonwealth government to account in the Productivity Commission’s response to Australia’s mental health infrastructure, which is due to be handed down in the first quarter of the next calendar year. Yes, there are specific actionables that we could do at state and territory levels but, to be honest with you, we really need that nationally consistent approach. It will be interesting to see.

The Pharmacy Guild has made a submission to the Productivity Commission. It has specific recommendations around the staged supply of antipsychotics and antidepressants to ensure that those people who are at risk are not overdosing but also to ensure that the expansion of the mental health consulting trial, which is about to be rolled out in the next couple of weeks in Western Australia and South Australia, is fully funded so it can be rolled out here in the state of Queensland.

CHAIR: Dr Perry, I am one of the people who has been recommended to go—in this case to see an ENT—for a consult, but I have put it off because of COVID. There must be long-term repercussions for people like me who do not go through with going to see doctors in general but specialists in particular in terms of ongoing conditions that are better dealt with early. Is there anything we can do to get awareness and encourage people like me to go and see an ENT or another specialist?

Dr Perry: Very much so. Any help with that would be gratefully appreciated. Three or four weeks ago we noticed an uptick in people wanting to come to be seen. You cannot really get in to see me for another six weeks or so, but there are a lot of new ENT surgeons in Brisbane to whom

you can get in. It has dropped off a bit over the last week or so with what is happening in Victoria. People listen, they are scared and they want to stay away from health institutions, especially where COVID people could be. When you come into my office you have to say that you do not have an upper respiratory infection. You get your temperature checked. You have to stay more than six feet away from other people. If you are coughing, you are sent out of the room. When you come into my office it is a bare office. I have a spotter in the office with me to make sure I am putting my PPE on properly. They watch what the patients touch, and when the patients leave everything is wiped down with alcohol.

Once again, I would like to say that this will not happen in a retail pharmacy when they are doing COVID testing, and it is going to blow it out of the water if COVID comes back in Queensland like it has done in Victoria. If it comes back like it was in Italy then, sure, have COVID testing in pharmacies, but we are nowhere near that at the moment.

Mr O’CONNOR: This question is to the Pharmacy Guild. Taking your submission as read, the big thing we have seen since you put that in is this idea of COVID-19 testing within community pharmacies. I was just wondering if you have any response to some of the concerns that Dr Perry was raising and in general if you could give us an idea of what your members are saying about this proposal. How many are thinking about taking it up? Particularly, what methods would you put in place to manage that risk to customers and staff that Dr Perry has raised?

Mr Twomey: I do not subscribe to fearmongering. I do not subscribe to giving personal opinions. I subscribe to fact and evidence. Whilst I love Italy for a holiday, I do not want an Italian healthcare system here in Queensland. If I want to look for international precedents, I will look to the UK, Canada or New Zealand. If I want to look a little closer to home I will look through the exact trial that is happening in the state of South Australia. This is not about whether or not a Queensland access services from their general practitioner or accesses it from their community pharmacy; this is about making sure that a Queensland gets to access a service and that it complies with the same clinical guidelines, regardless of where they get to access it from.

I am very proud of the 1,160 community pharmacies in Queensland. We have proven that we can partner with the Queensland government to do more to keep Queenslanders productive members of the community—still going to work, still being able to care up and care down in a family unit for those people when they do so. Opportunistically testing those people who present with allergic rhinitis or symptoms like the common cold is not going to increase the risk of anything in a community pharmacy. What it is going to do, as the Premier quite rightly said on the floor of the House last week when she made this announcement, is provide an extra level of protection to ensure that, even though we know, based on all the empirical evidence, that it is just the common cold and it is just allergic rhinitis, we know categorically that it is not COVID-19.

This is not about standing down fever clinics that Queensland Health runs. This is not about people who have, because of their travel history, come into contact with somebody who is at an increased risk. This is just saying that for those people who get their Telfast, Nasonex or Codral Cold and Flu this will just provide that extra level of protection, that extra level of certainty that is consistent with the advice of the Chief Health Officer and is happening in other First World jurisdictions, both domestically and internationally.

If we are going to have a mature conversation about keeping our economy open, keeping people as free as they possibly can be and decreasing risk, we have to ensure that we acknowledge this is both an economic crisis and a health crisis and that we utilise all of the resources we have at our disposal. That is the infrastructure and that is the private-public partnership that is the community pharmacy network in the state of Queensland. We are not here to fearmonger. We are here to offer our services. We will ensure that we comply with the same clinical guidelines that every other piece of the primary healthcare infrastructure needs to comply with.

CHAIR: I think we have canvassed this issue extensively. If either of you wishes to make a submission there is a separate committee, the health committee, to accommodate you. It is important that this issue gets an airing, but for the most part we are looking at the economic response.

Ms RICHARDS: With the trial of COVID testing in community pharmacies, could I get a bit more detail on how you think that might roll out and whether or not any issues have been raised around that? Secondly, I have seen reported recently in the media the good stats around better Queensland health as a result of social distancing and good hygiene practices around general influenza. Could you talk about what those economic impacts might be across pharmacy and GP networks?

CHAIR: There are two questions there. We probably have dealt reasonably with the testing question, but is there anything to add?

Mr Twomey: On influenza, absolutely. In 2019 there were 36,874 laboratory confirmed cases of influenza. This year, because of the great work of Queensland Health and Queenslanders making sure that they socially distance and do all of the appropriate things they are doing in a COVID world, there are 5,918. For the record, that is 36,874 laboratory confirmed cases down to 5,918. Influenza vaccination rates are up. The vaccination program that we are running specifically for Queensland Health employees—Gerard, I think it was just shy of half a million vaccinations given; is that right?

Mr Benedet: In terms of corporate vacs across the Queensland community, it is just short of a quarter of a million. Basically, 30,000 Queensland government employees received their influenza vaccination through community pharmacy this year, which is a huge jump.

If I may just very quickly add that in terms of the economic response, there are a couple of other things that worked well. The payroll tax deferral and holiday has definitely helped our members, and they are grateful for that at a time when some put on more staff and some let off staff, depending on where you are across the community pharmacy network.

The other thing of note is: the essential services working group, which was Minister Dick’s creation when he was state development minister, ironed out very early in the piece some shortage and supply issues—whether that was hand sanitiser, PPE or simply general freight around the state—that kept us going through the initial period, through March and April, in terms of ensuring deliveries under the CSO from our wholesalers. There are basically four main wholesalers—three CSO wholesalers in Australia, basically, of medicine supply and the like—and we were able to keep running that into pharmacies. You will remember the hoarding of medicines that happened in March and into April, where stock shortages across really common lines like even Panadol were quite a concern to our members. Even in the south-west of the state we were in a situation where we had no Azimol or Ventolin at some stage, and we were able to fly in units because neither the hospital nor the community pharmacies in that setting had any stock. That essential services group that was founded through State Development worked very well in terms of helping us with that initial economic hurdle.

Mr WATTS: Both my local pharmacists and my local GP have experienced downturns in business, with people staying away. I am interested to find out where we are back up to. Obviously, there are some long-term issues in terms of people staying away from their doctor and/or getting their medications regularly. How do you think we can manage that to smooth the economic impact on both forms of practice?

Dr Perry: There are still fewer people coming along than there were, as the chair pointed out, so that should sort itself out with time. Patients with telehealth and prescriptions should not be missing out on their medications, so I do not think that is a big issue.

CHAIR: I hope people are filling their scripts and going to the chemist.

Mr Twomey: We monitor this quite closely, as I said. I love data. I love facts. I thank my branch director for correcting me on the influenza numbers previously. We monitor through the Prescription Exchange Service—which is agnostic, whether you are a guild member or not and what software you use—prescription volumes on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. March obviously saw the largest day in the history of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme as people had a run on supermarkets and had a run on going to their local pharmacy. March was exceptionally busy. April and May dropped off, but since June it has normalised.

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Even though we now have the same volumes at an aggregate, system-wide level that we had pre pandemic, consumer behaviour has changed. People are not shopping in major metropolitan areas. They are not doing a big shop in a big shopping centre. They are staying closer to home, they are going out less often and they are utilising online shopping portals to order their prescriptions and have their prescriptions delivered. The largest percentage increase has been in online. I do not have the figures before me, but people are shopping closer to home with their neighbourhood community pharmacy instead of going to big-box corporates, because they are just trying to stay away from large crowds where possible.

This is not just because prescription medications are not normal items of commerce. This is because of the behaviour of community pharmacists. Unlike other areas of the healthcare system that put up stop signs—red signs telling people to stop coming, telling people to stop visiting and telling people to have a conversation on the phone—we mitigated risk. You cannot get rid of risk; you need to mitigate risk. This is about making sure that our economy continues to function and our health system is not brought to its knees.

What we have done, working with not only Queensland Health but also the other state and territory health departments and the Commonwealth Department of Health, is change the way pharmacy operates to ensure social distancing is in place. There is proper screening at the entrances

to community pharmacies to ensure that if you have symptoms you stay outside. We screen you. You can call before you arrive. At no stage did we tell Queenslanders to stop coming to their community pharmacy. Other areas of the primary healthcare system told people to stop and literally put up stop signs on their front door. We did not do that. We will not do that.

CHAIR: I know that my local pharmacy was almost out of Ventolin and restricting it to regular customers, but I think that has since been alleviated. The time for this session has now expired. We really appreciate your appearance. If there is anything relating to the state or federal governments’ economic response that the associations wish to submit on, we certainly do not discourage you from putting in additional surveys. We really appreciate the information you have given and thank you for your participation today.

Proceedings suspended from 12.17 pm to 12.38 pm.

010 **BAKER, Ms Vivi, Member, United Workers Union (via videoconference)**

BRISKEY, Ms Jo, Queensland Political Coordinator, and National Parliamentary Affairs Coordinator, United Workers Union (via videoconference)

FLANDERS, Ms Kate, Assistant Secretary, Together Union (via videoconference)

HORA, Mr Anuj, Member, United Workers Union (via videoconference)

SCOTT, Mr Alex, Secretary, Together Union (via videoconference)

CHAIR: Good afternoon. In view of the hearing today being broadcast via videoconference and given the more limited visual cues and absence of nameplates, I ask you to please identify yourself by name when speaking, particularly when speaking for the first time or when speaking in response to a question or giving an additional answer. Committee members will also be endeavouring to clearly identify themselves when asking questions to minimise any confusion for yourselves and for members of the public watching the broadcast, as well as assisting Hansard in transcription of the proceedings. I now invite you each to make an opening statement, after which the committee members may have some questions for you.

Mr Scott: Thank you for the opportunity to speak to our submission and also to give responses to any questions you may have. Clearly, the issue of the economic response to COVID is the overwhelming issue facing our members as well as the broader Queensland community. Firstly, we point out that the most effective economic response to the COVID pandemic has to be a health response. We have seen the unfortunate circumstances interstate and internationally where governments in different jurisdictions and overseas have failed to have the same quality of response as we are seeing from the Queensland government. The ability for the Queensland economy to recover is fundamentally linked to a continued level of responsiveness that we have seen from the Queensland government. While there has been a very dramatic impact on the Queensland economy, it would have been far worse but for the actions taken by both state and federal governments in relation to ensuring that Queenslanders are protected from the health impact of COVID. Limiting the health response, both in terms of nature and duration, is the most important element of any economic response. Therefore, moving forward, the health issues have to be taken into account in terms of developing a broader economic position.

We made a detailed submission to the committee. I do not intend to read that in detail because I know that we have limited time today. Certainly we would also flag that the Queensland Productivity Commission’s report issued this morning clearly indicates what we have been previously stating, both to this committee and others, about the fact that the economic impact of COVID has particularly hit younger workers and women workers across Queensland, and we would expect that to continue to be the case in terms of the continued rollout. Particularly in terms of focusing on what has happened up to this point in time, there has not been the same level of economic impact across the community. It has been very targeted. The impact, not only in terms of casual workers but also the nature of the industries affected, has overwhelmingly affected younger people and women in particular.

In terms of the responses so far, we welcome the recent decisions of the Commonwealth government in relation to the extension of JobKeeper and JobSeeker, but we are gravely concerned that the reduction in the scale and the quantum of those payments, which are currently propping up the Queensland economy, will potentially have a significant impact on the Queensland economy. Also we are very concerned about the fact that those payments have been extended for only a few months. We think that, particularly given what has come out of the Productivity Commission report and even more broadly, the economic impact of COVID is not going to be short term. We are looking at a longer term economic impact rather than a shorter term economic impact, and we are expecting a longer recovery rather than a short one. We need to make sure, both at the Commonwealth and at a state level, that the government does not walk away from the necessary steps that are required to ensure we have the least impact on our economy and, as much as possible, not only rebuild our economy but also rebuild our communities to address the economic impact of COVID and to build stronger Queensland communities moving into the future, as well as prepare for a potential second wave of COVID or future pandemics.

What we also know from a health perspective is that, while this is unprecedented in terms of its severity, we have to start to factor in the fact that there are likely to be future pandemics of a similar or different nature moving forward. We need to learn the health lessons and economic lessons to make sure that we rebuild a community and an economy that will be better able to withstand the sorts of challenges that we faced over the first few months of this year.

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In terms of that, particularly in relation to Queensland we want to emphasise the fact that, while the economic impact of COVID has been targeted at younger people and women, there are also going to be very different geographical implications. We want to make sure that the responses from government not only take into account the need to build stronger communities but also recognise the importance of regional communities throughout Queensland and the challenges they face. While we look at a statewide, macro level, at the micro level we need to make sure that the economic responses are about strengthening our communities in regional Queensland as well as strengthening our economy in regional Queensland. Part of that clearly has to be the impact on employment.

In terms of that process, the stimulus packages that the government has introduced and the role of government in relation to building a stronger community and stronger economy moving forward have to be about also ensuring quality employment, particularly direct employment within the Queensland public sector, particularly in the health sector. As the economic impacts in relation to the challenges of the downturned economy hit the community, we need to make sure that other social services continue to be reinvested in in a way that will deliver the best outcome for the Queensland community as well as the Queensland economy. The amount of money that it costs in relation to investing in direct employment in those services has a very significant impact in relation to the ability to keep the economy moving. In relation to direct employment in the public sector—whether it is in the health sector, education sector, community services such as child safety or the correctional services areas—the amount of money that the government has to expend in direct employment is the greatest possible multiplier in terms of that process.

We are concerned that, moving forward, the fiscal principles that were established by this government and previous governments need to be revisited as we look at a longer term economic recovery to make sure that we do not have fiscal principles, in terms of the way that the government manages itself, that are counterproductive in relation to the broader community and the broader economy. The fiscal principles in relation to employment need to be strengthened to make sure the Queensland government does not exit the field—as we are fearful the Commonwealth government may be looking at doing in March next year—and that we continue to provide economic stimulus and support in regional Queensland and throughout Queensland. That will mean that the fiscal principles as currently developed in relation to debt and deficit need to be revisited because, particularly with the low cost of borrowing at the moment, the best solution for Queensland is for both state and federal governments to expend money to keep the economy going.

The alternative method, going down the path of austerity, has consistently failed internationally. The last thing we want to see is that historical budget principles are applied in a circumstance where they are no longer relevant. A program of austerity would not only dramatically impact the quality of services being provided to the community but also have a dramatic impact in terms of the knock-on effect to the broader economy. If we are going to get out of this in the best possible state, the Queensland government as well as the Commonwealth government need to continue to invest in our economy. The best method of investing in the economy for the Queensland government is to invest in the services that build an economy and build a stronger economy; that is, direct employment through the public sector in the health system and beyond. We must also ensure that the funding system for health or the fiscal principles that apply across the board in terms of the Queensland budget are not readjusted and that we learn the lessons this year while also readjusting the economic parameters we have to best place the Queensland government to support the Queensland community and the Queensland economy. That is all that I have as an initial statement. I am happy to take questions.

CHAIR: Ms Briskey, do you want make a statement and then introduce some of the workers the United Workers Union has put forward to give us their firsthand experience?

Ms Briskey: Thank you very much, Chair. I would like to thank the committee for extending an invitation to appear before you today and give really important insights into the impact COVID has had on workers across the hospitality sector. Most importantly, I would like to introduce you to both Vivi Baker, who is a restaurant worker on the Gold Coast, and Anuj Hora, who is a casino delegate from Star Casino, also on the Gold Coast. Obviously, these two workers represent two key parts of the hospitality sector and come from a region acutely hit by COVID. I will leave the direct insights into how COVID has impacted these sectors to Vivi and Anuj, but I can provide the committee with some key observations that we have seen across the board.

Hospitality workers across Queensland have been among some of the hardest hit by the COVID-19 economic crisis as the forces of long-term, high levels of casualisation and insecurity, wage theft and workplace health and safety issues and risks collided with the major shutdown. Around one in three paying jobs had been lost to the industry by mid-April. The downturn particularly impacted young workers between the ages of 20 and 29, who had seen a decrease of about 40 per cent.

A recent UWU survey underscores how precarious work security and day-to-day cash flow have been for hospitality workers during the COVID-19 crisis. It found that, once the pandemic struck, 47.5 per cent of workers had less than a month’s savings in their bank account to cover rent, food and bills. According to the survey findings, a key contributor to the low pay and consequential low savings of hospitality workers was wage theft, with 82 per cent of those surveyed having experienced wage theft. That was around not being paid penalty rates, being paid below the award minimum, being paid cash in hand and therefore missing out on a number of other entitlements, significant unpaid super and, for those paid a salary, not being paid for overtime work. As such, in this time of economic crisis workers and their families have needed coordinated support to secure their employment and assistance with household expenses.

The Queensland government’s announcement in June of a hardship payment to casual workers who had fallen through the cracks of the flawed federal JobKeeper and JobSeeker schemes was very important and very welcome. This payment has meant that casuals who are not eligible for federal payments or who have exhausted their sick leave have access to that \$1,500 payment if they test positive to the virus, resulting in not needing to choose between going to work sick or putting food on the table. Understandably, the COVID risk is ever present and, as Victoria has shown, it is critical that Queensland workplaces continue to implement key health and safety measures to ensure the safety of workers, patrons and the public. UWU commends the Queensland government for its strong health response, which has helped to protect Queenslanders and is critical in giving us a stable path forward as we build towards economic recovery. We welcome the ongoing structures and directives in place that are keeping us safe.

A key plank in Queensland’s economic recovery is ensuring that Queensland workers are empowered to establish and maintain COVID-safe workplaces. Understandably, this is critical across the hospitality sector. Ensuring workers are well trained, have access to health and safety measures and are empowered to call out potential risks as they see them will help continue to protect the health of communities and help us rebuild local economies. Compliance with safety measures in an industry with a poor compliance track record is crucial to maintaining public confidence in this industry and to ensuring public safety moving forward. Accordingly, hospitality workers must be empowered to: comply with the measures that are mandated; implement them even when there is pressure for a speedy economic recovery; comply even when there is a big queue out the door waiting; and report even when their job is on the line.

UWU has welcomed the mandatory training required for all hospitality staff prior to venues reopening. The access to free training modules delivered through Queensland TAFE is helping workers know how to operate safely in a COVID environment. However, we believe more can be done to ensure workers are trained in how to identify, raise and resolve concerns effectively and how they can access independent information, advice and support from their representatives.

Again, as Victoria has revealed, the crisis is not yet over and a lot hinges on the federal government’s response. We understand the Queensland economy relies heavily on how the federal government responds and the measures it puts in place to help drive the rebuild. We argue that the Queensland government, through national cabinet and other national partnerships, needs to call on the federal government to do more. As the committee is likely aware, the government is proposing changes to its JobKeeper and JobSeeker programs. As Mr Scott said, while the decision to extend beyond the September cut-off is welcome, now is not the time for the federal government to step back in its income support measures. Cutting back the amount received when JobKeeper drops to \$1,200 a fortnight and part-time casual JobKeeper drops to \$750 a fortnight for those working 20 hours or less will have a significant impact on workers increasingly across the hospitality sector. We must see not only these measures extend beyond the end of the year but also the expansion of JobKeeper to those who have been excluded—casual and migrant workers, who make up a significant proportion of the hospitality workforce. As such, we urge the Queensland government to call on the federal government to expand and maintain its income support measures to give our economy a stronger platform from which to recover.

That concludes my opening remarks. I would like now to pass over to our members, Vivi and Anuj, to provide firsthand accounts of the impacts COVID has had on them and their workplaces.

Ms Baker: My name is Vivi Baker. I am a hospitality restaurant worker from the Gold Coast. I am also in my first year of university. I am studying full-time online at the moment. I will tell you a bit about my experience. I have been working at my place of work now for nearly three years. When lockdown first hit I was let go. They kept me as an employee—I was not taken off the payroll necessarily—but I had no hours. I was not making any money. As a result, I tried to engage with

getting JobSeeker, which I found a really complicated process. I got about halfway through that process before discovering that I qualified for the JobKeeper payment, which I did not expect at all—mostly because I am not a rent payer. I know, obviously, that was not a requirement of JobKeeper, but it definitely came as a surprise. I am incredibly appreciative of the way that JobKeeper was implemented. It was so smooth from my end because it all happened through my employer. JobKeeper has opened up a lot of opportunities for me in terms of my studies and being able to go to university and move out of home and that kind of thing in the future.

The other layer to the whole JobKeeper situation from my end is that, while I was making the most income I had ever made, I am working the most hours I have ever worked because I am essentially considered free by my employer. There is not a lot of flexibility around the hours I work. I am not necessarily feeling as entitled to say no to shifts at the last minute or ask for time off because obviously I am receiving these payments.

Another thing that is concerning is that small businesses are being kind of entrusted with making this call between giving all of their hours to JobKeeper employees or giving the hours to employees who are more vulnerable. For instance, I work with a couple of women who are on foreign visas and do not qualify for any Centrelink. They are basically pulling from their savings and their super, but I am working more hours than they are. That is a difficult situation, especially because they are my co-workers and I know them personally. I guess it is also a lot to ask of a small family-run business that is just trying to get by and stay afloat to make that call. It seems to me like it is a bit of an ethical dilemma.

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I want to go back to what Jo said about the mandatory training. I feel like that was really well mandated. As soon as that was released, I was not allowed to work a shift until I had completed it. It was really accessible, it was easy to do and it was really detailed. In terms of empowering workers to I guess call out when protocols are not being followed or that kind of thing, I have been working in the hospitality industry since I was 13 and the biggest thing I have observed is that it is not an industry where workers, especially young workers, feel empowered to speak out at all very much. I think COVID has definitely exacerbated that.

Since I started working in hospitality, I have experienced a few different kinds of wage theft. I have been paid cash in hand and I do not even know how much unpaid super I have—there are all those kinds of things. I never really was told that I was allowed to speak to my employer about that. I think COVID has created a whole array of employees who are going to slip through the cracks and not feel empowered to speak up about it. That is something where there definitely needs to be a bigger conversation. That is all I have to say.

Mr Hora: I work at the Star Gold Coast casino. I am still stood down so I understand how valuable JobKeeper is and can be. There are people who are still stood down like me, but unlike me they have families and more mouths to feed and they are dreading the fact that come October the JobKeeper is going to go lower. They are already struggling with the situation and they are actually dreading October.

I know as a union member that just under 60 per cent of the staff have come in and the rest, 40 per cent, are still waiting to be called back. We are eager to work but we are not yet called back. At the same time, we are definitely lucky to be in Queensland compared to all the other states and how they are going. I hear from a lot of friends outside work—supporting all different areas and political parties—and they are all very thankful that we have a strong Premier who has a very good leadership. She is showing that maintaining the border closures has been so important and so valuable, especially for us Gold Coasters who are on the Queensland border. We can enjoy such a nice life which is slowly and gradually opening up.

Mr STEVENS: Alex and Jo, how has the federal government JobKeeper payment assisted your membership in staying gainfully employed? Out of the 28,000 members or so, how many are receiving the JobKeeper payment via their place of work? What was the further direct support that you suggested the state government should do?

CHAIR: I anticipate quite different answers with membership and JobKeeper. We will go first to Mr Scott, representing the Together union.

Mr Scott: Thank you for the question. While the vast majority of our members are in the public sector, we do have a significant number of members in the private sector, particularly in the aviation area. In terms of the impact of JobKeeper, we have had members affected within the Flight Centre organisation and also within Qantas and Virgin. In terms of Virgin, there have been some issues around what the company is going to look like coming out of it.

One of the challenges with the JobKeeper program has been its limitations. Members in Toll Dnata were excluded from that payment, even though they are part of the general aviation industry. Some of the arbitrary rules that have been brought in have meant that, while JobKeeper itself has had a positive impact—in terms of the workers who receive it and the ability of the economy to keep moving; as an economic stimulus package, it has been quite successful—some workers have been excluded, like at Toll Dnata. More importantly, groups such as the higher education industry and the university sector are not able to access the same sort of economic support as state government employees, and that has had a dramatic impact.

There has been a failure of the Commonwealth government to take a more holistic view. JobKeeper should really be applying more broadly, both in terms of the one-year casual cut-off and in relation to its arbitrary exclusion of groups like Dnata or the higher education sector. That has had a dramatic impact, because large sections of the community have been dramatically impacted on a personal level. While JobKeeper has had a stimulus role and has been successful, there has been a failure to have a human face to it. It has had one set of rules and that has affected people who have been working next to each other at the airport. Due to vagaries in relation to the employment ownership, one group of workers has no rights, has no income and has been effectively thrown on the scrap heap, while larger companies are getting massive subsidies to continue to work people. That seems completely unreasonable and has caused significant damage to those families—particularly in light of the fact that the Commonwealth government originally had a much more expansive view of how much JobKeeper was going to cost. It was costing roughly half of what they originally suggested. The Commonwealth government said they were going to spend I think \$100 billion on JobKeeper—and I am not sure of that figure—but then all of a sudden they were spending a lot less.

We can see no reason at all that Queensland families should not have had the ability to access it. Some of the teething problems and the arbitrary rules in relation Toll Dnata, higher education and short-term casuals should have been addressed. JobKeeper was about stimulus but it was also about looking after Queensland families. There was a failure with those arbitrary rules. There has been no real discussion or capacity to admit there were some inequities, and that has meant untold personal tragedy for those groups who have fallen just the wrong side of the long-term employment rule or just the wrong side of the issue in relation to why universities or Toll Dnata were excluded when companies such as Qantas and Virgin were included.

From that aspect, that really has been a tale of two cities. It has worked well for some people. Even though it cost a lot less, the exclusion of some groups for arbitrary reasons has had a terrible impact on those people who were excluded and are unable to justify to themselves, their family or their children why they should not have got the same sorts of payments that were being made in a completely appropriate sense to people who have been working beside them for potentially years on end.

In terms of the payments we would be looking at from the Queensland perspective, clearly the heavy lifting has to be done by the Commonwealth in this jurisdiction. We understand the size of their budget and that their ability to spend more is greater. From our point of view, the real role of the Queensland government is to provide some support to get the economy back on track. It needs to particularly try to focus on those industries which are being left behind by the Commonwealth packages and focus on younger people and women in particular who are facing more of an economic impact from COVID, rather than just construction. Building more bridges, trains and infrastructure is important, but, in terms of the social impact that stimulus has, it does not necessarily target those groups within the community that have been most affected, particularly younger people and women. It is important to focus on the industries which are in those target areas.

It is also about making sure the Queensland government focuses on what it does best in terms of service delivery. We have a health system that has been the envy of the world in relation to COVID. Its responses have saved thousands of lives. Also, those choices have made our economy stronger moving forward. We need to reinvest in what we have done well, not necessarily in the same way. We need to make sure that we continue to have direct employment through our health system, education system, child safety system and other things. We need to address the gender issue and the age issue, because generally public sector workers are women and are lower paid and often younger so that is an important factor.

We also need to ensure that the public sector continues to employ people in regional Queensland. Unless the budget principles are readdressed, there is a real risk that there will be a short-term response to the debt and deficit issue, which is really irrelevant given the cost of money at the moment. If we go down the austerity path that has been tried and failed overseas in relation to

previous economic downturns of nothing near the extent we are currently looking at, we will see a longer and deeper recession than is required and the impact on regional Queensland in particular would be far worse. It might be that the south-east can respond, but unless we guarantee continued direct employment and investment in public sector services in regional and remote Queensland the challenges will be far worse from an economic point of view and a human point of view.

It is also making sure the Queensland government invest in the economy, in the community and in Queensland families. They have done that but they need to reset the economic parameters moving forward for a very different environment moving forward. As I said in the first case, the best economic response is making sure they continue to have the world’s best health response.

Ms Briskey: We have a membership across 45 different industries so there has been a varying impact and varying accessibility to both the JobKeeper and the JobSeeker programs. I do not have the exact number for you in terms of the number of members who have been in receipt of JobKeeper. You are sitting in front of two of them at the moment, and as they said it has made a significant difference to their lives. However, there are some members we have who have been deliberately excluded from the scheme—for example, those casuals under 12 months. The hospitality sector in particular is largely made up of people who change jobs quite regularly, so many were excluded from JobKeeper on that basis. We represent several thousand migrant and visa workers who have been left without anything and without any support. Although they have been taxpayers for many years, they have been left without a cent of support and that is obviously having a major impact.

As Vivi referred to a moment ago, in terms of how JobKeeper is structured at the moment, we are seeing many employers make the decision—either purposefully or generally because they have no other choice—to only give hours to those who are in receipt of JobKeeper, which is making it very difficult for those who have been ineligible to again pick up work. That is something we need to see fixed. At the moment we have a two-tiered workforce where people are being left out.

We are concerned further that the federal government’s plans to create another tier in terms of a full-time JobKeeper and a part-time JobKeeper will impact those workers in particular in the casino industry and right across the board. We have members who may be contracted to a part-time number of hours but regularly work well above that and they may be forced to see their income reduced even further.

In terms of where we see the state government playing a really important role, as Mr Scott referred to, it is around that direct employment. We have members obviously in the public sector. Most importantly, as I noted in my opening remarks, any support around that hardship payment is quite critical, especially as we continue to call for the federal government to create paid pandemic leave. We are seeing that workers are forced to go to work if they do not have access to paid sick leave—because either they have exhausted it or they were never eligible for it in the first place—and I think that is a key factor, and I congratulate the government for stepping into that space. Any additional support in terms of utilities and other assistance has been greatly appreciated by our membership. We would like to see that continue.

I see that the main role of the Queensland government is creating that stable government focusing on the recovery and maintaining that strong health response and calling on their federal counterparts to continue to expand what they are doing. It is the main job of the federal government to provide that income support and we want to see that continued for our membership.

CHAIR: Thank you. The time allocated for this session has expired. I would like to thank you for your contributions. If you have any future contributions in this changing economic situation, we would welcome them from the unions as a supplementary. I want to particularly thank Ms Baker and Mr Hora. We appreciate your experience and your feedback, and we thank your union for getting you involved. Thank you for your assistance today.

013 **ANDERSON, Ms Chiou See, President, National Council of Women Queensland Inc. (via videoconference)**

BOURKE, Mr Brendan, Head of Client Services, yourtown (via videoconference)

DAVIS, Dr Donnell, Habitat Adviser, National Council of Women Queensland Inc. (via videoconference)

MANDLA, Ms Kathryn, Head of Advocacy and Research, yourtown (via videoconference)

MARTIN, Dr Tracey, Rural, Regional & Remote Women Adviser, National Council of Women Queensland Inc. (via videoconference)

CHAIR: I welcome our next panel of witnesses. Because our broadcast today is on video and because there are limited ways in which we can identify you visually, and as we do not have nameplates, I ask you to identify yourself by name when speaking, particularly when speaking for the first time or when speaking in response to other than a direct question. Committee members will be endeavouring to do the same so that we can assist the public watching the broadcast and also, of course, our hardworking Hansard reporters, who are transcribing the proceedings. I now invite you to make an opening statement, after which time committee members will have some questions for you.

Ms Mandla: Good afternoon and thank you for inviting yourtown to give evidence today. I am Kathryn Mandla, yourtown’s head of advocacy and research, and this is my colleague Brendan Bourke, who is head of client services. Our organisation is a national organisation and one of Australia’s largest youth charities. We seek to improve the life outcomes of disadvantaged children and young people. Alongside our helplines, Kids Helpline and Parent Line, we deliver a range of face-to-face support services to young people in Queensland, including educational engagement and youth specialist employment services.

To date we believe Queensland and Australia have fared comparatively well in relation to managing the health and economic impacts of COVID, and the responses of state and Australian governments have played an important part in this success. Notwithstanding this, young people have been most severely impacted. They disproportionately work in industries affected by restrictions and disproportionately work as casual employees, some of whom are ineligible for JobKeeper. Youth unemployment is up by 3.4 per cent to 19.2 per cent in Queensland compared to a rise of three per cent to 15.9 per cent nationally and is the highest in the nation. New referrals to our jobactive and Transition to Work employment services in Queensland have increased by 293 per cent and 163 per cent respectively from 1 March to 31 July. We have seen a 25 per cent increase in young women in our jobactive case loads and we have a 14 per cent increase in numbers of young men who are long-term unemployed—that is, unemployed for 12 months or more—in our jobactive case loads. These figures are of grave concern given that the youth unemployment rate has remained consistently high since the GFC and youth unemployment has not been below 10 per cent since 2008.

Coupled with the youth unemployment rate, the youth underemployment rate—that is, those youth who are 15 years and over who want and are available for more hours than they currently work—has increased 7.5 per cent over the same time, since November 2008 to June 2020. The youth long-term unemployment rate has similarly trended upwards and it has nearly tripled since 2008, from 0.8 per cent of the youth workforce to 2.3 per cent. Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly difficult for young people to access secure jobs given the rise in credentialism—that is, the belief that formal qualifications are needed to do a job—fewer entry-level jobs for young people, the gig economy, increased competition with older people delaying retirement, and more experienced and unemployed professionals now looking for work as well.

We have seen a significant rise in young people contacting our Kids Helpline, our national 24/7 helpline, and this rise has continued since COVID, with an increase in demand of 24 per cent between 1 March to 31 July compared to the same period in 2019. Much of this increase was young people with mental health needs, and in our experience a key barrier for young jobseekers to finding work is actually mental health related.

The pandemic has also brought into sharp relief the digital divide, a reality that disadvantages many young people seeking education or employment. This was the case for young people engaged in our education, engagement and employment programs in South-East Queensland. For example, Brisbane

in our youth engagement program in Queensland 36 per cent of participants did not have a computer to undertake home learning, 27 per cent did not have internet access, 20 per cent shared a mobile phone with their parents and/or siblings and 15 per cent did not have access to any mobile phone. In addition, many parents of our clients could not offer the practical support their young people needed to learn at home. Our staff went above and beyond during the lockdown period by delivering hard copies of school or program work to clients, coaching parents and students to use and install software, and loaning suitable devices to clients or providing them with internet data.

While some state and national economic policies will and have helped young people through the pandemic, there has long been an ongoing lack of policy focus on young people’s economic future since the GFC which has now been exacerbated by COVID. Specific policy responses tailored to the growing numbers of youth unemployed people and underemployed youth are desperately required, and we believe that policies aimed at supporting young people struggling with key transitions from school, training or further education are also required.

We have asked in our submission that the Queensland government take a leadership role and work with colleagues in the national cabinet to develop a national investment strategy to address youth unemployment, underemployment and long-term unemployment. We think this should include job supply and demand initiatives and short and longer term interventions. We have also asked that the strategy include young people’s educational needs, including their digital literacy, and that the strategy is seen as an opportunity to address the many longstanding issues that leave many young people behind. These have not been caused by COVID but they have been exacerbated by the current crisis. Unless government responses now prioritise young people, we fear that this crisis will leave lifelong scars on a whole generation into the future. That concludes our opening address and we are available for questions by members.

Ms Anderson: I will give the opening address and will hand over to Tracey when I am finished. Thank you very much for including the National Council of Women in your hearing today. As you know, we did our submission to you in June. Our submission highlighted the importance of essential equipment and PPE, funds for progressing human trials, arrivals to Australia, technology for tracking cases and the ability to locally develop technology and resources for self-sufficiency. Since our submission as a group of advisers and appreciating that the National Council of Women has been given the opportunity to represent women in Queensland, we have now prepared a supplementary submission. In our supplementary submission we have focused on rural communities. Tracey Martin, as our adviser for rural communities and as the president for the Queensland Rural, Regional and Remote Women’s Network, has put together a submission that we think should have more focus on women in the outback. I would welcome Tracey to speak on behalf of the National Council of Women.

Dr Martin: Thank you very much to the committee for having us here today to speak and also to Chiou See for that introduction. I am the rural regional adviser for the National Council of Women but also president of the Queensland Rural, Regional and Remote Women’s Network. I will be speaking about matters affecting women across Queensland today with some focused remarks around rural and regional women. At the outset I want to echo the views put forward in the segment just prior to us about the gender issues and the risks to rural and regional Queensland if economic stimulus is not focused in those two areas.

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We welcome the work that has been done by government in the space of domestic violence and child safety. It has been very responsive to the uptick in reporting of incidents. We stress that the work needs to be ongoing. We welcome and thank you for the excellent and quick support to implement better connectivity in telehealth services when COVID-19 began. These have been game changers for many in rural, regional and remote areas as well as the cities, and we ask that they be further improved and not rolled back. They are essential services that rural and regional areas have always needed.

Women underpin and are a lever the government can pull to drive a faster and sustainable recovery by harnessing their contributions and removing barriers to their economic engagement. This is equally the case in rural and regional areas. Mobilising women’s economic contribution to the recovery can underpin a sustainable and faster recovery. You can seek to drive recovery via the regions and rural and regional industries as well.

I want to talk quickly about some specific impacts on women this year from COVID-19 in rural, regional and remote areas. We have seen a dramatic increase in domestic violence and child safety, but that has been the same in the cities as well, together with mental health impacts. We are also seeing that women are experiencing unemployment at much higher rates than men and, due to the high casualisation of women in the workforce, they have been disproportionately impacted financially.

We are keen to ensure that there is not a two-track recovery where women are left behind in terms of recovery job wise and also their financial security, but we are also concerned that there not be a slower recovery and poorer outcomes for women in rural and regional areas when compared to the cities and larger centres.

Economic initiatives that are shovel ready will predominantly support the employment and re-employment of men, yet we ask that economic stimulus initiatives focus on women and revive and support rural and regional economies and communities. We need to target jobs where women are employed and where they have been displaced by COVID-19. The loss of professional roles in rural and regional areas hits women hard and it will take many years to recover those positions. We are seeing women in rural and regional areas dramatically under-utilised when their skills and experience are examined. We ask the government to focus on initiatives that ensure women in rural and regional areas are employed at a level commensurate with their education. The closing of regional universities and other corporate roles has been incredibly damaging to women. We strongly support the recent movement towards remote work which we are seeing across rural Queensland in the eastern states. We ask that government seek to support that initiative where many corporates in the city are seeking to harness the experience and qualifications of women in particular who are living in rural and regional areas.

Chiou See has referred to the additional submission that we will be putting in. There are five headings under that submission which address women across Queensland. I will just quickly talk to a few of those and highlight a few of the issues recorded in that submission. We want to acknowledge that women comprise half the population. They represent half the capacity for ongoing participation in the economic recovery. We want to ensure there are water security mechanisms in place for domestic food production. We noted earlier this morning that there was a very constructive discussion around primary production and the necessary workforce to participate in those activities. We would also like to stress in that regard the safety and security of those employees if they are migrant employees, the women in those roles and also their families and also the need for strong workplace health and safety to be in place around those arrangements.

We urge the Queensland competition commission to investigate price gouging of basic commodities. We suggest there be safety nets for students and people in crisis. We suggest that there be systems for those at risk of losing their housing. We ask for increased funding for the public hospital and mental health system. We ask for an increase in funds to all groups active in supporting women who are subject to domestic violence. We ask you to ensure that there is thorough education of all Queensland doctors, emergency services and police in how to look for and manage domestic violence cases. We also ask that the government seek to find initiatives which were mentioned just prior to us speaking that reassure and support youth and young people in their experience of COVID and the consequences of it. We ask the government to invest in the care economy. There are many other recommendations and submissions put forward in that very complete paper that the National Council of Women has prepared.

I just want to make a few closing remarks about rural and regional Queensland. We know that women contribute 74 per cent of off-farm income. This is essential for many areas in Queensland, particularly those in drought and that have been affected by flood and bushfire. Sixty per cent of the state is still in drought. Please bear in mind that COVID-19 for many rural and regional communities is just another disaster on top of many years of very difficult economic times. We ask that the government take into consideration these cumulative impacts on women and tailor economic initiatives in rural and regional communities for them. The stimulus that would be provided supports women in their long-term employment, but it also flows through to their families, the children and the broader economy. It supports family businesses that are struggling through drought and businesses in town that are also struggling.

We also raise the issue that if you want to try to propel forward one of the rural and regional industries ag is certainly an area where women are acknowledged to be key drivers of new technologies. If you want to take ag into the future and drive it forward, invest in ag and invest in women in ag and invest in technology. We need to make sure that there is training that goes out to rural and regional areas and that those initiatives are targeted at women. The research shows that women ensure implementation and change. This aligns with many government goals around the environment, carbon reduction and the reef. I am happy to finish my remarks there and to take any questions together with my colleagues.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. I can confirm that the supplementary submission that you have put in has been accepted and tabled by the committee and is now on our webpage.

Mr STEVENS: Dr Martin, on top of drought and other debilitating problems that rural and regional people have suffered, how have the mental effects of the financial hardship caused by the COVID-19 crisis impacted rural women and what financial measures should the state government respond with to assist in those particular areas that you will be able to highlight?

Dr Martin: I think I caught most of your question. There were two quite significant impacts. Some are really direct in terms of job losses, so casual jobs. Many women in rural and regional areas take casual roles because either they are supporting back on the family farm or they are the only roles that are available. The job loss assistance was not always available to them, so there was a disproportionate impact on the women within the towns from those job losses. Compared to men, it was definitely much higher. That money has been really important within their families to sustain their families and also support their children when their family business is struggling.

The additional issue around many rural and regional women is that they might support the agricultural business or they might run their own business in town. With many children returning home, there were quite significant impacts—returning home for homeschooling and even the boarders who stayed home for a much longer period of time. That impacted their ability to operate their businesses and they suffered there and then also their ability to contribute to any other additional family businesses that were running. On top of it all, I think there are quite significant mental health impacts in trying to juggle all that and I guess really keep everything going. It was not a good wet season across most of the state, and that has been devastating for people, particularly in South-West Queensland and right through the centre, and then it was not a good wet season for the people who were still recovering from the floods in the beginning of 2019.

CHAIR: You have given us a very fulsome briefing, but there are a couple of questions.

Mr O’CONNOR: I want to get some more detail from yourtown. You touched on it in the submission and then in your comments at the start, and that is the national employment strategy. Could you give the committee a bit more detail on that? You also mention in the submission some of the problems that you see with jobactive. I thought you might flag some of those because that will obviously be important as we try to get out of this.

Mr Bourke: There are a couple of different ways to answer this, and our policy position has been outlined in our submission. First of all, I think the Queensland government over many years and many iterations needs to be acknowledged for its complementary services and programs to the federal employment services system such as Skilling Queenslanders for Work. These are complementary programs that fill gaps and meet need, complementing the federal system. Our position is certainly specialised, but intensive programs such as those should be maintained and invested in.

There is the need for youth specialist services to be very much tailored, specific and specialised for the reasons that Kathryn outlined in our introduction as to why there needs to be a focus on the current and the future ramifications if we do not make that investment. In terms of the federal system going forward, you mentioned jobactive and there are well-documented proposals for the future of the new employment services. I think that higher level of specialisation and the bringing back of youth specialisation is critical, as are the lower case loads, more intensive services and the combination. It speaks to youth specialisation. That is, as well as employment specialisation, you need to build in non-vocational barrier specialisation and build in allied health professional youth workers who can deal with the mental health and other non-vocational issues at the same time to get young people back into work.

There is also a role for state and federal government systems to work seamlessly around the transition from school to work. The federal system largely picks up kids after they have left school but, as we know, young people can disengage in the middle and last years of schooling and then get lost in the system. There needs to be a seamless support network for kids to be identified who are highly vulnerable and likely to disengage so that they are not lost and they are maintained in earning or learning and engagement with training, education and subsequently work. Also in relation to economic stimulus, there is an opportunity for there to be a focus on social procurement and social enterprise so that not only are we stimulating the economy with perhaps infrastructure projects and we are achieving real improvements to public amenity but also we are providing some focus on highly vulnerable groups and creating jobs within that economic stimulus and infrastructure spending.

There are probably a few other things, but in the interests of time there certainly could be specific issues. We have spoken to employers for years and years, and young people have told us that it is factors as simple as a driver’s licence. This could be an opportunity to absolutely invest in

the driver training area to not only improve safety going forward, to stimulate that part of industry, but also give young people that driver’s licence that so many of them are unable to get with the current driver training restrictions. This is a one-off opportunity to meet a whole lot of objectives.

In terms of place based approaches, which is Skilling Queenslanders for Work and other initiatives that are happening at the moment that we are focused on, Kathryn spoke about not only the demand side but also the supply side of the labour market. We need industry-led identified training. What does industry need? Is it a reinvigorated TAFE sector and training sector where, if there are not the job opportunities now, we are training young people in those opportunities that industry itself has identified place by place. They are some of the issues that we would see in a national investment strategy for youth employment.

Ms Mandla: I think there is an opportunity to also think more broadly about social procurement targets to stimulate job creation and growth of social enterprises, particularly in lower socio-economic areas, with specific quotas for youth employment. We believe that portions of new infrastructure—for example, social housing, green and circular economy projects—would be optimal areas for which to consider potentially setting quotas. As we found, in government it is one thing to set quotas but it is also very important that they are closely monitored and compliance is enforced.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your contributions today. Unless there is anything else anyone really wants to say, we really appreciate the fact that you have given us your submissions. I also note the supplementary submission from the National Council of Women. Do not be discouraged: as your organisations go forward, if there is something that you think could be helpful for our deliberations for our report—as you have done this morning in tabling an additional submission—I would encourage you to send any additional information to us.

Dr Davis: The special part that the National Council of Women really wanted to focus you on, besides the usual suspects, is the economic productivity multipliers that women can provide. That part of the report we have not discussed on this, but that is fine because it needs a little bit of time. I will just leave it there. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for all of your submissions and for appearing before us today to assist the committee.

015 **ARMSTRONG, Ms Paige, Chief Executive Officer, Queenslanders with Disability Network Ltd (via videoconference)**

BOL, Mr Beny, Queensland African Communities Council, Multicultural Australia (via videoconference)

MUHYADIN, Mr Idris, Multicultural Australia (via videoconference)

TADESSE, Ms Seblework, Souths Community Hub, Multicultural Australia (via videoconference)

CHAIR: Good afternoon. I invite you to make an opening statement, after which committee members will have some questions for you.

Ms Armstrong: I will start by giving a brief overview of the organisation. Queenslanders with Disability Network is an organisation of, for and by people with disabilities. Our members represent people with a diverse range of physical, intellectual, sensory, psychological and other disabilities. We also operate a statewide network of people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds with disability. The submission that we have provided to the committee to date in relation to this matter has been informed by our members as well as by the 21 peer support groups that QDN operates around the state. Those peer support groups are run by people with disability for people with disability. They are our eyes and ears on the ground and they provide feedback to inform the systemic advocacy and policy work that the organisation does.

We have already provided a submission to the committee in relation to economic impacts. Today we want to stress some issues in the submission because of further developments and work that we have seen happening nationally that can apply in a state context. That is around the cost impacts on people with disability. We also want to look at the economic impacts around workforce and workforce planning, because that directly has impacted upon the ability of people with disability to get necessary support workers in the home. They are support workers who actually contribute to local economies and businesses around the state as much as the people with disability. Being unable to get the support workers, who are unable to consequently get out and about or have the digital skills to do the necessary purchasing of necessary goods, is a further economic impact in local communities across the state. They are a couple of additional issues we wanted to cover off today.

Mr Muhyadin: Good afternoon. Multicultural Australia is an organisation that helps new refugee families to settle. Since last March, with the border being closed, we have had no new family arrivals. COVID-19 affects our clients in many ways. JobKeeper and JobSeeker helped some of the families. Some of our families are large families, which is fine, and the adults are eligible for JobKeeper or Jobseeker, but a lot of other families are single mothers or small families with two or three children. The parents caring for the children are not eligible for benefits in terms of JobKeeper or JobSeeker. This is one issue.

Another issue is that most families who come from northern Iraq and Syria cannot read or write English. They cannot access information about hygiene because they cannot listen to radio or see television in their language. They cannot attend a lot of basic services like health, because there are no face-to-face interpreters. Interpreting on the phone is not great, especially in terms of mental health issues. It is very difficult. With regard to home learning for the children, we discovered that the parents cannot read or write and so are unable to help their children in their learning. Most of these families have no access to the internet. They have no laptops, tablets et cetera. They are some of the issues we face.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. Mr Bol or Ms Tadesse, can you give a perspective of your communities?

Mr Bol: Thank you very much. I thank the members of the committee for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the African community. The African community was on the edge before COVID-19 actually hit. We are a newly emerging community with so many complex challenges and, at the same time, many opportunities. When the crisis happened, the major issues around language emerged immediately. The thing that many institutions usually do not acknowledge about our community is its diversity. A lot of people could not get the message on time because of the language barrier. We have a community that is already struggling to engage with and understand the system. We have a very small number of people who speak English very well and can engage with the system and ask for help, but the majority of our people actually struggle to understand basic information.

When the crisis hit, it exacerbated the issues that were already there. I refer to unemployment. The few people who were already working lost their jobs. Mental health became a major issue. For a variety of different reasons, most of our members struggled to reach out and ask for help. Very few languages were translated so people could get information. Most languages are actually grouped into a language and that does not work. For example, in the South Sudanese community there are those who speak the Dinka language. When government agencies translate Dinka, they do not know that there are about 12 different sections of Dinka. Most of those people interact within their own communities. If you only translate one version of Dinka, it is not going to reach all of the different sections of Dinka, which is about 11. It is the same thing with Arabic. If you translate Arabic Sudan, Arabic Iraq or Arabic Egypt, people who speak Arabic Juba, the South Sudanese, may not actually understand that. Those were some of the challenges.

Then came homeschooling. Many of our parents speak very limited English or no English at all, and we expect them to supervise their children—sometimes five or six children—at different levels of school. One parent could not even understand the basic content of an email sent by the school and later on was required to go online and supervise their children. These are some of the issues we are going through. The community leadership voluntarily decided to interpret all of the key messages, because up to 95 per cent of our languages spoken here in Queensland were not translated for the community.

Lastly, I encourage the committee to look into the importance of engaging with the grassroots, especially when dealing with very complex issues such as this health issue. The best way to get the message to the grassroots community is to come up with a strategy that deals with the grassroots community rather than a top-down approach, because we have a very diverse and very complex community. The best way to deal with the grassroots community is to empower them and to give them the resources and the critical information they need so they can share it with their own community members. Thank you.

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Ms Tadesse: I thank the committee for giving us the opportunity to share our concerns, challenges and experiences at this very hard time in Queensland and also nationwide. My name is Seblework Tadesse. I work at Souths Community Hub, based in Moorooka, Brisbane. The organisation has been working to support the business community, especially new and emerging businesses in Moorooka. As many of you know, most of those emerging community groups have a positive story of starting from scratch and making business. Some of those businesses have been operating for more than 20 years. They have been building until COVID came and it is really shaking all of their strengths.

My input would be more on that side, but also I want to express my experience and my different heart as a community leader and also as part of the Queensland African community. I am also part of Multicultural Queensland, QPASTT and other agencies on a COVID working group to respond to the challenges and the problems in managing community groups. My experience and my talk will be also from that take. I was on a small committee to respond to the economic impact at that time. One of the biggest issues has been through the business community but also through our engagement with the multicultural community here in Brisbane and generally in Queensland. We have a problem in terms of the economy, especially from the Queensland government. Not enough information has been sent out for communities, especially about the assistance and support available for the business community.

From my experience, some Moorooka businesses are already closing because they cannot survive. There are different reasons for that. The types of businesses they run are highly dependent on the human connection. It is grocery stores, hair salons, beauty salons, hair products. Those are very limited because COVID affects the chain itself and also the numbers of people who go there are limited.

When it comes to JobKeeper, that is the information that we somehow try to communicate to those business groups or the business community. Some of them did not even know how to apply for that because it is very complicated for them to go online. Mostly they are sole traders. It is very hard to understand the whole legal system. Some of them are afraid about whether they are eligible and then being confident to pay for others. They do not have enough cash at the moment. All that is impacting most of our business community in the Moorooka area and Inala.

Also, with Queensland government assistance, from the data that I try to collect, none of them actually got that \$10,000 boost being given from the Queensland government. Some of them do not know; some of them know and try to apply but the requirement excludes them. For some of them it is because they do not really have a proper technological data collection in terms of their employment, Brisbane

employees or support. I can speak in that space further if there are any questions that the panel wants to ask. It was not properly communicated to the business community, especially around the assistance coming from the Queensland government.

Also, from my own community I have been really inundated by people trying to find support for rent. Later on they got it, but in the early stages of the crisis it was not available to some of them. Especially those who work in the hospitality area, in hotel cleaning and other cleaning spaces, they lost their jobs and could not pay their rents. That was the challenge that was being communicated to me through the community and also through our work.

I am happy to speak about the Souths Community Hub, which is also working with domestic and family violence. That was another issue. In the first few weeks of the COVID crisis, women felt they could not go to places and there was no information clearly coming out. Of course, later on the community took some leadership on that and tried to break down the information and give support. Those are the challenges that I have been witnessing in my community and through my work.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. Mr Bol, we have received the Queensland African Communities Council’s community response plan. This morning the committee met and published it on the webpage as a submission. From a local perspective, whatever started the issues in Logan, I note that the African community came out in great numbers to get tested and obviously took their responsibilities very seriously as a community. I thank them for that.

Mr WATTS: My question is to Multicultural Australia. The federal government has a particular financial model for how it supports multicultural Australia and it is operating in Toowoomba, for example. A lot of people have lost their jobs because no new refugees are arriving. I am wondering how that is affecting people who need support to continue looking for work or to continue education so that they can then start looking for work. In Toowoomba I have seen that a lot of our counsellors and support staff have either lost their jobs or are unable to fulfil their obligations as much as they used to. Could you comment on that? I think not helping people find gainful employment is going to have a long-term effect.

Mr Muhyadin: That is right. As Multicultural Australia, a lot of our case managers lost their jobs and that affects our clients. It is a really hard situation, especially for new families. You cannot imagine having a case manager taken off you and you never see them—just on a form. We lost that relationship with our clients and new clients because of the situation. Some of our clients lost their jobs but it is not a big number because most of them are still studying at TAFE and, as you know, they are a very new community in Toowoomba. It has really affected them in different ways. As I said, they are not able to access services because one of the big issues is the language barrier. Most of them were looking for jobs, but they have lost their hope of finding any job in this situation.

CHAIR: Ms Armstrong, I note that there are concerns to do with residential disability care and disabled people in general. We are trying to get to a system where disabled people have more choice over the services that they need. They must also have an awareness that they are quite vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19. Are disabled people changing the services that they request? What is happening with residential disability care and what measures are in place for safeguarding disabled people?

Ms Armstrong: I can answer that question in two parts. I can tell you that people with disability were very concerned. In our disability community there is a group of people who are very concerned about continuing to actually get services. During the emergency phase a number of disability providers, in trying to look after both clients and their staff, decided to directly withdraw staff from doing one-on-one support, especially in-home support. We were getting numerous calls from people with disability and families who were very distressed because they really felt that they needed the one-on-one support. They were being told, for example, that they could access essential services by getting online and ordering their goods from the chemist. However, many of those people do not have devices. Even if they do, they do not have the data to have the extended usage of those devices to get online, order services and goods, connect with their health care and do a range of things. They rely on support workers to help them in doing those things. Even getting down to the bank to get the money out is difficult because they actually do not have any kind of Visa card or any online banking system. Therefore, we had a group of people who were very distressed.

They have been saying to us that, in the current COVID environment, they are looking at a flexible workforce and the ability for the Queensland government going forward to have some kind of strategy around dealing with the need for a surge workforce. If there is an outbreak in a particular community—it could be Brisbane—there might be some way of having registered people with the

right training and skills who could come in and supplement and do work and be available, whether that is by an online platform or anything else. We are definitely calling for some strategy by government to look at how you could use the people who have lost their jobs all around the state at the moment and are looking for alternative employment to provide support.

There is another group of people who are very worried about workers coming into the home because they are highly vulnerable because of the nature of their disability and related health condition. They were wanting to make sure that workers have effective sources of PPE and training in PPE as well as in infection control. Disability is a largely casualised industry. We have a workforce that largely moves across residences and households. People get good training, but specific training around infection control, the effective use of PPE, let alone having a supply of PPE by providers and covering the cost for that, is relatively new to the disability industry, not just in Queensland but across Australia. It is one of the things that has emerged.

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It has become so important because, as I said in my opening remarks, if people are able to work in the industry, they are providing an essential service for people with a disability who desperately need in-home workers and other workers to meet basic essential needs. It also means that those people are working and contributing to the economy. For people with a disability, it very much means that their most basic needs and essential services—whether that is getting a meal prepared, making sure the rent is paid or getting out of bed—are being met. Going forward, what we would like to see built into the future economic planning and employment strategy is a way we can see flexibility around the creation of that surge workforce.

In support of what people from the CALD multicultural community who are part of this videoconference have said, the other thing we are finding that has been a constant message is that, for people to be able to access any kind of workforce differently, there is a desperate need to improve their access to digital literacy. People need the devices. They need affordable data and devices and then they need to be able to use those devices. There are 90,000 people eligible for the NDIS in Queensland. The NDIS has recently made devices available. However, there are 900,000 Queenslanders with a disability in this state. Many of those people need a variety of assistance. At the moment, the issue of that digital divide is closely tied up with looking for support workers or in-home cleaners—whoever they need—in times when you are not able to rely on your regular worker supply.

Mr O’CONNOR: I want to get some more detail from Mr Bol and the Queensland African communities. You mentioned some of the issues in terms of the language barrier. I think you were talking about the South Sudanese community and the Dinka language having 12 different varieties. How can that practically be improved? Like you were saying, is it about improving those channels of communication between government departments and the communities on the ground? Is that a big issue with the information that gets out there in general, not just with COVID? Last week I saw some reporting from departments and it seemed like they had just plugged the information into Google Translate and then turned that into a fact sheet. Is that a big issue? Is it just about trying to improve those channels of communication?

Mr Bol: Definitely. I think that is a very big issue and it has been an issue going on for some time. We have so many diverse tribal groups like that across African communities. The best way to engage with those communities and make sure the message reaches the grassroots would be to identify those people who actually lead different sections. For example, when I mention the Dinka community, you have about 12 or 11 sections of Dinka and all of them have leaders independent from each other. They run their own different cultural and social activities in different pockets of their own communities. In all of those different sections, you have one leader and then you have a youth leader and a woman leader. If you reach out to those people, if you know their contact, that would be the best way to make sure the message gets out.

You have another tribal group called Bari speakers within the South Sudanese community as well. They speak Bari language and they have different tribes. They have tribes such as Kakwa, Mundari, Pojulu, Kuku and Bari. Usually you would get translation in Bari and most of them speak their own little dialect. The best way would be to reach out to those who are actually leading those different sections. When this crisis hit, that was the No. 1 thing that I identified personally at the Queensland African Communities Council. We came up with a comprehensive list of languages, and we are still collecting others. When we shared that list, some people could not believe these languages are actually spoken here in Queensland. They thought maybe I had brought the list from overseas. I had to actually find some people to speak the language so people could see that these languages are spoken here in Queensland in our own communities.

It is a matter of coming up with a strategy that reaches those people. The challenge for the majority of our people is that they do not come out and interact with the system. You have a very small number of people who are competent enough and can come out and knock at the door of a service provider, but the majority of people are in their own spaces. The best way would be to reach out to those people through the connection of the community.

At QACC level, we have identified all of those different structures within the community and we have created a webpage to make sure that, whenever there is important information, we share it on that page. Within the South Sudanese community, for example, I make sure that we are not dealing with the president of the Council of South Sudanese Communities in Queensland alone because that is the umbrella which represents the whole of the South Sudanese community. There are more than 60 different smaller associations and all of those have their own leaders, so we have collected their contacts and made sure we have added them to the page as well. That means if the president of the Council of South Sudanese Communities is not active or not willing to share the information for whatever reason, or maybe does not have the confidence or trust of his members for some reason, then we have the other alternative. We have the other leaders who are on the same page and they can get the information directly and share that with their own community members. That is the best way we can reach those communities.

What I was going to add earlier today was the impact of recent media. It is important for me to share this with the chair and the committee members. I have been inundated by so many incidents of racial vilification across different parts of the community, including people being asked whether the African people actually understand COVID-19. That was at the workplace. Somebody asked a colleague, ‘Do you people really understand COVID-19? Is it true that you don’t go to hospital when you are sick? You did not come to work last week. Is it because you were sick, because we’ve been told African people don’t go to hospital.’

There have been a number of people who have been left stranded at bus stops. The bus has approached the station and as soon as they were spotted as African the bus actually went and left them and refused to let them on. That was recently during the media reporting. That has actually increased mental health issues and has had other ramifications in the community. I thought I should share that with you.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. We really appreciate all of you making a contribution here today. We thank you for the previous submissions. The time allocated for this session has expired. That brings today’s proceedings to a close. I take the opportunity to thank all of our witnesses for the information they have provided at today’s hearings. I would also like to thank our Hansard reporters and the parliamentary broadcast staff for their assistance today. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee’s parliamentary webpage in due course. I now declare this public hearing closed.

The committee adjourned at 2.23 pm.