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SENATE

RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT
REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Reference: Rural and regional access to secondary and tertiary education opportunities

TUESDAY, 10 NOVEMBER 2009

TOWNSVILLE

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SENATE RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT

REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 10 November 2009

Members: Senator Nash (*Chair*), Senator Sterle (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Heffernan, McGauran, Milne and O'Brien

Substitute members: Senator Adams for Senator Heffernan and Senator Hanson-Young for Senator Milne

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Adams, Back, Barnett, Bernardi, Bilyk, Birmingham, Mark Bishop, Boswell, Boyce, Brandis, Bob Brown, Carol Brown, Bushby, Cameron, Cash, Colbeck, Jacinta Collins, Coonan, Cormann, Crossin, Eggleston, Farrell, Feeney, Ferguson, Fielding, Fierravanti-Wells, Fifield, Fisher, Forshaw, Furner, Hanson-Young, Humphries, Hurley, Hutchins, Johnston, Joyce, Kroger, Ludlam, Lundy, Ian Macdonald, McEwen, McGauran, McLucas, Marshall, Mason, Milne, Minchin, Moore, Parry, Payne, Polley, Pratt, Ronaldson, Ryan, Scullion, Siewert, Troeth, Trood, Williams, Wortley and Xenophon

Senators in attendance: Senators Adams, Ian Macdonald, Nash, O'Brien and Sterle

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

An assessment of the adequacy of Government measures to provide equitable access to secondary and post-secondary education opportunities to students from rural and regional communities attending metropolitan institutions, and metropolitan students attending regional universities or technical and further education (TAFE) colleges, with particular reference to:

- a. the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE;
- b. the education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas;
- c. the implications of current and proposed government measures on prospective students living in rural and regional areas;
- d. the short- and long-term impact of current and proposed government policies on regional university and TAFE college enrolments;
- e. the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary or post-secondary study;
- f. the educational needs of rural and regional students;
- g. the impact of government measures and proposals on rural and regional communities; and
- h. other related matters.

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Committee met at 8.35 am

CHAIR (Senator Nash)—Good morning. I declare open this public hearing of the Senate Rural And Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee. The committee is hearing evidence on the inquiry into rural and regional access to secondary and tertiary education opportunities. I welcome you all here today. This is a public hearing and a *Hansard* transcript of the proceedings is being made.

Before the committee starts taking evidence I remind all witnesses that in giving evidence to the committee they are protected by parliamentary privilege. It is unlawful for anyone to threaten or disadvantage a witness on account of evidence given to a committee, and such action may be treated by the Senate as a contempt. It is also a contempt to give false or misleading evidence to a committee.

The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, but under the Senate's resolutions witnesses have the right to request to be heard in private session. It is important that witnesses give the committee notice if they intend to ask to give evidence in camera. If a witness objects to answering a question, the witness should state the ground upon which the objection is taken and the committee will determine whether it will insist on an answer, having regard to the ground which is claimed. If the committee determines to insist on an answer, a witness may request that the answer be given in camera. Such a request may, of course, be made at any other time.

I would also ask witnesses to remain behind a few minutes at the conclusion of their evidence in case the Hansard staff need to clarify any terms or references. I remind people in the hearing room, including myself, to ensure that their mobile phones are either turned off or switched to silent. Finally, on behalf of the committee, I would like to thank all those who have made submissions and have sent representatives here today for their cooperation in this inquiry.

[8.36 am]

GORDON, Miss Anna-Jane Augustus, Publications Officer 2009, Rural Health in the Northern Outback (RHINO)

HANKS, Ms Heather Ann, Year 4 Medical Student, James Cook University; Rural Health in the Northern Outback (RHINO)

MURRAY, Associate Professor Richard, Head of School, School of Medicine and Dentistry, James Cook University

CHAIR—You have lodged a submission No. 765 with us. Did you want to make any alterations to that? If not, I invite you to make an opening statement before we start with questions.

Miss Gordon—Firstly, we would like to say thank you for the invitation to be here at this hearing. We appreciate the opportunity to voice the results of our research through the inquiry. We are speaking on behalf of RHINO, Rural Health in the Northern Outback, which is a rural health club. RHINO is a member of the National Rural Health Students Network. It represents nearly 600 medicine, allied health and nursing students here at James Cook University who are interested in rural and remote health. We would also like to note that Heather and I are speaking both from personal experience of moving away from home to attend university.

For our research we started with a focus group of six RHINO students. The information we gathered from that focus group helped us to develop an online survey that was distributed to approximately 1,500 students studying medicine, dentistry, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech pathology, pharmacy, nursing, and sports and exercise science. We had 232 surveys completed. According to the rural and remote and metropolitan area classification of postcodes for secondary schooling, 11 per cent of the respondents were from an urban area, 46 per cent were from a regional area, 30 per cent from a rural area and 11 per cent were from a remote location. Our research results have come from people who have faced the barriers to university education and 96 per cent of them have reported that they would like to return to a regional, rural and remote area upon graduation.

Our research has shown that, on average, participants spent approximately \$10, 500 per year on study. In addition to that amount, approximately \$6,000 per year was provided in support from families—70 per cent of those had support from family. Sixty-five per cent of the students undertake 14.25 hours of work while studying full-time on their university workloads. Over 50 per cent of the respondents reported having received youth allowance at some period during their degree to support their tertiary education, and nearly 70 per cent of those claimed the independent rate.

Nearly 60 per cent of the respondents who received independent youth allowance reported that they had taken a gap year in order to become eligible for the benefits and 70 per cent of the student respondents were required to move away from their home in order to pursue tertiary

education opportunities. The majority reported that this was a negative experience due to the burden of cost and the mental and emotional stress of moving away from home to attend uni.

We have largely conducted our survey in response to concerns about the changes to the youth allowance eligibility and their effect on rural and remote uni students, the future health workforce, regional universities, and rural and remote communities. We are very interested in building healthier, stronger and more sustainable non-metropolitan communities. To do this, we believe that education needs to be equitable and accessible to all students and we need to make access to quality tertiary education a level playing field regardless of where you come from.

Regional education facilities should be supported to provide a quality education because it is an investment in our regional, rural and remote health workforce as well as the regional and remote communities. We recognise that healthier communities are made through the provision of not only rural doctors, nurses and allied health professionals but also other professionals such as accountants and teachers, who provide a strong community which helps to retain those health practitioners in the community. We hope that this inquiry gives us the opportunity to contribute to making stronger and healthier rural, regional and remote communities.

Ms Hanks—There is nothing that I really need to add to Anna's statement except to say that we think it is really important that we be here to represent regional universities, to support not only students who have to move from their home to come to regional universities but also students who are already based in places like Townsville or Cairns and to encourage them to stay in Townsville or Cairns to study. That is all I wanted to add.

Prof. Murray—It is interesting to note that in quite a lot of the challenges we face in relation to the health workforce we very much have our shoulders to the wheel on this. What are the predictors of the likelihood of rural and remote return? We know that having a rural or remote origin has around twofold odds on most of the studies. We were talking before with Senator Adams about the fact that actually rural spouse origin is probably a little more predictive, which is interesting too. But regional universities and having regionally based postgraduate education in whatever discipline you may be in are all independent predictors of the likelihood of return to the regional workforce. The alternative is to lavish large amounts of benefits and gold upon city people to come to the bush, which I think is really the wrong model. It is not about them capacity building in the regional, rural and remote areas.

I guess we have a strategy in the School of Medicine and Dentistry, and also more broadly in the faculty, for a priority recruitment of students with diverse backgrounds. For instance, in medicine it would be the most unusual demographic, I would suggest, of any school in the country, with the majority, 75 to 80 per cent, being of rural and remote origin. Many of them are the first in their family to go to university, let alone medical school. We are talking about the dux of a little high school in the table lands. It is a very nice profile but the reality is that those students do not have the wherewithal to meet in particular the relocation and living costs associated with pursuing studies. Also often their families lack equity to be able to even look at borrowing options to support study. So they lack access to finance options.

I see students who are talking about taking a year off so they can work a bit harder in Coles so they can get themselves through their last year. This is just crazy in terms of the return for the nation of the health workforce. It is also actually crazy for them as individuals—they should get

through and start working. This is a silly sort of situation. So I very strongly support the idea that if we are to align the student support and recruitment from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, which is national policy, in the production of a workforce that is interested in being in and working for underserved populations then we have to find ways to identify that group and support them.

I think that means two things. One, rural origin students do need to be supported to access tertiary education; and, two, I think regional universities that are the great producers of regional workforce in health need to be supported to be in the same breath, in a sense. For instance, we would be very much in favour of greater income support and eligibility for rural origin students going to university where they have to relocate. But we would want to be careful to make sure that that was not sort of an incentive to go to Brisbane. That would, in a sense, undo the things that are important about building regionally based production and intellectual capital that is community-building, nation-building and provides workforce. That is the nub of it from our point of view.

There are a few things you should know. We have over 100 Indigenous students in this faculty. We have, in medicine alone, so far—this is coming up to our fifth year of graduations—70 per cent of our graduates have elected to undertake internships, second-year and third-year jobs in other than major metropolitan teaching hospitals. This is unparalleled evidence of what it is like when you line the ducks up to produce a regional health workforce. We have got the same sort of experience in nursing and in allied health. Pharmacy is a great example; occupational therapy is also a fabulous example. No-one knew what occupational therapists were, and then they had them on placement, and now you trip over them everywhere—mine sites, rehab centres—and they are greatly in demand. It is a great example here of the establishment of a full suite of these programs over the last decade and what happens to areas that have been starved of workforce when you actually open up the tap and supply workforce—how transforming that is to communities, health services and access to quality health care.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, and well done on the submission and all the work that you have done. It is really the first of this kind that we have seen come through in this much detail, particularly from the regional perspective. Very well done.

Senator ADAMS—I was certainly very impressed with the evidence that has come from the submission too. Your recommendations are exactly what we have been looking for. Miss Gordon, would you like to outline your background? As you said, you have both had to relocate to study. Could you give us a background of where you have come from, how hard it was too get work during the gap year, if you were able to, and just a bit of a snapshot of your focus.

Miss Gordon—I come from Emerald in central Queensland. I did all of my schooling there. I did do the gap year thing and earned over the \$19,000. To do that, I did three and sometimes four jobs in a week for that year, because I could not get full-time work. So it was a little bit here and a little bit there. It was a big move; it was like moving to the city. Even though it is considered regional, it is still a big move. It is still moving away from everyone you know and from your support networks. Personally, if I did not have the opportunity to get independent youth allowance I would not be here, because at the time my parents earned over the threshold. Since then, they have changed jobs and probably do not earn over the threshold. But they would not have been able to support me even though they were over that threshold, because they have

commitments and also I have three younger brothers. That would have been my only option. At that age, I thought, 'I'm independent so I should be paying for myself to go to university because that was my choice and my parents should not have to pay for it.' That was my journey.

CHAIR—Just on that point about your parents being over the threshold: one of the continuing themes is that once the parents are over that threshold they should theoretically be able to support the student, but what you are saying is that there are a number of other factors that exist, even if the parents are over the threshold, which preclude them from supporting a student. Like you say, you have got three siblings and they have obviously got other commitments. That point about just being over the threshold does not necessarily mean that a parent is going to be capable of supporting their student.

Miss Gordon—Yes.

Senator ADAMS—I have another question about being able to get work. Miss Gordon, you are fairly advanced in the years that you have been here, but now with the downsizing and things like that to do with the financial issues, how would a student now trying to apply for youth allowance, having to spend two years in a job before they can qualify, be affected?

Miss Gordon—I think that it would be very difficult. Emerald is largely a mining town and I think that there has been a lot of downsizing at the mines, so for anyone to get a job there would be quite difficult. The downsizing of the mines reduces every other industry. I felt guilty in having three jobs even though they were not full time in that year. I felt guilty about that because other people could not get jobs. People who are getting good grades are more likely to get the jobs and they are taking up jobs of those people who might want to stay in regional and remote communities, so it would be hard.

Senator ADAMS—Do you think that now an employer, say, in Emerald would be prepared to take a student, knowing full well the work and the training that goes in and knowing that they are going to go off to university and that they are using it as a stopgap job, instead of someone who is going to be permanent?

Miss Gordon—It is not likely, or less likely, for someone to take on a person who they know it is going to leave, especially over someone who they can put the time and training into and who is going to stay there for five or six years.

Senator ADAMS—Thank you. Ms Hanks, what is your story?

Ms Hanks—I grew up in country New South Wales. I am from Mudgee. My mum is a single mum and I have two younger siblings. From high school I went directly to uni and I actually started at the University of New South Wales in Sydney. It was just fortunate that I am the eldest of the three siblings because when I got to the end of my second year and my middle sister started vet science in Wagga, my mum really could not afford to support both of us at the same time. So I took that year off from university and worked. I was lucky in a sense that I had been to university for those two years because I was able to work as a nursing aide in nursing homes and do that kind of thing, which I would not have been able to do if I had come directly from high school. So I worked for the year and earned my \$18,000 over the 18-month period or whatever it was.

Then I made the transition up to Townsville. I think that the hardest thing for our family was that we had more than one person who needed to go to university and we are all in close succession because we are each two years apart. My mum was over the threshold, but then as soon as you get more than one person at university it becomes too expensive for all of us.

My sisters have also taken time off from university to earn their money in the allotted amount of time so that they can be supported by youth allowance. That has been a huge support for our family and has enabled us to go to university. I have got one sister doing vet science and she wants to be a rural and remote vet and work with country farmers and do all that stuff. Obviously I will be a doctor and I want to be a rural and remote GP. My youngest sister is studying physiotherapy and she wants to be a rural and remote sports physio.

CHAIR—So your family likes achieving—

Ms Hanks—But I think that support has helped us to get to where we are. It would have cost us so much financially that mum would have had to take another mortgage and would have had to do all sorts of things that would have left her in debt for many, many, many years. So that opportunity has really helped us.

Senator ADAMS—Professor Murray, do you have a course here for Aboriginal health workers as well?

Prof. Murray—We have had quite a bit of involvement. You and I know each other from the Kimberley and I was very involved in Aboriginal health workers training there. We have got a partnership with the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services Council, which is a regional training organisation. We have supported that at Mount Isa—the Mount Isa Centre for Rural and Remote Health—and provided the Kimberley curriculum and training in partnership with them there. That is a little in abeyance at the moment, in part because of the implementation of new national qualifications and competencies and, I guess, systems just getting organised to do that. We remain very committed to it and we are quite involved with support of Aboriginal health workers in other ways, but we are not delivering directly and we are not currently a registered training organisation in the VET sector—that is another story. So we are not delivering directly certificates III and IV or diploma or advanced diploma in Aboriginal primary healthcare work which are the main qualifications.

Senator O'BRIEN—Ms Hanks, you are aware of the impact of two students at university increasing the threshold at which benefits apply. Would that have any effect? It is theoretical because of your progressing now further into the system, and if you are already in the system as an independent nothing changes, it is quarantined.

Ms Hanks—I understand your point. I guess it would have helped, and we looked into it at the time. The benefit of actually taking time off from university or spending some time working is enormous for students, because they get that opportunity to learn some life skills and they might get some time to travel and do some other things, but also the independent rate at that particular time was far greater than the independent rate. As you can imagine, living in Sydney is very expensive—spending \$12,000 to support me in college, and that has obviously increased since then. Plus there are your other costs, plus your travel home, which is really important if you are a rural student. You need to be able to get on the bus or the train and get home.

Senator O'BRIEN—Many elements of the proposed changes impact on that, including upfront \$4,000 for dependent students who move away from home in the first year and \$1,000 each year thereafter and \$2,254, I think it is, per year spread over two payments in the year, which has restructured the payments. Have you had a chance to analyse how that might have changed? I would not be critical if you have not, because it is something that does not apply to you now.

Ms Hanks—No, that is right. I could say that it would have been very helpful. But had I been on the dependent rate, if it was the dependent rate plus the \$4,000 compared to the independent rate even without the \$4,000, I think the independent rate still would have been more valuable to me.

Senator O'BRIEN—As of now, is that the case?

Ms Hanks—I do not know.

Senator O'BRIEN—Fair enough. I am not saying you needed to have looked. I was just curious.

Ms Hanks—The important thing to note with the relocation scholarship is that, though that is really important and an enabler for students to get to university if they are from a rural and remote background, it is likely, or it is possible, that it could have a perverse effect on regional students. For example, for students who studied here in Townsville and in Cairns who graduated from high school here, in order to get the relocation scholarship they would have to do move to Brisbane, and I think that means that then we lose those students who could potentially stay here. I think the same example for places—

Senator O'BRIEN—Why would they need to? That is a perverse thing about this. If you have got to move away from home when the course is close to home, why should the system encourage you to do it?

Ms Hanks—Is that a rhetorical question?

Senator O'BRIEN—It is a question. Why should the system encourage you to do it, was the question. Hansard does not pick up anything other than words, so if you want to answer it then you will need to say something.

Ms Hanks—I guess it is important that we support students, particularly because we know that the biggest burden of their cost is the accommodation part, so it is important to support rural and remote students who have to relocate because—

Senator O'BRIEN—Have to move away from home?

Ms Hanks—Yes, exactly, but then you do not want students to move away from regional areas because they might be rewarded by a scholarship.

Senator O'BRIEN—What does it cost to move into Townsville? That is one thing we should have because we have established that for capital cities, for example, and also for some regional centres that have university facilities. So what does it cost to live in Townsville?

Ms Hanks—In our research we have averaged what the participants reported spending, and that was \$10,500 per year. In addition to that, 70 per cent of them were supported by their families, who contributed \$6,450 per year. We are saying that is approximately \$17,000. For some people it might be more and for some people it might be less. It depends on whether you live in a college or off campus.

Senator O'BRIEN—What does it cost to live in a college?

Miss Gordon—It was expensive—more expensive than living off campus. It was definitely over \$10,000 and probably about \$15,000 a year.

Senator O'BRIEN—If there is detailed information you can provide, that would be useful.

Miss Gordon—We can find that out.

Senator O'BRIEN—Are there opportunities to live off campus and are they scarce or plentiful? How would you categorise it? Can you find share houses?

Miss Gordon—Yes. There is a fair bit of opportunity to live off campus but, because of the nature of the community—having the Defence Force up here as well—and the sorts of housing options, it can get expensive very quickly as there are limited places. That can mean living on the outskirts of Townsville, in Bushland Beach or Wulguru and those sorts of places further out, just to get a cheaper rate of rent.

Senator O'BRIEN—Is there a significant opportunity to work here in retail, hospitality, food services et cetera?

Miss Gordon—There is a fair bit of opportunity and quite few different industries that are around, such as the retail and hospitality industries.

Prof. Murray—It is worth noting a couple of things about our context. Firstly, the majority of students in our programs are not from Townsville, and that is actually a really good thing because rural kids who go to the city typically feel a little isolated, whereas there is a greater welcoming experience here. There is local accommodation, and it is tight, and people can find jobs and so on. However, in the health professional areas, clinical placement is a significant part of the program and that is not in Townsville. For instance, more than half the senior medical students are not in Townsville; the majority are in Mackay, Cairns and Darwin, and some are in Mount Isa and small places in between. Nursing students, allied health students, pharmacy students and so on will undertake placements all around northern Queensland and indeed elsewhere in the state and the country. They do so largely at their expense. If you are dependent upon a minimum wage job in the hospitality industry of an evening but you then need to be away for eight, five or two weeks, it puts that employment at risk. You cannot give your share house accommodation up. You will need to keep paying that rent. You may well have to also pay for accommodation in the clinical placement site to which you are going.

In terms of the health workforce side of this, the clinical placement, and the importance of that both for workforce outcomes and educational outcomes, is another impact upon students and the cost of living. There are support schemes and I guess medical students have had a better run at this than other disciplines, but even there it is difficult. There are long periods of attachment elsewhere. People need to relocate at their own expense, find a house, live in Cairns and get a job. If they have come from a low-income family and do not have assets to draw upon in relation to securing a loan, they really are at risk and there is a lot of anxiety around all of this. I think that is another important aspect of the regional student experience.

Perhaps I can suggest another solution to this. I feel very frustrated with students who are off doing retail and hospitality work to support them in the final years of their health professional program. Why are they not in the healthcare industry? Why is there not greater opportunity for service based learning at the very time when we need to be going from something like 11 per cent of the workforce in health to something like 20 per cent of the workforce in health. By the way, we have done the calculations here, and we are at about eight per cent in our own region. We need 35,000 additional people to enter healthcare work between now and 2025. They are not going to be all doctors, nurses and so on. Students are an important source of labour in this respect and we must be creative about this.

Senator O'BRIEN—Have you spoken to the industry about that?

Prof. Murray—Yes.

Senator O'BRIEN—What is their response?

Prof. Murray—There is interest. For instance, in Queensland Health, ClinEdQ, the new clinical training advisory structure for Queensland, is interested in this as well. There are some models. For instance, some of our students have been employed by the division of general practice locally to visit nursing homes, to assist as agents of doctors, essentially, doing aged-care health checks, sort of as healthcare extension officers, if you like, or health attendants. Heather mentioned earlier that there is a long tradition—I did it myself—of being a nursing attendant in nursing homes and elsewhere. I think that is good. Of course, it is back to the future for nursing. This is in fact what nursing used to be. Learning does not have to be separate from service. They can be brought together. We need them to be brought together. It has got to be structured, but it is possible to devise a course structure sequencing rosters so that a health service can rely upon a steady stream.

Senator O'BRIEN—Health systems are bad at rosters.

Prof. Murray—In the final year of our medical program we have a thing called a rural internship, an eight weeks proto-doctor sort of rotation, where the aim is to behave much as you would the following year as an intern but in a small rural hospital—so in a place like Proserpine, for instance, they can rely on upon a steady stream of rural interns across the entire year. Initially people were worried about whether that was going to be a burden et cetera. In fact, that is not what they have found. One of the doctors said to me recently: 'There are going to be three weeks without our rural interns. Who is going to do all the paperwork?' Of course, the students love that and they learn in that environment. They think it is a fabulous term, because they feel valued and they feel that they are returning, that they are part of a team. Indeed, it is informing their

decisions. There should be ways in which we can turn our minds to how that sort of service could be paid, hospitality level wages at least—

Senator O'BRIEN—At least.

Prof. Murray—That is right. Why not embrace that sort of opportunity across the health professions?

Senator O'BRIEN—It sounds like it is moving a bit slowly.

Prof. Murray—We have isolated examples. It would be nice to say: 'This is a direction in which we would like to go. Let's find a way to do it and somehow get some sort of policy momentum in that direction.' We can quote examples, but they tend to be local, and we need something more systematic. I think it is part of Health and Hospitals Reform Commission agenda: how can learners provide service whilst learning if we are to have accessible high-quality health care that is geographically distributed?

Senator O'BRIEN—Thanks for that. I have many more questions but we have limited time.

Senator IAN MACDONALD—Congratulations to RHINO again for the work you and your predecessors have been doing over a long period of time. You were talking to Senator Adams about Indigenous involvement. I did not quite follow that. You do have quite a number of Indigenous medical graduates out of James Cook University. I saw many of you up at Laura at the dance festival when you had a team there. Could you tell the committee a bit more about that and, as an example, what you were doing in Laura and who actually paid for all that sort of thing?

Prof. Murray—There are aspects of supporting student attendance and participation in the Laura festival and what that is about, and then there are the graduate outcomes, recruitment and so on. We have an organised faculty exercise which includes roadshows, talent spotting, recruitment and bringing in Indigenous students from school and from out of school to consider a career in health. There is a thing called IHCAP, the Indigenous Health Careers Access Program, which I think is very good. It is not a bridging program; it is a sort of recruitment assessment—get a taste, socialise, do some refresher chemistry and other bits and pieces over a summer break and then be able to go through a selection and decide whether or not you are ready to enter immediately one of the health professional areas the following year or undertake further studies to prepare yourself in a subsequent year. That has been, I think, quite successful.

So far, we have had eight graduates, with another two Indigenous graduates due this year out of a medical program. I think that is really good, and we want to do a lot more. We have had 18 students in the program in medicine this year and another seven-odd in dentistry. I might have to be corrected on the exact number in dentistry, which, as you know, commenced in Townsville this year with much the same sort of philosophy. Overall, we have had over 100 Indigenous students across the health professional programs in the faculty. I think that reflects a lot of years and a lot of effort, and that is about support and recruitment to not only get people in but make sure that there is success in achieving a qualification.

Senator IAN MACDONALD—Are the Indigenous students fully funded? What is the comparison there?

Prof. Murray—For Indigenous students there is a different set of criteria, through Austudy arrangements, in relation to eligibility. There are many of the same sorts of issues—for instance, oftentimes we will find when people are relocating that they have family to deal with. There is the upfront cost of relocation, which is often underestimated. You have to come up with a bond, you have to furnish a house and you have to move things. That can in fact be an insurmountable burden.

We do have some specific income support that we provide to select students, but it is reasonably thin. We also strongly feel that Indigenous students are a very important part of the health professional workforce for the future, but they cannot be the only answer to addressing Indigenous health problems. So finding and supporting students from all sorts of cultural backgrounds to get excited and inspired about working in Indigenous health is very much part of our mission. I guess that is also what the Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival is about. It is part of that inspiring experience that sets a spark that will drive career choice and interest.

Ms Hanks—Thank you for your question about the Laura dance festival. It was really lovely to meet you up there and talk to you about some of the issues that RHINO faces in generally attracting students to become involved and interested in rural and remote health. The purpose of RHINO's involvement in Laura is twofold. Firstly, we want to take Indigenous students who are from up here to see their various groups or to participate or to see groups that they may not have seen before. Secondly, we want the non-Indigenous students to be exposed to a fantastic experience, to the really positive, welcoming and healthy community experience that Laura is. I think those two things are why we go.

The funding comes from the National Rural Health Students Network. RHINO is funded through the RUSC funding program. The money comes to the school because they provide the rural placements to our students and they also provide some money for RHINO. We got a special grant to take the students up to the Laura dance festival, which came through the National Rural Health Students Network, and we also had some local support from Tropical Medical Training, which is our regional training provider for GPs. It is nice because it links lots of stakeholders and gives students the opportunity to meet lots of different people and to be a part of the festival.

Senator STERLE—Senator O'Brien is copying my homework, because he has asked all my questions. It is the first time anyone has copied from me, I can tell you. Ms Hanks and Miss Gordon, typically how many hours would you spend studying each week?

Miss Gordon—It varies from year to year.

Prof. Murray—And time of year.

Miss Gordon—Yes. In the first year it is about 18 hours of contact time, plus your own study on top of that, which probably is not as heavy in the first couple of years. Like the medical students in their last two years, you have to look after your own rents here and at the place you are at as well as retain jobs and that sort of thing. So, broadly, towards the end it is quite an intense period and can be a full-time workload of probably up to 40 hours a week if not more.

Senator STERLE—Forty hours of contact plus what you do after hours?

Miss Gordon—Not contact hours. There are probably about 24 hours of contact every week.

Ms Hanks—It is similar in medicine. Particularly in the first three years, we would probably have 20 to 25 hours of contact per week. When you get into the clinical years, years 4, 5 and 6, you really spend almost all day every day at the hospital, so you are talking about a 35-hour week, mostly at the hospital, and then going home to study in the evenings as well just to keep on top of the workload. It is absolutely necessary that you do that. If students have to work a lot to support themselves sometimes they can jeopardise their studies by having to work. Certainly, particularly in the final years of medical school, it is a hefty workload. You need to be prepared to be there after hours. Sometimes on weekends, especially if you are on your obs and gynae rotation, you need to be there pretty much all the time—so take a book. A lot of other students would have similar experiences to us—quite hefty workloads. I think it is particularly in health, nursing and medicine that there is a very heavy workload in addition to doing your own study.

Senator STERLE—I have a lot of questions but I know that we are short for time.

CHAIR—Yes, thanks, Senator Sterle.

Senator ADAMS—This question is on clinical placement and funding. Ms Hanks, do you get any funding support as a medical student when you go on your clinical placement?

Ms Hanks—Yes, I do. I recently did a rural placement to Mackay, Moranbah and Sarina. On that placement I received petrol reimbursement; I think I got nearly the whole lot back. Accommodation was free. So the only expenses that we had to pay for ourselves were food and social activities. The accommodation and travel was provided.

Senator ADAMS—By whom?

Ms Hanks—By the school. The school of medicine provides funding for medical students, and that covers almost all of your accommodation and travel expenses. However, I know of nursing students and allied health students who really do not get the same support whatsoever. Friends of mine have spent over \$1,000 on a two-week placement because there has been no accommodation. They had to go to a mining town and there was nowhere to stay so they had to stay in a motel for two weeks and pay for that themselves. And there is no support for travelling there. There is an inequity in what medical students receive. Sometimes we fork out, but we do not fork out nearly as much as our allied health and nursing counterparts. So we would certainly advocate for greater equity amongst clinical placement provisions for students.

Senator ADAMS—Professor Murray, could you comment on this?

Prof. Murray—This is associated. We have had for a while the Rural Clinical Schools Program and the Rural Undergraduate Support and Coordination program, RUSC. They have been providing early and later year clinical placement support for medical students to undertake placement in rural and remote areas. That is a workforce initiative that has been going for about 10 years. It has been recently reviewed. I think it has been highly successful. Our problem, as I pointed out to our medical students, is that those same principles apply to nursing, pharmacy and

allied health. Anytime I hear too many complaints about how put out people are I point out the fact that really, relatively speaking, medical students have access to more support in this respect than other health professional areas and, like Heather, I am certainly an advocate for broadening that.

There are the beginnings of various sorts of programs to support the clinical placement costs in rural and remote areas, and we will see where that goes. It is expensive. We are creative about it. It often takes the form of partnerships with local communities—for instance, we do deals with local shires, local divisions of general practice and so on to be able to provide a bit of capital funding and they then look after an asset. There are all sorts of things that characterise the rural clinical school program, which I think are great. I guess also the Erbus review has flagged that that foundation of regional and rural based medical education infrastructure should now be a backbone which is broadened to be multi-professional much like the university departments of rural health, of which we also have one based at Mount Isa.

So I think we would like to see much more interprofessional learning and multiprofessional support. We already do that informally—so, for instance, physio students and others access the medical student accommodation that was funded under the rural clinical school program in Mackay, and that is all fine. We support that. But of course there is a problem with regional capacity around accommodation. If I could just underscore that point, we are often asked: what can we do about rural and regional health workforce production and what are the priorities? I would say that priorities No 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 are accommodation. There is sort of this concept of a three-legged stool in clinical learning—you need enough patients who are willing to see students as learners; you need adequate supervision, and that is both numbers of people who can supervise as well as willingness; and you need infrastructure. If you cannot sleep somewhere or if there is nowhere to sit down and see a patient then it is not going to work and the stool falls over.

State governments around the country used to have nursing homes and so on on their sites, often when they used to have regionally based nursing education. Because they do not meet fire safety standards, because there have been policy decisions about them—such as, ‘We are not in the accommodation business,’—or because they are now full of agency staff and locums, the state governments have knocked over and/or redeployed that accommodation for other purposes. So there is a massive national need to rebuild accommodation infrastructure in rural and remote Australia. It is honestly the most important thing that needs to be done to harness the needed clinical training capacity for all health professional areas, both undergraduate and postgraduate.

Senator ADAMS—Miss Gordon, just on that issue, and Ms Hanks sort of stole your thunder a little because I was coming across to you, this would make youth allowance for nurses and for the allied health students so much more important, because medical students are obviously being accommodated but this would be important for you. Would you like to comment briefly?

Miss Gordon—For nursing and allied health students that bit of money each week is essential because you are working full-time at placement so you have less time to work to earn money but you are expected to pay for your own accommodation and transport as well as placement, clothes, lunches and all those sorts of things. On my last placement I did benefit from the university’s department of rural health down in Murwillumbah, which is where I had my placement. It was nice that I was able to be accommodated there for a reduced cost. It was great.

However I still had to pay for my travel down there, but that was my choice. I suppose having a scholarship and having Centrelink support has enabled me to be able to go that far and to choose where I wanted to go. If I did not have that option then that would severely restrict where I would be able to do placement and where my opportunities might be.

CHAIR—Just on that issue of clinical placement cost, we always come back to the funding issue and more broadly I guess should there in general be more funding allocated to student support, particularly rural and regional. In regard to clinical placement, in your opinion should there be a revenue stream from government that directly addresses the inequity between rural and regional students going out on a placement compared to metro students?

Miss Gordon—In our research something that came up a lot was that people would like the opportunity for placements to be subsidised somehow. There were comments about a trainee and apprenticeship style, where you are paid to learn whilst you are on placement and contributing to that place and workforce—you might be reimbursed for your services.

CHAIR—Did you want to add anything to that?

Ms Hanks—I think that there needs to be greater scope for financial reimbursement, as Anna says, because, particularly on rural placements as you get more senior, you are a valuable part of the team. Even if that only meant complete subsidy of your accommodation, it would still be payment in kind for being a part of that team and contributing. It is also giving people the opportunities, because we know that that is what is going to take them back to those types of places. If your experience is enjoyable and fairly cost- and stress-free in that you know that you can still afford to pay for your rent or whatever in Townsville but do not have to worry about what you are doing in Moranbah or wherever you are. I think that is a nice, reassuring thing that lets students move on and enjoy that placement and that that is what is going to build the capacity of the future rural and remote health workforce.

CHAIR—Because it is not just about getting students through their medical education, is it? It is about where they are going to go after. You are obviously doing very well here getting those students back out to the regional communities where they are needed. One of the things that has come through from a lot of the evidence is the inequity between rural and regional students trying to access education and metropolitan students accessing tertiary education and that that access is separate from the social welfare issue of youth allowance. There have been some recommendations—indeed, our interim report recommended a tertiary access allowance for rural and regional students—which specifically addressed the costs from the inequity. Would you agree with that? I note in one of your recommendations that you are talking about special funding grants designed specifically to support rural and remote student intake. Would you see a need for a separate access funding bucket—without, of course, taking away from the very good point you made earlier about not wanting regional students not to go away. It comes back to what you said earlier. You would have to be required to move away, so if somewhere on your doorstep you had the course you would not get it, but you would if you were required to move away from home. Is that something you have given any consideration to?

Miss Gordon—We think it is more than a welfare issue. It is about equity and about rural and remote students having the same opportunities to go to university tertiary education. To do that, then, the costs might need to be subsidised in some way to make it fairer.

Prof. Murray—It is something more. If you are in a big city and you have to, say, move around on clinical placements or go from one hospital to another, it is just another question of suburbs, isn't it? You can often still live with Mum and Dad at home; that is what these systems are built on. If you have to relocate and set yourself up, Mum and Dad do not have the ability to support you independently and yet do not qualify, and you have to travel not from suburb to suburb but hundreds or, in some situations, thousands of kilometres, then there is a whole set of disabilities that work against you. So there is an equity things. On either grounds, the evidence for equity, access and also health workforce outcomes—it is ultimately this group that will be the workforce of these areas, and it is not for nothing that we have ageing cohorts of doctors, nurses and others in small rural and remote towns, because in a sense we once knew how to do this. We have forgotten. We need to go back and reinvent some of what went on in the past—which was much more local, community grounded and apprenticeship oriented—but with a modern tweak. We have much better technology now. We are much smarter about curriculum and assessment. We can do distributed teaching in regional environments. I think that has great benefits to communities and to the future workforce, but we need to tweak our incentives and support systems to reflect that reality.

CHAIR—Finally, you mentioned early on the importance of the regional universities and your capacity to retain or attract students. What do you see as some of the solutions? What would you like to see the university be able to access through either federal funding or any other mechanism to improve the sustainability of your regional universities, and how could that model be applied to other regional universities? Would you like half an hour to answer that! I am very happy for you to give us a brief answer now, but I think that is a really important question, because one of the things that have come up right across the country is: how do we improve our regional universities—not talk about taking regional students away but actually make them better and more sustainable?

Prof. Murray—Just a few general points: firstly, all universities in Australia, as is very clear from recent reviews, have been doing it tough. But I think regional universities have been doing it tougher, with four to six per cent growth in salaries and costs, in particular in health professional areas, where because of workforce shortages we have seen a massive escalation. For example, for me to buy a piece of a Queensland health clinician it is a \$400,000 FTE, so you have to think long and hard about whether you can afford a couple of days worth of a staff specialist at a Queensland hospital, which we buy. Now, of course, this comes out of this inadequate dollar, so we have been just progressively slipping.

I think it is particularly tough for newer institutions, and by 'new' I mean less than 100 years old, where we do not have major endowments and there are not huge property portfolios. I was talking to colleagues at another, major metropolitan university down south who were regretting the fact that their investment income this year is \$100 million down from last year. There is a problem I would not mind having! It is still painful; you have still got to downsize. But we do not have those 100 years of build-up of infrastructure, endowment and all the rest of it. We are much more exposed, particularly where we choose, because of our social accountability mandate, to maintain a broad suite of programs of high quality so that local students have access to them. We do not just cherry-pick the profitable pieces; we offer a full range of programs—and I think that is a really tough gig for regional universities. So we are doing it tough.

I am sure our senior deputy vice-chancellor will have something to say about the details of how that impacts on the sorts of supports and infrastructure that we can afford in a distributed environment to supply supports to our students. I think one solution is, in fact—which I think all rural clinical schools and university departments and rural health exemplify—to have workforce oriented funding coming into an education system that has specific policy objectives. I think it has been possible to show that the sorts of supports that have been described can have a real impact upon student support, access to courses and outcomes. If you like, that is sort of an industry portfolio, being able to invest in regional universities to support outcomes. It may be a principle that can be more broadly supported. Of course, the DEEWR and base funding mechanisms and the impact of following a capitation model, of dollars following students et cetera—there are real dangers in all of that.

One thing I would like to mention is about the recent COAG developments around the support of clinical training in Australia and the soon-to-be established Health Workforce Australia and the idea that somehow moneys to support clinical placements and clinical training for students will now follow the student head. The trouble is that that is across systems that are a highly inequitable. You can have a hospital in a regional area and a hospital in a city area with a similar profiles, but one has got half the beds and a third the number of senior staff, and so if the dollars come into that on a dollar per head basis then in fact you just worsen the existing inequities in the way in which health systems are funded. There has got to be preferential regional and rural and, I would say, outer metropolitan loadings in the way this works. It is terribly important. Teaching health systems are needed, not urban teaching hospitals, but there is a lot of catch-up. There is a step function required to do catch-up in relation to infrastructure, accommodation, staffing profiles and so on.

We have to deal with the fact that there are real anomalies at a state and jurisdictional level in the ways in which resources have been distributed historically, which are not necessarily lining up with either state or national priorities as we try to build a generalist, regionally oriented, team oriented workforce that we can afford in the future.

CHAIR—Thank you. We are well and truly over time. I think we could actually sit here all day and talk to you! Thank you very much for being here today and for your submission, which has been extremely useful for the committee. Thank you for giving us so much of your time.

[9.35 am]

VANN, Professor Andrew Michael, Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor, James Cook University

CHAIR—Welcome, Professor Vann. You have lodged submission No. 435 with us. Would you like to make any alterations or amendments to that?

Prof. Vann—No, there are no alterations or amendments.

CHAIR—Would you like to make an opening statement?

Prof. Vann—Yes. I will summarise some of the points in the submission and add a couple of things as well. Firstly, can I say thank you for coming. It is fantastic to get senators to come to regional Queensland and to the campus for these things. We see that as very important, so we really appreciate that. The second thing which is not there but is implicit in our statement is the pride and the passion for regional education that people have in institutions like James Cook. Having worked in Central Queensland for nine years as well, I know that we do this because we are absolutely passionate about what we do and we really believe in the importance of it.

Just to highlight some of the things out of the submission, the first thing is really the notion of place. This is a very strong theme for us because we really believe that universities make a difference, both in providing infrastructure that people come to but also in providing social networks. Whilst there is a transactional nature to what universities do in the classes that students sit in or the assignments that they submit, there is also the social interaction that happens between academics and their students, academics and each other, and academics and the community in and around the university, which I think also adds a lot to the health of towns and regions. I think that contribution is shown up in the participation rates, so my suspicion is that the existence of a university draws people in as well as servicing a latent demand, if you like.

The second thing I thought I would highlight is the issue of retention of graduates. I think you would have covered some of this with Richard and the students. We certainly see that educating people in a regional setting tends to keep them here, and we think that is incredibly important for the social and economic health of the communities.

The third thing to highlight is about the deferral issues that we mention in our submission. That has been a particular issue for the regional universities in Queensland. The Queensland state government does a Next Step survey of year 12 leavers every year and they are starting to do some longitudinal studies on that as well. One thing that has happened—or was happening up until the global financial crisis—was a substantial increase in deferrals for regional students. This would be on the state government records, but if I remember it rightly about four per cent more of the total cohort were deferring than had previously done so over the space of about three years, and that is probably about 10 per cent of the enrolments. So we saw a very substantial number of people pre the global financial crisis—in the boom times—choosing to defer, and we think that some of the increase in enrolments that we see now is due to those people coming back. It is relevant to the issue of the gap year because, if people need to stay out longer to actually become entitled to it, it means they are more likely to drift away from education. It is

also problematic from a planning point of view because we basically make them an unconditional deferred offer. For instance, in our vet program, in a cohort that was expected to be around 60, we suddenly had about an extra 12 people show up that we had made offers to in previous years. Servicing those students then becomes quite difficult.

The fourth thing I thought I would highlight is the flow-on from voluntary student unionism. Clearly, the money students did not pay in fees remained in their pockets, but I do not think they have seen it that way, and they certainly have not chosen to necessarily put it back into the campus. It is being spent off campus. Certainly on our campus we have seen a reduction in services as a result of that. We have taken money out of the educational budget, if you like, to keep essential infrastructure going. We would very much like to see the student services and amenities bill get up. We realise that is a not uncontroversial piece of legislation but, on balance, we think it would be to our benefit and to our students' benefit.

The fifth thing is just to emphasise the distance scales. We wrote in the submission that Brisbane is closer to Melbourne than Cairns. Another statistic which I think is quite powerful, which I had not appreciated, is that Adelaide is closer to Sydney, by road at least, perhaps not as the crow flies. The road journey is shorter, and I think that is a scale that is not always appreciated unless you actually live in regional Queensland. The scales of distance and the difficulties concerning all of the things the previous students were talking about—just finding accommodation, getting to places, organising travel and, even for us as active members of the university network in Australia and taking part in research networks—add an overhead to everything you do. Perhaps we can turn to that issue of getting additional support for regional provision.

Those are the five particular points I want to highlight. In closing, I do take my hat off to students everywhere, particularly regional students. I think they have a very different life to the remembered life of people such as me going through university. They are carrying substantial part-time workloads far greater than anything experienced in my generation on top of studying, I think, just as hard and maintaining really good grades. There is a very different sense of what a student is now to what they were in my day and that is all to the good. I am not seeking to turn the clock back, but I think we should pay tribute to them.

CHAIR—I think the committee would agree with you wholeheartedly on that one. Before I pass to my colleagues, the issue of deferral is obviously a significant one and, while we have had some evidence that many universities will defer for two years, of course there is the issue of the student merely drifting away having to have been out for the two years. Do you think the criteria for the independent youth allowance that is being abolished for that one gap year, for a lump sum—and obviously there have been some increases in the threshold of youth allowance itself—and the increases and the changes that the government is bringing in will compensate or go beyond retaining what students could gain from simply keeping that independent youth criteria for that 12 months, as currently exists?

Prof. Vann—I think it is really hard to say. We will have to wait and see what it drives in terms of behaviour. I do not think change is inappropriate, because I do not think what we had was necessarily ideal. Certainly, the increased levels of support are good. But I think we really will not know until we have run this for a few years. It will be modulated by what has also happened with the global economy. We probably will not know for a few years what will pan

out. We are concerned about the time to qualify for eligibility because we do have concerns, particularly if the economy picks up—and I will come back to the issue of male participation as well—we may see people seeing that as a barrier that they do not jump over.

CHAIR—This matter was also raised, and it would be interesting to hear your view on this as well. With the two-year deferment, particularly as it relates to regional communities, if you have a student coming out of school and they have to be out for the 18 months then in that second year, the next year, those jobs will already be taken if they have to be out for a two-year period. From a regional perspective, I suppose that in itself will create a bit of a difficulty along with the two years out.

Prof. Vann—Do you mean in terms—

CHAIR—If you had somebody finishing year 12 this year, they then have to have employment for the next 18 months so then for the cohort that finish at the end of next year those jobs are already full because they need them for the 18-month period.

Prof. Vann—That could be true and, again, I guess we would have to wait and see how that plays out with the way the economy goes, but I had not considered that. That is a potential knock-on as well.

CHAIR—I asked the previous witnesses about what you see as your wish list, if you like. If we are looking at trying to make regional universities more sustainable—and Senator O'Brien has asked many questions over the proceedings of the committee about how do we get greater subject course offering and how do we get the regional universities to be able to offer more and be more sustainable—what do you see as the role of government in being able to do that?

Prof. Vann—I guess I would re-emphasise the point made by Associate Professor Murray, which was that universities have been doing it tough in Australia—globally as well, but particularly in Australia. The efficiency gains that have been forced on us, which were sustainable whilst the market grew strongly, have been really problematic over the last few years. That is particularly the case in a regional institution, with smaller numbers than a large metropolitan institution. It is difficult to maintain the breadth of disciplines. Even in large institutions like Melbourne, the philosophy department has reduced in size. That has been a concern for them, but those kinds of disciplines you simply could not sustain at somewhere like James Cook because the margins are so tight that being able to subsidise things is really problematic.

Senator O'BRIEN—I am just interested in the low SES group that you mentioned in your submission. Can you tell us how you qualify to fit into that group. What are the parameters?

Prof. Vann—Do you mean how we define people to be low SES?

Senator O'BRIEN—That is a better way of expressing it, yes.

Prof. Vann—As far as I am aware, we use the standard postcode definitions that have been in place up to this point. I think we would agree with many people in the sector that those are not

fully ideal, although I think we see fewer problems with them here than the large metropolitan universities have.

Senator O'BRIEN—Can you remind us what the family income threshold would be.

Prof. Vann—I do not know that off the top of my head, I am afraid.

Senator O'BRIEN—In the context of students in a community like Townsville and surrounds, I am just looking to see how they would fit in to the proposed new increased threshold to attract the youth allowance benefit, with parental income thresholds of up to \$75,000.

Prof. Vann—I do not know if we have done that analysis, and certainly if we have I do not have it at my fingertips. I can certainly chase it up and see whether we have that data.

Senator O'BRIEN—Do you think that more people will come to university because they can access a benefit as a dependent student without a gap year?

Prof. Vann—Yes, I would think so. We know that the financial aspect is one of the things that is regularly stated by students both in terms of choosing to come to university and in terms of deciding to drop out. So we know it is a key issue in retention statistics.

Senator O'BRIEN—It has always seemed to me that the arguments that are put about the gap year can be a little contrived. Young people who work in occupations that they do not see themselves staying in for the future are not going to be attracted to stay there because they are earning little bit of money if they have the potential to achieve a higher standard through tertiary education. People are not going to make their career making burgers at McDonald's or whatever if they really have a vision of something better. What is the university's perception of that argument?

Prof. Vann—Particularly on the gap year issue?

Senator O'BRIEN—Yes.

Prof. Vann—I have to say personally that I do not think a gap year is, in principle, a bad thing. For many students, and particularly for males—and that is just based on observations—taking some time out between school and university is not a bad idea. The difficulty, though, is getting people back into it later on, so it is a bit of a double-edged sword. But I think the notion that you want to squeeze everybody in at age five and have them come out at age 21 is not right. I think it benefits a large number of people to take some time out. As we have noted, forcing people to take more than a year out when they might otherwise have made another choice is the thing that we are concerned about. But I think a gap year in and of itself is certainly not a bad thing for many people.

Senator O'BRIEN—Yes. Some people take a gap year to do exchange and the like, and that can be a great way of learning without actually going to university.

Prof. Vann—Yes.

Senator O'BRIEN—You will probably learn more than you would in that first year at university, given how some people perform in the first year of university!

Prof. Vann—You have not been looking at my academic record, have you?

Senator O'BRIEN—Given that the workforce options for someone who has just left school with no other qualifications are fairly limited, unless you are very lucky you are not likely to find yourself in a lifelong career option.

Prof. Vann—It is very interesting that we are seeing quite marked differences in male and female participation. For instance, JCU students are about two-thirds female now. It is not ready for release, but we have got an equity portfolio that is being redone at the moment, and one of the indications in there is that there is a different distribution in OP levels between males and females.

CHAIR—What is OP?

Prof. Vann—Overall position, I beg your pardon. It is used in Queensland. It is not the equivalent of ENTER, but the analog of ENTER. We have observed that males in the regions are making very different choices about universities to females. There was some research done on the university by Professor Nola Alloway. I think it is based on some work in the Atherton Tableland. There may be a family business in which the male is seen as the natural successor so the females will go to university to pursue career options whereas the males may not see it as so relevant. That may work on a family level but on a social level that is a concern into the future. Believing in the value of education, that is not necessarily fitting the community to its best advantage. There do seem to be some issues in the attractiveness of higher education to various groups. That is something we will need to work on as a university to meet the Bradley participation targets.

Senator O'BRIEN—What about people who return to study after working for a period? What is the university's experience of that cohort?

Prof. Vann—It varies. Usually people who come back later on are better motivated but their study skills may be a bit rusty. We do have some transitional programs for people. It tends to be a mix: some people do very well and some people drop out. Part of what we are attending to is getting good support processes in place for those people.

Senator O'BRIEN—Do you get more men coming back or more women coming back in that group?

Prof. Vann—I do not know, I am afraid. It is an interesting question. We might be able to get the statistics on that, but again I have not got those at my fingertips.

CHAIR—Could you take that on notice? If you have got them, that would be quite useful.

Senator O'BRIEN—And any suggestions on how we reach that male cohort in regional areas who are not being persuaded that tertiary education is important for the future?

Prof. Vann—We are pursuing a greater practical emphasis on things like work integrated learning. Clearly positioning degrees that have an element of work practice as well as study we think may be helpful in terms of reaching out to those people who may see university as being solely academic—incorrectly I think.

Senator O'BRIEN—Is it anything to do with course mix? That is the other issue that arose. For example, you get more opportunities to do engineering away from regional centres than you would in regional centres et cetera.

Prof. Vann—Engineering has been one of our success stories over the years.

Senator O'BRIEN—I do not want to be suggesting that it is inappropriate for females to be doing engineering or the like.

Prof. Vann—I do not take it that way. I get the sense of your point though. It may be about course mix, although there are only a handful of courses in the university now that are prominently male. Engineering is one and IT is another. Dentistry, medicine and just about everything is female dominated. I do not think it is primarily about course mix. My suspicion is it is more about the nature of the offering we are making and perhaps the way we are positioning things in the minds of people.

The other thing to be said is that the whole issue of widening participation is not solely the job of universities; it is something we will need to partner with schools and TAFE on to make sure that we are providing pathways for people and we are providing appropriate propositions that people want to pick up.

Senator O'BRIEN—Thank you.

Senator ADAMS—Just to pick up on the TAFE partnership: at the moment are you doing anything to bring people from TAFE through?

Prof. Vann—We have had fairly long-standing articulation agreements with TAFE. We have an articulation booklet that shows people what credits they would get in JCU coming out of TAFE. That has not been as successful as we would have liked it to have been. We have very good relationships with TAFE here. I sit on the council of the BRIT and Deputy Vice-Chancellor Ian Cairns, who has now gone to be Vice-Chancellor at CQU, is on the council of the Tropical North Queensland TAFE.

In Townsville we have been explicitly working on partnering across the education sector. We have formed what we have called the Townsville education cluster, which involves us, TAFE, Education Queensland, Catholic education and the Australian technical college. It is with a view to recognising that, in an area like this, that kind of collaboration is crucial. We have done a fair bit. I think it has not got quite the outcomes we would have liked, and we are working harder on that.

Senator ADAMS—Coming back to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, are you increasing their numbers or are they having more difficulty? Firstly, do many of them come in under youth allowance or do they have another way of funding these students?

Prof. Vann—I may not be the best person to answer the specific details on the financial aspects but there are additional things, over and above youth allowance. There is Abstudy, I think, and various things that feed into the mix, like the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme. There are a raft of things that help. Are they enough? It would be nice to get more.

I am just looking for the statistics on Indigenous participation. The answer is: yes, we have been increasing our Indigenous participation. It is at three-point-something per cent. These are figures in the DEEWR submissions that the university provides and I can get you the exact figures.

Senator O'BRIEN—Indigenous participation of 3.5?

Prof. Vann—Yes, but the demographic is about six per cent.

Senator ADAMS—Coming back to the TAFE and your collaboration with the other organisations, will this be a way of increasing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation?

Prof. Vann—We certainly hope so because traditionally the participation rates have been higher in TAFE. So that is part of the strategy; yes. We are looking to reach out directly and also to improve the pathways through TAFE.

Senator ADAMS—On another committee I am on we have come up with a number of issues regarding older males. They leave school as soon as they possibly can and then sort of disappear. They all of a sudden realise that to get a job they do need some sort of education. Is that noticeable in this area?

Prof. Vann—Do you mean that males leave school and do not come back?

Senator ADAMS—Are you getting an older cohort of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males wishing to be educated and coming through TAFE and then onto university?

Prof. Vann—It is a mix but there is not the same pathway straight from school for Aboriginal students that there is for non-Indigenous students. Our experience would be consistent with everybody else's I think.

Senator STERLE—Senator O'Brien, I did not have leave the room after that! Professor Vann, I just wanted to talk to you or get more information about something you said in your submission—that JCU is investing heavily in on-campus accommodation, employment services and other things. Firstly, could you tell us a bit more about the on-campus accommodation? How? How much? How many beds? What is the cost? Who is in your public partnership programs? That is a very long question but it will save me asking you ten. I will get out of your way now and let you go.

Prof. Vann—We have, I believe, the highest proportion of on-campus beds in Australia, relative to size. I think we have about 1,200 beds on Townsville campus. Eight hundred of those are owned or run by the university and about 400 are run by independent colleges which have been church based and were set up close to the start of the university. They are not money

earners; they effectively require some subsidy. It depends on how you do the accounting but if you take the full cost of capital and renewal into account they certainly consume money.

Fire compliance issues were mentioned earlier on. We had to close one of our halls a couple of years ago because we could not meet modern standards of fire compliance. We have replaced that with some demountables. This leads onto the issue of public-private partnerships. With a view, in the longer term, to getting a public-private partnership to build new residences on the campus we have been working through a process over the last 18 months or so. It was looking promising but unfortunately when the global economy collapsed and the credit squeeze happened all of the funding dried up. So that is on the backburner at the moment and we are trying to find some other ways to get that restarted, because it is a particular issue. The reason we have such a large number of beds is that we know what a difference it makes to regional and remote students.

Senator STERLE—We heard earlier on that the cost of living on the campus is somewhere between \$10,000 and \$15,000 per annum. Is that correct?

Prof. Vann—That would be not unreasonable. It depends. I have not got the up-to-date figures, but it was something under \$200 for a self-catered room, I believe. This was a couple of years ago, as I recall. It was about \$180 for a self-catered room and in the early \$200s for a catered room.

Senator STERLE—So how much out of pocket, if it is not too personal, would the university be per room at that price?

Prof. Vann—I have not got the exact accounting figures, but I think from memory it was something of the order—if you do the full accrual costs—of \$1 million a year that the university would be subsidising accommodation.

Senator STERLE—And I take it with the public-private partnerships that no large businesses were involved either?

Prof. Vann—We had tenders from some of the major players in the campus accommodation market.

Senator STERLE—So, of the 800 that you own, the 400—

Prof. Vann—Currently, no—it is either us or the colleges, which are basically church based.

Senator STERLE—Is that because the industries are not interested in investing in the training of these students in their particular areas, or they just have not been asked?

Prof. Vann—As in major industries like mining?

Senator STERLE—Take the medical industry, for example. You have medical training facilities here. Has the medical industry come to you and said, ‘Look, we don’t see training as a cost; we see it as an investment and therefore we would like to partnership with the university in maybe some accommodation in ‘?

Prof. Vann—Not precisely. We have had various discussions with Townsville hospital about whether there might be some joint accommodation options, but usually those would be in conjunction with some sort of public-private partnership as well.

Senator STERLE—Disturbing, isn't it? Okay. And, of course, part of the accommodation that you provide out here, public transport would be a major issue as well to get the students from here out to maybe where they could seek employment?

Prof. Vann—We have a bus service. There is a bus service that runs that is not too bad. I am sure the students and the staff would like it to run more regularly. In the longer term that is something that we would certainly like to see expanded.

Senator STERLE—If I were a rural student coming to Townsville JCU, what would be the advantages of me living on campus as opposed to finding my own accommodation outside?

Prof. Vann—A couple of things. For one thing you are part of the university community immediately. Particularly if you are coming in for the first time, it is a benefit. Part of the reason we run it and part of the reason it is good to have it on campus is the pastoral care aspect. There are residence assistants, there are people there to support you, and there is a community you can slot into. Whereas if you go and find your own accommodation off campus that would not be the case. You have more direct access to educational facilities like lecture rooms and the library. You do not have to go chasing and negotiating with landlords. On the other hand, you lose some freedoms. It depends whether you want to be part of the on-campus community or whether you prefer to live in the city, I guess.

Senator STERLE—Obviously before the global financial crisis the university recognised that there was definitely a need for expansion in on-campus accommodation. How many extra rooms or beds were you talking about?

Prof. Vann—We more or less left that to the providers to see what they thought would be economic, but 300 or 400 was what was being talked about.

Senator STERLE—So there is still a huge demand out there for rural students to take up accommodation on the campus?

Prof. Vann—Yes. Accommodation has been a particularly problematic issue in Townsville. There is a bit of a crunch at the start of every year as the new students arrive and try to find themselves places in the city. But certainly when the boom was at its peak—and we would expect that this would come back—accommodation was pretty expensive off campus. The other reason that people were looking for on-campus accommodation was that it was actually overall cheaper. It has been difficult for people to find things. Prices have been driven up just by the surge in the economy and, of course, the Defence Force increases also consume a lot of rental stock.

Senator STERLE—I have the chair glaring at me, with the clock ticking away, so, thank you very much, Professor Vann.

CHAIR—Professor Vann, can we thank you very much. It has been extremely useful for us. Thank you for giving us your time this morning.

Prof. Vann—Thank you.

[10.05 am]

LAWRENCE, Ms Barbara Jane, Director, Navigate, Central Queensland University

CHAIR—The committee welcomes Ms Barbara Lawrence from CQU. You have lodged submission No. 479 with us. Do you have any alterations or amendments to that?

Ms Lawrence—No, no alterations.

CHAIR—Would you like to make some opening remarks before we move to questions?

Ms Lawrence—At Central Queensland University we feel there are probably several key points that are affecting the rural and regional access to secondary and tertiary education. The two main ones would be the aspiration and the affordability. Probably most of the things that have been expressed to this inquiry in the past would fall into that in some way, but maybe the aspect of aspiration has not really been explored.

We think that, before assistance to access can be given, it is really the aspiration that needs to be raised. It is not just the aspiration of a person thinking about university or higher education as an option; it is the aspiration of the whole of the community. There is that lovely old expression, 'It takes a village to raise a child'. We think it is probably very much the same thing in our regional and rural communities. We need to raise that aspiration of the whole community for their children to take further study. Very similar to what Professor Vann was talking about, in our communities where we have the boom of the mining industry, there are a lot of people who get left behind. It is the aspiration of those people in particular that I think we are missing out on.

Affordability is obviously something that has been discussed quite a lot, so I will not belabour that. Access to most regional universities is quite broad and quite accessible now. There are a lot of access programs and there is good research by regional universities as to what the regional communities want in regard to that access. But the outreach is still something that is very expensive for regional universities to do, and the outreach is what builds the aspiration and the understanding of the ways that communities and students can access higher education. So we would like to look a little bit more at that and see increased support from the government in regard to that.

The agenda of social inclusion is probably very poignant to regional universities as well. We also need to consider the mature age people in our regional communities, because as the boom and bust happens in our regions, some of the people you were referring to before—male, Indigenous—are affected. The social inclusion aspect picks those up as mature age students who realise at some point in time that if they want to progress further or they want opportunities for their families or to build their communities then access to education is really important to them.

CHAIR—Thank you, Ms Lawrence. Just before I pass to my colleagues, in your submission you say that the new eligibility criteria failed to address the significant barriers for rural and regional students who must relocate to attend university. The ICPA and some other witnesses have, indeed, suggested that there be a separate tertiary access allowance to directly address the

inequity for rural and regional students having to travel to go to university. Is that something you have given consideration to or would you agree that that might be something worthwhile considering as a mechanism to address that inequity?

Ms Lawrence—This university would strongly support that. The work of the ICPA is quite outstanding. Their research and the work that they do in identifying the costs associated with that I would not question at all.

CHAIR—Thank you. You also mentioned in your submission the funding model and the regional loading, and you say that the regional loading model has been unsuccessful. Can you expand for us what you mean by that and what you would like to see as a solution to making that regional loading work more effectively?

Ms Lawrence—CQU receives about \$2 million a year, I think, in regional loading. We have multiple campuses, as a lot of regional universities do. The purpose of that is to take the education to where the people are—in the regions. But it is a very expensive model to do that and it is a very expensive model to offer programs face to face at those smaller campuses. At the present time we are looking at different ways of delivering that. We are looking at a blended delivery approach. I think that is the only way forward for regional universities now. So it may be an opportune time for government funding to look at assisting universities in developing blended delivery approaches. It is not going to be a cheap thing to do because we may have to change the way that we deliver our materials and the opportunities we take to take those materials and the teaching people out into the communities and deliver on sites where we do not currently have the facilities available to us. It may be that we develop infrastructure in some of those smaller communities that are accessible not only by the university in that region but also by TAFEs and other educational groups. It is very expensive to deliver a program to five students. It is much cheaper, obviously, to deliver it to 50 students. We would not want to close any programs on our smaller campuses because we only have small numbers, but those are choices the university has to make for it to be viable. So the regional loading is certainly not adequate for what we are trying to do.

CHAIR—What do you mean by blended delivery?

Ms Lawrence—As you would know, universities are funded, in a sense, on the type of delivery—that is, internal or distance education. It does not work exactly cleanly that way, but it is seen that way. The regional loading is meant to offset some of that. Sorry, I have forgotten your question.

CHAIR—I wanted you to explain what blended delivery is. You mentioned that you were going to move to a more blended delivery model.

Ms Lawrence—It is that blending between the external and the distance ed that we would need to look at. It may be that, instead of enrolling a student as an internal student or an external student—or a flex student, or whatever they are called—we would try and enrol them as a blended student. That mean that they have some face-to-face teaching. They might come in for a week, as in the old residential school type approach. They might be supplemented by the technology that is available, whether it is through podcasting or other things. So they are not an internal student. They do not get marked for being in class, they do not get marked for that level

of participation. But they are not an external student, in that they have the access. So we have to look at different ways of doing that.

Senator STERLE—I am interested in talking more about aspirations. Coming from WA, Senator Adams and I fully understand what the boom can mean to rural and regional Australia and to Perth as well. Is our education system getting the message out to the youth in the high schools that, while the mining boom may offer you \$120,000 a year for semiskilled or unskilled labour and you only have to work three weeks in every month, there are other options out there that you should look at. Are our vocational officers in secondary schools getting that message out?

Ms Lawrence—No, we are not getting that message out. And I think we need to get the message out to not just the youth but also the communities, as I mentioned before. If the community are not supportive of their youth, and even their mature-age people, in developing professional skills then those skills will not come back into the communities. It is similar to what the young women were saying before. If they go out and do their practicums in the communities and they have a good experience then they are much more likely to go back there. If the communities are not supportive of their young people having the education then the communities are not going to grow. So it is an aspiration that has to be built in the community—in local councils and in the schools. It is not just the youth that need to be targeted.

Senator STERLE—How would you do that?

Ms Lawrence—It is a complicated thing, and we have been having a lot of discussions about that at our university at the moment. We do think that some of it is having a blended learning model so that there are not issues of affordability and people moving away from their communities. I think the Youth Allowance program changes are another thing. If they have to move, will they come back? Maybe we can look at providing support, interest and ongoing motivational seminars, whatever we can do, within those communities so that the students do not actually have to move. Certainly in the time when they might be working so that they can get the youth allowance in the future, taking away some of the myths that are associated with higher education would help. Things like: ‘Why would somebody go and do it if there are no jobs you afterwards?’ if the community does not support it. Or, ‘If we let our children go, they won’t come back at all.’ We need to address some of those things.

Senator STERLE—In that case, do you think the universities themselves could probably put together courses more relevant to the regional or rural areas than what they are doing now?

Ms Lawrence—Yes. At the moment we have a project officer out at Emerald who is working with the local communities there to try to understand and seek from them what they would like presented in their communities and what is relevant to their communities. Maybe there will be just short courses that address the current issues but, in the process, it is building the aspiration to actually complete a full university degree, whether it is as an engineer or in a council management role or something like that.

Senator STERLE—This committee went to Emerald a number of years ago. Apart from the citrus industry and the mining industry, what other areas of learning could you introduce in a community like Emerald?

Ms Lawrence—In all of those communities there is a high demand for health services—allied health, doctors and psychologists. All of that is really needed in those rural communities. When you think back to the pressures that were raised in rural and regional communities 10 to 15 years ago, there was a lot of talk then about rural youth suicide. It seems to have gone off the agenda but it is still there. There are significant problems like that in regional and rural communities, not just for people working on properties or in failing industries but also for the Indigenous communities. So health services of all sorts are hugely demanded out there.

Senator STERLE—Do you find, or have you found, that the industries we are talking about are very proactive in talking to the universities to keep the students in their region, or are they just sitting back and leaving it all to the universities and the councils?

Ms Lawrence—I do not really feel qualified to respond to that. The best I could say to you is that the work that we have been doing in Emerald and the communities in that area indicates that, when the university approaches them asking how best we can support them, they have been very responsive.

Senator STERLE—That is great, thank you.

Senator ADAMS—I want to pick up on the comment that you made about suicide. Our community affairs committee currently has a Senate inquiry into suicide at the moment, so it is certainly not off the radar in any shape or form. I just thought I would mention that to you.

Ms Lawrence—That is good to hear.

Senator ADAMS—Can you give me an indication, as far as what is happening at your university, on the deferral issue, with the students who are applying for youth allowance having to work 30 hours a week rather than working to gain X amount of dollars in the way that they have been through, perhaps, seasonal work? Could you comment about that and how your university looks at the two-year rather than the one-year gap?

Ms Lawrence—At the moment, it is a bit of an unknown thing for all of us to respond to. But the indicators from the students whom we have talked to now is that, if they knew they had to take 18 months or two years off, it is such a substantial gap they would have more seriously questioned whether they would have gone to university at all. So I do think it is a significant thing. I think the relationships and the networks that they build and where they are living become extremely important to them, so to expect them to move from that to look for other employment in a different area is quite a big challenge.

Of course, most of our students do study, so even if they are working somewhere for 18 months or two years to achieve the youth allowance they then have to leave that job and go somewhere else to get another job. That is not the same issue for the urban or metropolitan students. They do not have to deal with that. So that is a barrier, and certainly the work that the ICPA has done in regard to the cost of people moving or sending their children away is going to come into play a little bit more with the deferment issues because, dare I say it, it is cheaper to move a 17-year-old than it is to move a 21-year-old because of what they acquire and what they need. They may be less likely to want to live in a college because of their age. They may want to live in a house or be more independent because of their age.

I do not know whether it is a sleeper or something that we have not really looked at yet, but I am a little concerned that if a student finishes year 12 and they are, say, 19 and they then work for two years they will be 21. Their aspirations at 19 and 21 are quite different, but also quite a few of the benefits and even scholarships that are available seem to cut in and out at that 20- or 21-year age group. It may be that by deferring the two years they actually become ineligible for some of the benefits that they may have been able to access when they were 20.

Senator ADAMS—As far as the university goes with the next cohort of students coming in, they may not be looking for youth allowance and there is competition to get a place. How are you going to accommodate that?

Ms Lawrence—I think for regional universities that is not going to be such an issue. It is not that we have masses of places or we would take anyone. That is never the issue. I think it is that regional universities have a focus of supporting their region and doing whatever they can, so it would be very unlikely that a regional university would turn someone away from the region.

Senator O'BRIEN—In terms of the availability of courses for regional students, I fully expect that a lot of courses will be delivered technologically in the future anyway, particularly by regional universities. I am interested in your blended model and the block of face-to-face components. That probably addresses the impersonal aspect, and perhaps the courses that require more self-motivation will have some sort of component to help drive students further in their coursework and connect them back into the idea that they are actually working towards a degree, which might be lost if they are doing it remotely. How do you see universities like yours coping with the technological changes that will come in the future and the fact that many students will be able to stay at home and study? How will you connect them to the path of study? It may be more difficult than it is now.

Ms Lawrence—There are obviously significant costs in that, but I am sure that, as with most things, as technology develops the costs reduce. It is just that when you are always the market leader it tends to be quite expensive for you, and universities probably are market leaders in using technology for education. So it does tend to be expensive upfront. But it is also expensive for the student as a user. If it is possible to subsidise or assist the students who become blended learners and need the use of technology, maybe that is another source of scholarships, bursaries or something else that we might look at in supporting them.

Senator O'BRIEN—The actual hardware technology is becoming cheaper—there is no doubt about that—and the software is becoming more user-friendly.

Ms Lawrence—Yes, that is true. But then, as I said, if you the market leader it tends to be expensive to get going in it and you cannot always wait until the price comes down. You do not want to be the last person to buy a colour TV.

Senator O'BRIEN—Video gaming is leading the way for all of the technologies that universities are going to use, I think, judging by what I read in the catalogues.

Ms Lawrence—There are certainly some good university programs and video gaming too. The students who now receive face to face or who are on campus have what we call 'work integrated learning' built into their courses. It is almost like the reverse side of it in that the

students who study by blended learning or distance education learning need to have the university component built into their courses. I see universities as responding to that as a need, and I think it will happen. It will just be a matter of accessibility to the technology, and the broadbanding issue will become a bigger issue for that.

Senator O'BRIEN—I imagine that coping with block placements in term breaks will be the way that the universities cope with the availability of accommodation where students do go home and vacate rooms during term break. The universities will fill those rooms with students who are coming in for the face-to-face component. How do you think the staff will cope with that sort of rolling student mass?

Ms Lawrence—Regional universities are very flexible and they will cope with that. To some extent it is a good thing to have a continually vibrant life happening on the university campus, and so that is not an issue.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Ms Lawrence. Thank you for being here this morning. We appreciate it very much.

Ms Lawrence—You are welcome. Thank you for the opportunity.

[10.26 am]

DYER, Mrs Robyn, Institute Director, Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE

CHAIR—Welcome. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mrs Dyer—I am also part of a collective of six regional TAFE institutes that are in the process of moving towards becoming a single body. I guess I reflect the views of the regional institutes reasonably well.

CHAIR—I remind senators that the Senate has resolved that an officer of a department of the Commonwealth or of a state shall not be asked to give opinions on matters of policy and shall be given reasonable opportunity to refer questions asked of the officer to superior officers or to a minister. This resolution prohibits only questions asking for opinions on matters of policy and does not preclude questions asking for explanations of policies or factual questions about when and how policies were adopted. Officers of the department are also reminded that any claim that it would be contrary to the public interest to answer a question must be made by a minister and should be accompanied by a statement setting out the basis for the claim.

Mrs Dyer, I now invite you to make an opening statement before we move to questions.

Mrs Dyer—You will have already heard about many of these issues but they are all very significant for us. The financial impact on rural students who move to a metropolitan area or to a major centre is very strong. The cost of travel and accommodation pose an impost on regional students. Also, a decreasing availability of rental accommodation and the living expenses associated with increasing rents are additional problems to that move. There is also a potential environmental impact from the additional travel that may have financial impacts in the future. Certainly, we find that our youngish students need to travel home very regularly, and so there is additional cost in relation to that.

There are a lot of impacts for Indigenous students, and I will refer to them throughout this brief commentary. We deal very closely with Palm Island. We have campuses on Palm Island but a limited amount of training occurs on Palm Island compared to a full range of opportunities for Indigenous people in other Indigenous communities, and the costs there are quite significant.

There are some alternatives. As I mentioned, the TAFE Queensland regional network is a strengthening one. Over the next 12 months or so, we will transition to become a statutory body and work as a single entity. We believe that there is real strength in our functioning as a large organisation and servicing our local needs or our local communities. This is not in any way intended to be a centralising approach but rather a way to get some synergies and efficiencies out of working much more closely together and developing further our expertise of servicing regional communities.

We will have 46 campuses between us and expertise in blended and distanced delivery. Blended delivery is very much a part of our operations, so I am happy to talk about that. The use

of online components comes through a centralised system, which, for us, is my.TAFE, and various other open learning mechanisms exist across the TAFE network. We have some great examples of those. Enrolled nursing, which is offered through a couple of our locations, incorporates video conferencing, online delivery or podcasting, recorded resources and practical components at hospitals and, in some cases, face-to-face workshops. So a lot of blending happens there.

Articulation with universities will be improved through the AQTF project that is underway at the moment. We are reviewing the Australian qualifications framework nationally and we will see some changes in how those articulations transpire. There is a hope to standardise articulation right across the two sectors and to bring us closer together. There is also a lot of work being done on comparable quality systems or mechanisms to monitor quality between the two, and that will certainly help articulation. Strengthening partnerships is important, and we have a good partnership here with JCU, but when you look at our other regional institutes they all work very closely with their local universities.

With respect to implications of current and proposed measures, moving towards a greater participation level of low-SES and low participation groups certainly is very important as a result of the Bradley review, and we know that there will be less of an impact of that requirement in communities such as this where we already have good low-SES participation rates. But increasing participation, particularly for Indigenous people, is a real issue. We have recently run some very successful programs that we call FUTURES, and they have been recognised for awards. We were recently a finalist in the Premier's award. The FUTURES program was designed to take people, predominantly Indigenous people, from disadvantage into comparative advantage. It costs about twice as much to deliver that program as a standard engineering program at a pre-vocational level, and that was the nature of it because of the high levels of support that are required to address literacy and numeracy issues for the individuals but, more importantly, the personal issues of a lot of those people. They are very real issues. Indigenous participation by population in this area is about 15 per cent, but it is about 12 per cent in VET, in our institute, for example. So there is inequity there.

Changes to the youth allowance and the age for independent living allowance may have an impact and see a greater requirement for employment. There are fewer part-time jobs in smaller communities, particularly when I think of our small communities. We have eight campuses across a large region with some quite small communities of only 10,000 to 12,000 people, so there are very few part-time jobs available there.

Increasing contestability in VET funding has focused on the lowest price being the determinant for the allocation of funding, and there is a concern that that will continue in the future. Productivity places are a good example of that. When you look at the participation rates of TAFE in providing for productivity places in our state, it is very, very low, and that is because it does not take into consideration the costs of the public provider. Being able to offer those programs through the excellent facilities we have and the great networks that we have should be an advantage to people who have previously had low participation or low access to training.

TAFE courses may be an alternative entry point to higher ed, and there are some advantages. If you can undertake a diploma program through us, then it ends up being a cheaper option for the overall cost of a degree, but the disadvantage is that fees are paid up-front. Without income-

contingent loans and VET FEE-HELP, which we are moving into, it is more difficult for people to use those pathways.

Another funding aspect is a push across all of our funding sources towards higher level qualifications. This is actually seeing the funding coming away from entry level programs, and therefore quite a number of people are not being able to move into the entry level programs that they require that will eventually give them access further down the track. Apprentice wages are low and therefore extra travel is a concern. Several of our programs require clinical placement in the health courses, and of course they are very important in our suite of programs in regional communities, but they are often quite restricted and require some travel, which is difficult.

An opportunity for us could be the Education Investment Fund but we are finding that the regional TAFE institutes are missing out. In the second year of offer, we have not been successful in attracting any of those funds either. Although working in close partnership with rural universities, they have still not coming to the fore.

The cost of shifting students around is considerable. A review of Abstudy and away-from-base funding for students probably would be advantageous. For educational needs literacy support is needed, and personal issues. Obviously we have funding that provides for those areas in part, but we often find that the very individual needs which require very low ratios of staffing to students have a high impact on the need for those resources.

Senator ADAMS—I would like to pick up on your review of Abstudy and the movement of students for clinical placement. Would you expand a bit more on that, as to why you think it should be improved?

Mrs Dyer—The issue with the clinical placements is a constant battle for us because there are many of us playing in the space and the requirement to have episodes or times of placement in hospitals is critical for real learning to occur. Hospitals have a job to do, which is more than training our students or being a part of the training process. So there is always a tussle between universities, both in our local patches and also we find that the larger universities from metropolitan areas are trying to use regional hospitals to get a regional experience. Demand from those places is very high. In fact we have had full intakes for the last couple of years and we are turning people away because it is based on our ability to place students into clinical placements successfully and give them real experiences in that training environment—that is important.

Concerning general access to Abstudy and the support in being able to meet the requirements and keep Indigenous people engaged, that has always been a problem with people who have had poor experiences in school, to help them to transition into a TAFE environment but still meet the full requirements of Abstudy forms and proof of participation and engagement, those sorts of things. We are looking at whether there are some other ways of making that more flexible and more possible for participation.

Senator ADAMS—As far as the 46 campuses coming together are concerned, do you think that working like that you will be able to resolve some of these issues, especially with clinical placements in the Indigenous Torres Strait Islander cohort?

Mrs Dyer—Yes, I think so. One of the strengths of the six institutes working together is the ability to bring greater access to training into all communities. At the moment in my institute we have about 300 course on registration but there are lots of things that we are not registered for which could be made available without us having to take on the registration—that collective ability. We all work quite closely together in terms of collaborating for access to clinical placements and some of those high-demand areas. The solution is probably a bit more of systemic one. We have been trying to work more closely with Queensland Health to get a recognition of the need to continue to strongly support, wherever that can be managed, and not infringe on the core business of the health system, to make it possible to keep taking people through that valuable set of experiences.

Senator ADAMS—Is there any financial help for your students with clinical placements? We have heard before that accommodation is really difficult for some students.

Mrs Dyer—I do not think they get any assistance with that placement, certainly not through us. It is not an allocation of the program. Those students who are receiving support payments would be able to access some additional for away-from-base training. The vast majority of the students that we put through nursing programs—enrolled nursing is the level we go to—are mature age people who are generally juggling family, often a bit of part-time work in the sector and full-time training. They would not be eligible for additional support financially, so it is an extra cost that is borne by them.

Senator ADAMS—As far as attraction for students into the aged care industry, are you finding that you are getting students coming into work in aged care?

Mrs Dyer—Over the last five years we have certainly had some peaks and troughs. It is reasonably low in our institute at the moment. At one stage we had very, very full groups. It is fairly attractive for international students. It is not at all attractive for young students. It seems to be a cohort of mature age people who are interested in that training. The pathway from aged care into nursing is quite good, so some people take that as an option. Obviously it can suit people who are juggling family commitments as well, because there are shifts all around the place that can be easy—possible; it is never easy—to work around.

Senator O'BRIEN—I was interested in the experience you have with students accessing these blended courses with the issues of technology and cost. What can you tell us there?

Mrs Dyer—Technology is an issue. We look forward to the improvement in broadband services. We run a lot of communication via video conferencing. Not a huge amount of delivery happens via video conferencing, but the cost to us of using video conferencing is about four times what it costs in metropolitan areas. There is a disparity there in terms of being able to get full access from the services. Of course, the quality of the broadband for online delivery and communication is still a problem and is going to be a problem for a long time. It is something we continue to push hard for.

We have a reasonable uptake in online delivery. The vast majority of people coming through are fairly evenly balanced in our institutes between school leavers and mature age people who are seeking a career change or an alternative training opportunity. Many of them have not excelled at school. There is a notion that young people come through geared up ready for

technology. That is not entirely true, either, in our experience. Not everybody is racing in to look for an online experience. We are pushing in the direction much more of blended, so we use the learning management system, myTAFE for us, as a mechanism to engage and to base a lot of resources and to provide opportunities for blogging, texting and interaction, but not too much of the full delivery happens that way. Of course, it differs right across the whole scope.

My personal view is that there needs to be the component socialising. That is so very important. We have also found some other very interesting examples. The work that we are doing in moving to become a single statutory body requires a tremendous amount of interaction and development happening between our six institutes. And as much as we try and very regularly use technology, both phone and other forms of technology, when you get people in the room and you work alongside one another and you can really fully interact, in our experience with our transition, you get far more work done. It is the same with student groups. In a lot of our areas of delivery students are learning from one another as much as they are learning from their instructor. A good number are already employed in the area of study—obviously, all apprentices are. So a lot of the learning comes from the interaction and understanding the experiences of one another and bringing them to the learning process. That is not as easily done electronically. It is a real advantage, it will continue to grow, it has a very significant role to play, but it is not an overall solution.

Senator O'BRIEN—I take it from your answer that you do not see cost as an issue at the moment?

Mrs Dyer—Only in a limited number of areas. Certainly software programs, though being more user-friendly, still incur a pretty big cost. We get reduced rates on lots of software programs, but not in the advanced IT areas—gaming and multimedia. They are still very, very expensive programs. In terms of the cost to students who access state based funded programs, it is comparable between an online program and face to face. Yes, there are the setup costs for students in having reasonable quality equipment and access to broadband based service. I am not sure that that is a prohibitive factor for us at this stage.

Senator O'BRIEN—Will centralisation mean that some of the developmental costs will be centralised and therefore distributed across more delivery?

Mrs Dyer—We are not using the word 'centralised'—that has a very bad notion for us. For us it is actually distributed. When you bring six institutes together there is expertise and real strength in all of those six. Our models are very much about maintaining a presence and the activity but putting various functions in a single place. So, yes, there will, in terms of cost of development of resources. We believe there will be savings internally, too. As you can imagine, six regional institutes all need to do the same things but we do them six different ways. In the future we will do them one way. That does not mean we will remove individuality or the ability to interact with student groups, but we will have a starting point that we will build from.

Senator O'BRIEN—Curriculum wise and resource wise?

Mrs Dyer—That is right, but still with the expectation that we tailor to individual student needs. At the moment we would have a program that is available in college that might also be available through some blended means. It might be available at the workplace delivery model

basing it on the same set of resources, but the interpretation and then enriching of the learning experiences comes down to the expertise of the teachers really.

Senator O'BRIEN—Do you have different issues in terms of recruitment of teachers in different regions?

Mrs Dyer—Yes, we do. A little less at the moment, but, having come through the skills shortage, we had tremendous difficulty getting electrical and plumbing teachers. They were the two big ones. What that meant for us was that we needed to offer enticement to bring those people into staff. In some cases we were still running very short over long periods of time. We ended up having to create HR and IR difficulties for ourselves to attract the workforce we needed—at the same time disenfranchising our existing staff who felt that they should be paid at the same rate. There were a number of issues that came with that. It is better at the moment, of course. I heard Andy make that comment. We will emerge from that quite quickly. I think our unemployment rate here is already the lowest in the country. We are going to see the same impact previously from the resources boom as we emerge on the other side.

Senator STERLE—How are the students recruited with your FUTURES program?

Mrs Dyer—We work very closely with the job networks, the employment services networks, across the area. We have actually taken everybody through a fairly serious recruitment process. In our first program we began with 50 applicants and took them through a work readiness program, which was about getting people ready to learn. We needed to get people there. We needed to get them fed. We needed to make them aware of the responsibilities of participating in a public group. It really was going back to a very basic set of requirements. They have continued to be supported by their job services area. We started with 50 and we came down to 23. We came down to 27 when we started the skills based component—the engineering and construction training. We graduated 23 at the end of the program and we have had a little over half employed at this stage, four months after their completion. It is really good for the very long-term unemployed or for people who had never been employed at all and had come from a serious position of disadvantage. Industry has also been very involved. We have had regular guest speakers to engage with and motivate people. Our normal ratio in a trade area is 14 students to one teacher. We have had 14 students to two teachers. So we have had a counsellor, a student support person and a literacy support person all rolled into one and a trade qualified teacher working with 13 or 14 students all the way through just to keep that level of input happening and provide the support that was required.

Senator STERLE—A 50 per cent employment rate is very good.

Mrs Dyer—It is very good in this area.

CHAIR—Mrs Dyer, thank you very much for being here with us today. We appreciated it very much.

Mrs Dyer—You are welcome.

Proceedings suspended from 10.51 am to 11.08 am

CHRISTIE, Mr Ernest Lee, Assistant Director, Townsville Catholic Education Office

CHAIR—I welcome Mr Ernie Christie of the Catholic Education Office.

Mr Christie—I have fairly much a single issue that I bring to the table. When Indigenous students come from remote areas to go to boarding schools and other schools in our diocese they do not get the rural allowance just the per capita allowance in relation to where the school is located, not where the students come from.

CHAIR—Would you like to expand on that a bit more for us and tell us what you see as perhaps some of the solutions.

Mr Christie—I fronted a Senate inquiry last year in Canberra on that particular issue. It looked as if the legislation was slightly changed. It was up to the discretion of the minister but that got turned around again. In reality, with the new funding arrangements students from isolated areas are not attracting funding according to where they come from when they come to state or Catholic schools. They just attract the per capita funding in relation to where the school is located. So a student may come from the Torres Strait and go to a school in Charters Towers. They would only be funded at the rate that a local student from Charters Towers would be funded at.

CHAIR—So there is an inequity in the way the funding model is happening.

Mr Christie—Yes. If those students had stayed and went to school in their area, they would have attracted isolation funding, which is almost double. If their parents exercised the right to move somewhere else, they would not attract that funding.

Senator O'BRIEN—So the solution is?

Mr Christie—Fund those students at the isolated rate.

Senator O'BRIEN—How do you guard against some sectors within the education system trying to capture that funding—would there be a value in doing that? Are there any areas where we are seeing a concentration of those students, and is that a good or a bad thing?

Mr Christie—I can only talk from our experience, where the relationships have been built up over 20-odd years, so they are not trying to capture anyone. Before any of this funding even happened our schools had relationships with the various communities. For example, I was Principal of Abergowrie College for six years, and we had relationships with people from Hope Vale, the Torres Strait, Yarrabah et cetera—15 different communities. Each of those communities had different reasons for wanting to send their students to the school. It was not just one size fits all.

In the Torres Strait, for example, they do not grow any vegetables. They wanted their boys to learn how to grow vegetables hydroponically, so they were attracted to the rural setting of Abergowrie College. In Charters Towers and Hope Vale, they have a real tradition of working

with cattle and on cattle properties, so that community would send their kids to Columba Catholic College because it has animal husbandry in cattle, veterinary work in cattle and the Cattle Club. Often the schools would build their own capacity to service those students. The curricula they offered served the community. Columba would not have done that otherwise; it costs a fortune to run a veterinary-type curriculum at a school. Abergowrie, for example, would send teachers up to those communities and build relationships, and parents in turn would come down—all cost carried by the college. It was wonderful when finally there was some money in recognition of that. Now that is not happening. St Patrick's, which is the Sisters of Mercy in Townsville, have a strong commitment to Indigenous girls—so much so that they lose enrolments in Townsville. They will be down \$200,000 or \$300,000 next year. They are currently addressing whether to continue their commitment to working with those families because the cost is now prohibitive.

Senator O'BRIEN—I can envisage circumstances where a school in a metropolitan area sees an advantage in cherry-picking the best remote students and gaining the financial advantage of getting them in as well. Is that a risk with this sort of financial weighting?

Mr Christie—From my experience, it is more of a risk for the schools in the metropolitan areas. I will give you an example. In Townsville, all our schools are full to overflowing and they are functioning really well financially as it is, so there is no need to do that—unless there is a need in the communities or parents want to exercise their rights to do that. I can only talk from my experience of our system. It is really about allowing parents to have a choice, not about building up numbers in a school. Our schools do not need those numbers. It is about a real commitment to working with students from those areas. It would be a reality of supporting those students.

I have not even mentioned the health issues of some of those kids. Again, I will talk from my experience at Abergowrie, where kids from Palm Island would come. One year three kids came over who had gonorrhoea. It was a sad case; they had been raped by their uncle. The school had to deal with that issue. We got the health workers in, and the parents did not pay; we fixed that up with funds from the school, for humane reasons. It was not, 'Let's turn our backs on them and let somebody else deal with this issue'; it was, 'We'll deal with it.' It is a financial burden to take those kids on, and they are often not the easiest kids to take. If the funding is cancelled then we will not be able to continue to do those things, which would be a real shame. We have 20-year relationships with a lot of those areas.

Senator O'BRIEN—What is the cost of your proposal?

Mr Christie—I have not looked at it.

Senator O'BRIEN—Has anyone suggested in the past that there is a cost or has the minister said what the differential cost is?

Mr Christie—No, I think when I read the fine print it said that the minister could use a discretion. So there was not blanket funding for every student; the minister could use their discretion and choose whether to. If they wanted to they could scrutinise each school and talk about whether they were really doing what they said they were doing. So it could be looked at case by case. If there was an avenue for the individual school to make a case directly to the

minister about why the school believed those students should get extra funding, it could be looked at case by case.

Senator O'BRIEN—So you would be happy with a discretionary, merit based allocation of the additional funding.

Mr Christie—Yes, I would, because I really believe that each of our particular schools could make a really good case. We are not saying you should just do it in a blanket fashion. That discretion could stop the issue you are talking about—unscrupulous people just building up the numbers in their schools. I believe our schools have built up relationships over many years and that they are doing it for genuine reasons and they would like to continue to do that. If there was an avenue for them to put their proposal through to the minister and have it genuinely looked at, I would be very pleased for that to happen.

Senator ADAMS—Mr Christie, sorry I missed your opening introduction. I am very interested in Indigenous education, especially students from very remote areas being given an opportunity to advance. What funding is there available for them? My second question is about students who drop out—mainly male students, who drop out of school as soon as they can and then later on realise that they need to have an education to gain proper employment.

Mr Christie—Again, I can only talk from my experience with it. Places like Abergowrie have a fantastic retention rate; it is up at 98 per cent. So the students who come have a great retention rate to begin with and it is quite remarkable if you look at it across Australia. We provide all those figures to DEEWR. So we believe that what we are doing is working and that the kids are staying. The extra costs come from doing a lot of vocational education work with them. It is really costly. It is almost one-on-one work sometimes. So classes are of six, seven or eight. To fund those, it would be easier to fill the classes with just straight academic subjects but we do not. The school looks at the needs of the students and try to meet them. The reason that we succeed is that the school works on an individual basis on the needs of each student, and that is really costly. We have a great success. We do surveys on where the students go after school, and those kids do go everywhere—from universities and back to their communities to larger areas and mining companies. We strike deals with various companies who ensure the kids employment after they leave, as well. So our experience is that we get the kids and maintaining them right through to year 12.

The other cost is that often the students, when they come, have really poor literacy and numeracy standards through their primary school. What is happening—and I do not want to knock what is happening in the primary schools in a particular area; I do not know what is really happening there—is that they are coming to our schools with really poor literacy and numeracy. So we often have to do intervention programs and try and bring them up to speed really quickly. Again, that has costs. It is fairly intensive. Again, we are having a great deal of success in doing that.

Senator ADAMS—I think that with your attendance record that is absolutely brilliant.

Mr Christie—Yes, it is. We have a captive market. We keep them happy, they feel fulfilled and we then keep them, basically, all the way through.

Senator ADAMS—There would be a large pastoral care component involved with that.

Mr Christie—There is huge pastoral care. We have Indigenous staff. We employ people from those communities, who also work with the kids in the boarding capacity. That is so essential. The schools have built transition houses so that families can come down if the kids are homesick, can stay on campus and can work with those kids through those difficult times. Again, it is all at a cost, but it is improving their chances of success.

Senator ADAMS—That is great. Thank you.

Senator STERLE—In what age groups are these students, typically?

Mr Christie—They are aged from 13 to 17 or 18.

Senator STERLE—And the families can come down and stay for an indefinite amount of time? Is there a time limit?

Mr Christie—No, it depends on what the need is. Normally, if the student's family or someone such as the elders comes down and just settles them down, they are pretty good. Once they feel comfortable and safe in a place, generally it is okay.

Senator STERLE—I suppose it is a bit unfair to ask for the actual number, but could you supply a rough success rate? Is it 100 per cent or near on?

Mr Christie—I wish it were 100 per cent! It is in the 90s.

Senator STERLE—That is extremely good.

Mr Christie—Again, we have been supplying DEEWR with statistics for ages now. In fact, at one stage they said, 'You're not improving your statistics,' and we said: 'We already have 98 per cent. If you want us to get 100 per cent, we're working on it, but we already have such a good retention rate.' It was just a bureaucratic thing saying, 'You've got to show so much improvement.' They already had that, and we had built that up over many years. So the retention is quite substantial.

Senator STERLE—That is remarkable. Congratulations. Do you find that students' siblings will follow as well?

Mr Christie—Definitely. With the success of their brothers or cousins, they come in. We can get whole families and extended families because of that.

Senator STERLE—Is it basic literacy and numeracy programs that you are running?

Mr Christie—No, there is vocational education as well.

Senator STERLE—Are there any other learning outcomes that are taught?

Mr Christie—Yes, there are straight academic outcomes as well. If a student wants to do physics, maths B or maths C, we really work on it. Again, there is a cost factor because there are smaller numbers, but we really want to give every student every chance to succeed at whatever they do. So we might bus those kids into the local Catholic school in Ingham, where they will do the physics and maths B. We try to give them every chance to do what they want to do.

Senator STERLE—I think that is absolutely wonderful. Congratulations.

CHAIR—Mr Christie, I do not know if you would be able to talk about this or not, but I am interested in the work that you have done following on once the secondary has finished and where they go to university. Do you have any information you could provide to the committee on the work that you have done on tracking where they go afterwards?

Mr Christie—Yes, we certainly have. Over the last, probably, four years we have done destination surveys. I have not brought it with me, but we could track back through places like Columba College, St Pat's and Abergowrie College. We could give you pretty accurate figures where they are available—because you are still using figures from what we are doing. We can give you pretty reasonable destination data, yes.

CHAIR—Thank you. That would be really useful. One of the things we are looking at with this committee, doing both secondary and tertiary, is the link between the two and what is occurring at the secondary level to link those students to either tertiary education, further education or going on to great levels of employment.

Mr Christie—Anecdotally, I was also Principal of Ryan Catholic College, our biggest school. We had three Indigenous students from that particular year. One of them was Matty Bowen, the footballer, and two of them were at university; one was studying accounting and one was studying engineering. They would meet with me regularly for coffee so I could see where they were. They wanted to go in totally different areas but they all were being really successful at what they were doing.

So it was a really hard thing to keep in contact with them over the years. No-one is capturing that information. We certainly look at that when they leave school. After that they start to move all over the state so we do not look at that, but we can give you good figures on where they go.

CHAIR—That would be great. Creating that aspiration in those secondary students has come out a bit through this inquiry, and how you do that and then turn that into going on to either further study or further learning of some sort. It comes back to us, then: is there a role for government to improve the secondary environment so that we have those links into tertiary education?

Mr Christie—I know that there is a lot of research around that shows that it is great to have a good start. It is so essential, and it would be wonderful, but that does not mean that it is a lost cause if they do not have that. We certainly put in place a lot of intervention programs where, if they feel safe and enjoy the experience, they can raise the bar pretty quickly. If you use their interests in vocational education or sport the kids can—and they do—with the help of one-on-one tutoring in the evenings, do it. Often they go from having no study routine to the routine of boarding school, where they have two hours a day in the evenings with one-on-one tutoring. It

can work. You have someone listening to them read and helping them. So they are not lost causes and they really do improve quite remarkably.

CHAIR—That is tremendous. All credit to you.

[11.27 am]

CLARK, Mr John, Principal, School of Distance Education, Charters Towers

CHAIR—I remind senators that the Senate has resolved that an officer of a department of the Commonwealth or of a state shall not be asked to give opinions on matters of policy and should be given reasonable opportunity to refer questions asked of the officer to superior officers or to a minister. This resolution prohibits only questions asking for opinions on matters of policy and does not preclude questions asking for explanations of policies or factual questions about when and how policies were adopted. Officers of the department are also reminded that any claim that it would be contrary to the public interest to answer a question must be made by a minister and should be accompanied by a statement setting out the basis for the claim. Would you like to make some opening remarks before we move to questions?

Mr Clark—Over the past 20 years I have been principal at the Charters Towers School of Distance Education and I have also been active in a range of areas associated with enhancing rural education at a national level. Our school covers a preparatory-to-year-12 range, with a strong vocational education and training component. We offer students the opportunity to access either traditional university pathways or complete up to certificate 3 level in a range of courses. We are able to use this approach through a range of external agencies and partnerships we have with them.

Our school traditionally covers an area of about 300,000 square kilometres, though our students are not restricted to this particular catchment area and come from right across Queensland. Using a range of flexible delivery technologies and face-to-face contact we support students who wish—because of circumstances, limited choice or desire—to be educated in the distance mode.

Our senior schooling pathways are growing as students in rural and remote areas find it increasingly difficult to access the more metropolitan based and focused services. One of the benefits I trust that could come from your deliberations would be an analysis of the social and economic benefits that could be gained by enhancing the senior schooling and tertiary access opportunities for rural and regional students.

Essentially I see both social justice and economic disadvantage to young people who currently reside in remote, rural or even regional centres. In the first instance, young people who are geographically isolated experience this disadvantage at a relatively early age, generally when entering the senior schooling pathways. The opportunities are fewer and the barriers greater than those experienced by metropolitan based students. However, there is also the situation where young people in regional centres are denied either access to a rich variety of senior secondary pathways that would routinely be available to metropolitan students or are completely disenfranchised by the current levels of financial assistance to access tertiary pathways.

To cease, limit or restrict the opportunities of young people from 15 or 16 years of age—the age of entering senior schooling—to access what I consider appropriate senior schooling, TAFE or university does not reflect well on our society. I believe we will have significant long-term

social and economic disadvantage—there will be significant costs to our country. I am happy to take any questions and elaborate on my views.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Clark. You were talking about regional students being disenfranchised by current levels of financial assistance to access tertiary pathways. Can you explain how you see them being disenfranchised and what is wrong with the current levels of financial assistance and how it could be improved?

Mr Clark—I do not wish to get into a financial analysis, because that is something far better done by the bureaucrats who are in those situations. In the conceptual situation of what is occurring, in small regional centres such as Charters Towers or Ingham, students from working class families are completely cut off from any sort of allowances to get to university. Therefore, even with the current changes in the Austudy scheme, those families still do not have any financial support to access university, say, here in Townsville. If you are a council worker in Charters Towers and you have three children who all have tertiary aspirations, you have to dull those aspirations at the start of their life in secondary school because you cannot afford to send them there. It is impossible. Current costs for someone from Charters Towers into Townsville stand at about \$22,000 a year. So if you have got three children, two of them will be in university at any one time. Under the current structures, Austudy will not give them any assistance for at least 18 months. That means a family could be up for trying to find \$44,000 a year—impossible if you are a working person. However, if you are completely geographically isolated, some assistance kicks in.

CHAIR—By way of explanation, when you said ‘18 months’, were you referring to the independent criteria?

Mr Clark—That is correct.

CHAIR—So you are not referring to the youth allowance as it exists, which obviously kicks in straightaway?

Mr Clark—That is right.

Senator O’BRIEN—So you are assuming that they are not dependent under the proposed new criteria in terms of the parental income threshold?

Mr Clark—That is correct. That would have to be done on a case-by-case basis, Senator O’Brien.

CHAIR—Thank you for clarifying that. The ICPA and some other witnesses have put to the committee that there should be a separate tertiary access allowance that addresses the inequity for rural and regional students who, as you have just described, have to travel away to tertiary education. Is that something that you have considered or that you would support?

Mr Clark—I would certainly support it in principle, on the basis that the debate will come about how far the perimeters go out. For example, how far is considered reasonable for a family to relocate their child to go to university? The ICPA may take the line that it is ‘geographically isolated’, which is their brief. But there would be other organisations that would argue that it is

actually outside the centres where universities are based, in areas that somehow, maybe through ABS statistics, could be defined as regional but not as having ready access to tertiary opportunities. For example, Charters Towers has no tertiary opportunities. It has a TAFE campus with a very limited range of courses: aged care and child care, very little else.

CHAIR—Not much in the middle, is there?

Mr Clark—Not much in the middle, and certainly no full-time study.

CHAIR—It would come back then to a requirement to move away. So, if you do not have a tertiary education and there is a requirement to move away, it would kick in at that point.

Mr Clark—Certainly. I also think there needs to be safeguards there; otherwise, you would have people picking and choosing which universities they wanted to go to based on social or family reasons. It would need to be based on the nearest university offering the course in which they had been accepted.

CHAIR—I think that is very sensible.

Senator STERLE—Mr Clark, you said that the only two courses at the Charters Towers TAFE are aged care and child care.

Mr Clark—There would probably be certificate I and certificate II courses as well.

Senator STERLE—What are the main industries around Charters Towers?

Mr Clark—Agriculture, mining and government services.

Senator STERLE—Can I ask the bleeding obvious question.

Mr Clark—That would include health. There are three hospitals, five public schools and a range of government services supporting the mining industry. So it is a bit of a heterogeneous mix of public servants.

CHAIR—What is the population of Charters Towers?

Mr Clark—It is about 11,000 within the surrounding area. It is a bit like Ballarat with Australian federation architecture.

CHAIR—Thank you. That describes it perfectly!

Senator STERLE—Would there be a call for TAFE to introduce courses that relate to agriculture or mining?

Mr Clark—The difficulty with TAFEs in Queensland—and I have been involved at council level with TAFEs—is that they are grouped on cluster models. The TAFE in Charters Towers is actually part of Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE here in Townsville, so it is simply an out-campus.

As such, the market would be considered to be thin and the infrastructure very expensive to maintain. So any available courses are generally delivered both face to face and by videoconferencing. There would be ad hoc courses done. There might be a mine certification course; so you can go onto a mine course conducted two or three times a year. But, as to a sustainable tertiary pathway for full-time students, it does not exist.

Senator STERLE—You said there are five public schools.

Mr Clark—That is correct.

Senator STERLE—Do you think that the schools themselves are successfully targeting the youth with courses that may be relevant to keeping them employed in Charters Towers?

Mr Clark—There are three independent schools as well. It is an education hub. I can only speak with authority about my school. That is why we have a strong vocational education and training component. There are not many secondary high schools that would have a range of certificate III courses, but we do. We deliver in business, education support, agriculture and a whole range of issues using partnerships with external agencies, purely for the reason that quite simply there are many students out there in the senior secondary pathways who do not want to go down the traditional boarding schools structure. I understand that that will always be a very strong highway for those with academic and maybe even different social aspirations, but there is a core group who wishes to stay in the areas. For them to get appropriate education past senior secondary, or even relevant senior secondary, is a challenge.

Senator STERLE—I can respect that. Do you get support from industry?

Mr Clark—Certainly. We are very lucky. We have a strong vocational education and training component and that could not exist unless a range of external agencies supported us—business, community based organisations and community based RTOs, registered training organisations.

Senator STERLE—In what areas do you provide VET courses—mining and agriculture?

Mr Clark—We do not do mining because it is highly specialised and as soon as we do we infringe into the commercial market. But we certainly look at business with an agricultural flavour for those who wish to stay on the land. We have an external agency that provides certificate III in agriculture, beef cattle production, IT and education support for governesses and those who wish to work in it. Next year we will open a certificate III in children's services, again for that early childhood care in which there are great black holes across rural Queensland. So we try to target the courses that we can deliver to a high quality in a flexible way and for which there is a need among our students in alignment with their communities.

Senator STERLE—So you have a catchment area of some 300,000 square kilometres?

Mr Clark—That is the traditional catchment area, but we do have students from elsewhere. For example, we have one student who flies in from Brisbane.

CHAIR—Why do they do that?

Mr Clark—They have looked at the subject offerings of the school and decided that that particular offering in that particular pastoral care setting is what they wish. They pay money to come into our schools. That is why I said that that is our traditional catchment area, but students will come in from outside that.

Senator STERLE—Do you have on-campus accommodation?

Mr Clark—No. I have a shed and they bring a swag—seriously.

Senator STERLE—It will not hurt them—

Mr Clark—We are a low-cost operation, Senator.

Senator STERLE—Are there any public-private partnerships then in Charters Towers?

Mr Clark—No.

CHAIR—Someone to provide the swag!

Mr Clark—But now that you have suggested it, we will offer a hire scheme next year! But seriously, Senator, we do not have the capital base for that. I suppose that one of the minor concerns, other than the fact that we really need to support senior schooling in regional and rural areas as well as an access program to tertiary application, is that the solution would appear to have been over a period of decades to ship children out. All you are doing is slowly depopulating the areas that you wish to have people in. That has been my concern.

Senator Adams, if I could refer to something from the discussion with the last speaker, you indicated the safety net, the recovery of those who have left and who now wish to come back. That forms a large part of our work: students who have gone away, who do not want to be at boarding school and come back to home properties and those who have left at year 10 and four years down the track decide that they need another set of skills to survive in the rural world that they are working in—that is what we do. That is one of our strong points. For many of our students we are the final safety net in terms of education. Hopefully we can engage them and that is why we have gone the strong VET route, because it is relevant to these people.

We still have our university students—we have got one at this university studying law at the moment. However the bottom line is that the university entrance out of our school is about 20 per cent, which is about the national average. It is the other 80 per cent of the students I am concerned about. We do not wish to continue shipping them out of rural areas so that they do not come back. I am quite emotive on that point so please understand that is the concern. We have got to have strong assistance for boarding schools. We have got to have strong assistance to enable all to get into tertiary. But we also need to invest money in the infrastructure of delivering into rural areas, otherwise we will suffer in the long term. I hope that makes sense.

CHAIR—It makes perfect sense.

Senator ADAMS—Just on your last comment about the more mature age people coming back in: what percentage of Indigenous or Torres Strait Islanders would there be?

Mr Clark—In the traditional catchment area we do not have a large number of Indigenous or Torres Strait Islander people. It would probably be around five per cent of our encapsulated population in that area. We do work at Bwgcolman, Palm Island, from here and I have recently had two teachers over there—as late as last week—working with a group of disengaged young men. So we work, but it is generally specific project work and it is generally outside of our catchment area, where we go in and try to engage them in some sort of qualification accreditation process.

But it is interesting to note that in most of rural Queensland there are not many Indigenous people. It is only when you go into the Cape areas. There is a hole in the middle of the state where people have moved on, and that would be reinforced by many of the Indigenous communities too.

Senator ADAMS—On that Palm Island project, have you got any statistics or anything else on a program that the committee could perhaps—

Mr Clark—We certainly have. We also work with some of the high schools in Townsville on that. We recently worked with Kirwan State high School and had great success. Most of those students we worked with were Indigenous. On the island one, we spent two days there last week with a group of 14 totally disengaged year-12 students, who had achieved very little in their schooling, and in that time four were able to be walked through and given some sort of accreditation, with another four with partial accreditation. It does not sound much, but when you consider that these students were really behind the eight ball at this stage of their lives we were quite happy with the success and so was the school we were working with.

Senator ADAMS—And that will be followed up?

Mr Clark—Yes. We are negotiating with the school now to embed a program from our school into part of their teaching practice next year, but where it will go is still up in the air.

Senator ADAMS—I want to ask about the youth allowance. On students and the now two-year deferment to go to university, could you comment on whether they are going to continue with tertiary education or will drop out because they get a job that possibly pays very well and they do not want to let it go.

Mr Clark—I am not completely familiar with the arrangements with the new scheme that is to come into place. However, I have had three children of my own who have gone through university, all of whom are successful and all live out of Charters Towers—which is the perfect example of what I am talking about. In terms of the bottom line, my understanding is that it is two years and \$30,000—that is not correct?

Senator ADAMS—No, it is 30 hours a week they have to work.

Mr Clark—I would see that many students in smaller regional centres, such as Charters Towers, Monto and places like that, will not come back into the tertiary education field. It is just nearly impossible for them to do. There will always be ways around at the higher end of the socioeconomic scale. It is the middle to the lower end that I am concerned about. They will get trapped into having to continue to work. That is my view.

Senator O'BRIEN—Just going back to your example of the council worker with three children going to university, and two at one time, what sort of parental income are we talking about in the family unit you are conceptualising?

Mr Clark—I am going on an example that I know by personal experience in Charters Towers. The husband brings home under \$50,000 and the wife has part-time work and brings in under \$28,000, so you are looking at a total home income of \$78,000. To support two children at James Cook University costs \$44,000, even before you start looking at travel backwards and forwards, textbooks or any of those other things. It is impossible.

Senator O'BRIEN—But that family's circumstance under the proposed scheme, with two children going together, would attract a benefit of a reduced—but some—youth allowance, a benefit of \$4,000 relocation allowance for each student in the first year and \$1,000 each year thereafter, and an annual amount of \$2,254. That is not the amount you were talking about in terms of costs, but it is a significant contribution. I cannot remember the scales to be able to quote you line and verse about what applies, but given that youth allowance runs out, where two students are living away from home, at a parental income of just under \$140,000, it is not an insignificant benefit.

One of the problems I have encountered with this at this stage is that the complexities of the system are lost on many in regional Australia. But, in fact, the parental income thresholds in this circumstance you are talking about are significantly higher, and upfront benefits are provided to students irrespective of the amount of youth allowance they receive. In that first year, each of the two students, if they were going in the same year, would receive \$6,200 plus whatever youth allowance was attracted.

Mr Clark—If it is that the positive, the message has not been sold to regional Australia.

Senator O'BRIEN—I understand the message is not out there, because a lot of people have been led to believe that the cut-off point is \$44,000, whereas that is the cut-off for the full benefit. Under the previous scheme the cut-off was \$32,000 for the full benefit, but the rate of cut-out was greater because the government is proposing to change the scales at which the benefits are reduced.

Mr Clark—If that is the case it needs to be marketed a lot better, but I still believe that it is a vast financial impost on families to get their children to university.

Senator O'BRIEN—We have heard that there is a case for saying that regional Australians who do not have a university that is suitable for them in their community are disadvantaged, as opposed to city students because they inevitably have to leave home and those who cannot get assistance are therefore subject to a greater disadvantage. We have heard that information and I think it is self-evident. Should we be focusing—and Charters Towers is a case in point, because there is some facility there for delivery of tertiary education—on greater availability of mixed methods of delivery to get education delivered and in place for these regional students?

Mr Clark—I think that the universities across Australia have been attempting to do that for 15 years. You have only to see the dispersed campus models that have been evident right across this nation. I think there has been an attempt to do that and it has been quite successful. I do not

know how much further you could go, because at what stage do you start to go from a dispersed delivery model to a watered down model? There is a concern there. I have spent a large part of my professional life becoming somewhat expert in flexible delivery in distance learning. My concern is that often an economic argument versus actual performance outcomes is used to put it in place. I think there are further opportunities, but it needs to be done carefully. My concern would be that state level and independent education authorities, such as universities, would not make that next gamble unless there were a grants framework around it.

Senator O'BRIEN—You think the money will drive it?

Mr Clark—Yes. I think they have gone as far as they can with their existing resource base.

Senator O'BRIEN—I suspect that you could probably pick areas where some institutions have done a lot more than others.

Mr Clark—I am certain that is the case.

Senator O'BRIEN—And if you best-practiced across the system you could probably make widespread improvements to delivery, particularly of that mixed delivery system rather than—

Mr Clark—I agree wholeheartedly with you. There are pockets of brilliance and there are pockets of mediocrity and, by identifying what is good around the ridges and putting together a model, it would be very successful. I think the same thing can be said for senior secondary pathways, though. I have the same concerns that we are perhaps not looking at what we want out of the outcomes but looking at economic and social statements rather than at actually providing opportunities for students. The same argument you have placed could be put forward to the senior secondary model.

Senator O'BRIEN—We have been talking about the developments in availability of high-speed broadband and what that might do. We probably cannot imagine what that will do.

Mr Clark—I will be honest: I wish it were here now. In 2003 our school moved from HF radios to audio teleconferencing. It is 2009, and next year we will move to web delivery—interactive web conferencing. We will not be able to do it. We have the technology, we have the equipment, but the infrastructure in rural Queensland will not allow it to be operated as it should be. So we will be limiting it to one lesson a week when it should be running five lessons a week. The concept of a broadband network is wonderful. However, my concern, again—and it always will be—is that that is generally measured between Sydney and Melbourne or between Perth and Adelaide. It is not measured between Townsville and Hughenden.

Senator O'BRIEN—I am a Tasmanian senator, and we are actually going to get there a lot quicker because there have been some visionary decisions to lay optic-fibre cable with other underground services over a period of time. And we do not have the distances you have. Nevertheless, things will be developing.

Mr Clark—I am envious of my colleagues in Tasmania. They have been talking and operating at that level, far beyond where we have been able to, for some time. I think that there

are a whole range of reasons for that. I understand where you are coming from; I just hope it comes up this way quickly.

Senator O'BRIEN—So do I. We probably need a few decisions at a political level in a place called the Senate to get it happening.

Senator STERLE—I noticed that the chair was nodding.

Mr Clark—The issue about that is that technology is not going to be the solution until we remove the bottlenecks in it. Once the bottlenecks have moved in it, a lot of the issues that I have put on the table and that you have raised with me will start to dissipate. It is embarrassing that in this day and age I still run a mail room because it is the only reliable means of getting things to the students. I am mailing them CDs and DVDs so that they can have their digital revolution of that technology rather than broadband.

Senator O'BRIEN—In a short period of time you will be giving them little packages that they will download and play on the computer.

Mr Clark—We have that all set to go. We have our sites and our repositories online. It is just that the highway between us and the students cannot carry the packages. If you are looking for a trial situation, I am quite happy to step forward.

Senator O'BRIEN—I think there are thousands of potential trials across the country.

Mr Clark—I am certain there are.

Senator ADAMS—I have a question about the population of Charters Towers. How many people live there?

Mr Clark—In the actual town, 9½ thousand. Including the surrounds, 11½ thousand. Of that, the Indigenous population is between nine and 10 per cent. It is an interesting community.

CHAIR—Just on the broadband issue, I assume you would be supportive, if the government roll out the NBN, of them starting in the regions first and not the cities.

Senator O'BRIEN—They have started.

CHAIR—I am talking about the mainland. I know they have started in your region.

Mr Clark—Senator Nash, is that a loaded question?

CHAIR—It is an absolutely and unashamedly loaded question.

Senator ADAMS—I would like to back Senator Nash up on that.

Mr Clark—I would answer that question by saying that it should be rolled out in some of the harshest conditions first so as to see whether it stands up. It would be difficult to make an

analysis if you transferred it between the Townsville suburb of Gulliver and the Townsville suburb of Kirwan, a distance of 10 kilometres. However, it would probably be more valuable if the rollout was run between Bourke and Port Macquarie.

CHAIR—Quite seriously, it should go where it is needed most first.

Mr Clark—Yes.

CHAIR—We were talking about the changes and that middle-income and low-income families are the ones that are likely to be hardest hit. I think that middle-income area is one of the really important areas. Senator O'Brien is quite right: there are some changes which are good, but where we have had a lot of concern from the witnesses is that once you get past the \$43,000 it starts ramping down. So once you get to that middle income you only have a percentage of the overall available. I think this is where some of the difficulty is coming. Certainly the lower end will be better off, and the very high end will be able to deal with it, but it is more the middle group that stand to be caught. That is taxable income, so you can have a family on \$80,000 but they have to pay tax before they even start to take money out to support their students. Is that an area that you think is likely to create some difficulties?

Mr Clark—Again, I cannot make comment because I would need to look at the figures. What I do see are families in the middle range of income who are now making deliberate decisions to leave rural areas to move into urban areas. I am talking about the paraprofessional to professional grouping—the nurses, the teachers, the road engineers. They are all making conscious decisions about this. I have been in the local community for 20 years. I am part of the local scene now. That is occurring. You see children entering into the senior schooling phase and then families relocating to Townsville, to Brisbane, to Rockhampton, to Sydney, to Melbourne, for a whole range of reasons. One of the reasons they give you is: 'We want to set our children on the way to education. We cannot afford to do it from here.' That is anecdotal and that is a cardiac response, but I share that with you.

CHAIR—Yes, and it is a response that we have had from one side of the country to the other. Just on that, given my question before about a tertiary access allowance, which you thought in principle sounded practical, on the basis of what you are saying now not only would that then assist the student to go to university but it may actually mean that it addresses the issue of retaining professionals in regional towns. If you could find a way to financially assist those professionals in our regional communities with education fees and costs for their students, would they then be more likely to stay in those towns? Is that a fair call?

Mr Clark—Some of the things that we removed in the last decade and a half from our financial structures were to our detriment. I am talking there about financial assistance tied to a length of service in a remote location. In Queensland, Education Queensland and the Queensland government have moved to put part of that back into the place, and I would strongly support any tertiary allowance that was targeted for those particular students having a component of re-engagement in their areas or in other areas of a similar nature. The bottom line is: how else are you going to get people back into these areas if all they are worried about is paying their debts?

CHAIR—That is a really interesting point that you raise—some more targeted programs or assistance that goes to some kind of tied linkage, and if you go off to university and then come back there is a benefit for you.

Mr Clark—Even if 50 per cent do not do it—and I cannot imagine it would ever be legally enforceable—you still have a flow back to the regional centres.

Senator ADAMS—Would that be under more of a bonded system?

Mr Clark—That was the old term from my day, Senator Adams.

Senator ADAMS—It is still used with the medical students, though.

Mr Clark—Yes, and it is here at the university. I see nothing wrong with that if there is some financial assistance provided for their education.

CHAIR—It is interesting. It links back to one of the earlier witnesses, who used the word ‘preferential’ for rural and regional. Maybe we need to get to the point where there are obvious preferential pathways or arrangements that are going to enable sustainable communities in the regions.

Mr Clark—I think so. My concern is that in the long term, in another 20 years, I would not like to be driving down the Western Highway from here passing through towns like Hughenden and Richmond. They will be literally deserted. The loss of population in the last 10 years is noticeable. I travel those highways all the time. I hear the same stories from my national networks in rural education and I am certain that, unless we do something now to stop this slow drain, all we will be left with will be populated pockets that are attached to mining.

CHAIR—Have governments—and I mean that from both sides of politics—been too hands-off, do you think, in where we have seen regional Australia go? Should there have been and should there be—we seem to be indicating that—more targeted intervention in some kind of way rather than being hands-off? Has it been too hands-off? Have we allowed regional Australia just to fall apart?

Mr Clark—We are now into personal opinion. I believe that all state and national governments have attempted to do things but, and I state this as a personal opinion, I believe it is a low priority across our nation. Where it will end will, I believe, be with large urban centres and depopulated rural areas, and there will be very few viable communities. Even our smaller states like Tasmania will be suffering the same challenges. Often it is about the perception of isolation, the perception of distance, the perception of service, and so for some people Charters Towers is isolated, yet it is only 140 kilometres from Townsville Airport. But that does not stop people leaving there for a whole range of reasons, and education access is one of them.

CHAIR—That was my final question, actually. I want to get more broadly onto the issue of the perception and your earlier comments about pushing students away and people leaving regional communities. Do we, governments, need to do more in changing the perception of regional Australia? Are we allowing it to become shown as an incredibly negative place? Does

that have an effect or not really have an effect? Again, this is a personal view I am asking for, of course.

Mr Clark—One of my roles is to act as the facilitator of the pre-service forum, which is all of the universities in Queensland meeting around a table as a means of promoting their graduates to move out into the regional areas of Queensland. My role is to facilitate that with all the universities. We meet three or four times a year. The issue, I think, is that there is an acknowledgement that it needs to occur, but it is extremely hard because there does not seem to be any incentive for people to return to regional centres. If you are 24 years of age, you have had five years of university. When someone says, ‘We’d like you to go and teach in Camooweal on the Northern Territory border,’ the question is: ‘Why would I do that?’

There are a couple of reasons they ask that. One of them is that the idealism of many vocations has been watered down. For many people, universities and maybe society in general, the idealism of a vocation has waned. I think there is an issue about assets and the collection of assets and I think there is also an issue about status. If I work in a hospital in Brisbane, my professional status is perceived to be higher than if I am the doctor at Kowanyama, an Indigenous community. So there are a whole range of social issues, and those issues can only be manipulated and changed by a national program. Does that answer your question?

CHAIR—Yes, it does. Thank you very much.

Senator ADAMS—To follow on from that, I have a question about the incentive that would have to be given. If professional people go out to the place that you named for three years and then they want to return to Brisbane to be able to stay at the level that they had left, as far as their professional development is concerned they are not going to lose. They will be far more enriched as a teacher by working in a place like that, even though people probably do not realise it. They certainly would. But they must have access to the area they want to go back to; otherwise, there is just no way that you are going to get people to go out there.

Mr Clark—Education Queensland has some very good strategies for that, and one of them is the ‘boomerang’ strategy: that is where you are left for three years in the cape and that is where you go back to. That means people do not perceive a loss and you have all of those enrichments. I think it is a broader issue, besides just assets and returning to where you were. It is about what you value. Somehow we have diminished people working in rural areas, people working outside of the Hobarts, the Launcestons, the Sydneys, the Brisbanes, the Townsvilles and the Cairnses. Somehow there needs to be a national program across all professions to re-energise that view. That is a very big task for anybody.

CHAIR—There being no further questions, Mr Clark, thank you very much for appearing here today. It has been extremely useful and we do appreciate it.

Mr Clark—Thank you very much for your time.

[12.08 pm]

FRANCIS, Mr Gary Edward, Acting Director, Workforce Planning and Resourcing, Human Resources Branch, Queensland Department of Education and Training

CHAIR—Welcome. I remind senators that the Senate has resolved that an officer of a department of the Commonwealth or of a state should not be asked to give opinions on matters of policy and should be given reasonable opportunity to refer questions asked of the officer to superior officers or to a minister. This resolution prohibits only questions asking for opinions on matters of policy and does not preclude questions asking for explanations of policies or factual questions about when and how policies were adopted. The officer of the department is also reminded that any claim that it would be contrary to the public interest to answer a question must be made by a minister and should be accompanied by a statement setting out the basis for the claim. Would you like to make an opening statement before we move to questions?

Mr Francis—I would, Chair. I have come to the table because the department has a high interest in supporting rural and remote education. Had this meeting been held on a different day, there would likely have been a more senior officer accompanying me or possibly even appearing in my stead. I will give a little bit of background on my responsibilities and also a picture of where we are in the department of education today, because it explains that this has been quite a significant year for us. We have had an election and we have a new minister, a new director-general and new senior executive staff. You would be well aware that the review by Professor Geoffrey Masters of Queensland primary education has highlighted some significant matters that we need to address. You would be aware that the new national partnerships that we have entered into with the Commonwealth have given us additional resourcing and incentive to drive some real reforms across all of education, particularly some that certainly cut into the rural and remote space. I note the conversation that was occurring with Mr Clark. That is an area on which we would like to continue the conversation with some authority.

Within the department my role is primarily around workforce planning as to the attraction and retention of high-quality teachers into our system, so working with universities. Rural and remote education has come into my bailiwick in the last couple of months, mainly because we have really identified that driving high standards of student performance in our schools requires having good teachers in our schools everywhere, particularly where we have identified, through the national testing, that we do need to improve. Currently there is to be a meeting over the next two days of senior executives in the department including all regional executive directors and executive directors of schools. That is why I am not accompanied today. Also attending that meeting is my assistant director-general of human resources, who would have attended with me or in my stead. I have been given a significant briefing and I do have sound knowledge across a wide range of areas but I would flag that if there are areas on which I cannot answer clearly I will seek leave to provide a written response in a timely manner. I would also note that there was a written submission that I believe was provided around July. My area did not have responsibility for rural and remote education at that time. I am aware that that submission has been entered as an official record. I would also seek leave to provide a supplement to that document because the landscape really has changed for us in terms of both focus, through our new leadership, and resourcing, through the national partnerships.

CHAIR—That would be great, thank you, Mr Francis. Regardless of your comments, we are very pleased to have you here so I thank you for being here today.

Mr Francis—Thank you very much.

CHAIR—We will go to Senator Sterle for questions.

Senator STERLE—Mr Francis, I am very keen to hear more about your attraction and retention policy because, as I must confess, I did spend all those years moving teachers around Western Australia. Are there any compulsory country/remote/regional and rural service times for Queensland teachers?

Mr Francis—We do have a statewide transfer system through which schools are allocated a number of points. What happens is that every year there is a meeting of all the regional human resource managers who take operational ownership of the transfer system. They identify vacancies and skill sets to match those vacancies. They will look at the number of points that have been accrued for service in a specific location. That determines someone's entry point into a region. Where we have identified in recent years that that has staggered is this. Over the last few years there has been a slowing down as to the number of transfers, for a range of reasons. For this year we actually set regional targets for transfers internally and for bringing new people in.

I note the earlier comment about people getting sent into rural and remote areas and about there being occasions when people have been on extended duty and unable to get a preferred location. One of the views that is currently held within Human Resources is that we need to revitalise that transfer system, we need to review the points allocated to schools in consultation with the Queensland Teachers Union, who are our stakeholders and partners in that process, and we need to make sure that the system functions so that people who do go out into non-preferred locations are treated fairly. There is anecdotal evidence to say that it has not been. That anecdotal evidence comes through me personally as I am an ex-teacher and I have a wide network of friends. They and their children have a range of experiences that are probably inconsistent so I have a personal interest in ensuring that that transfer system actually functions in the way it should.

We have not reached the Western Australian scenario as yet, and I have met a number of times with Western Australia's DET people around their workforce planning processes. But we are identifying more and more struggles in getting teachers to go into rural and remote locations, particularly people with the skills that are in high demand—so we are talking about senior maths, senior science and industrial technology and design. I could elaborate on some specific targeted strategies around those areas that we are implementing. I could also talk about a strategy that will be subject to the discussions in Brisbane today. It is being developed by our regional executive directors in consultation with Education Queensland. It is to reinvigorate that whole small-school notion. In Queensland we have well over 400 small schools, being one- or two-teacher schools. That is more than anywhere else. They are located across the entire state. Commonly our stakeholders, including the ICPA, are coming to us with concerns about the duration of people staying, about the quality of service in terms of the educational delivery that they are receiving and about whether or not the right people are going into those locations. So

we are developing a strategy to address that. There might be particular areas that you want me to touch on firstly.

Senator STERLE—Take young graduates coming straight out of teachers college. They would all understand about certain schools, so that Camooweal might be worth a lot more points than Magnetic Island. You do not have to be Einstein to work that out. But do they understand that they go there for a set amount of time? Does that give them points so as to be able to put their hand up and say, 'Now for my next transfer I want to go to somewhere that has fewer points'? Is that how it actually works?

Mr Francis—Certainly the second part does. One thing that I have identified is that the first part is not working and has not worked as to communication to students. I do not think it should start when they graduate. I think it should start in their very first year of higher education. In fact, we are starting to work in years 11 and 12 to raise awareness of the opportunities in working within the department. At the moment we have reinvented a strategy and called it 'Make a Difference. Teach'. It is our marketing strategy for Education Queensland. We say that it has three focuses. Number 1 is about teaching as a career. Number 2 is about Education Queensland as the employer of choice in Queensland. Number 3 is about rural and remote locations as preferred destinations for teaching as part of your experience as a teacher. If we have a functioning transfer system, if we have a good communications strategy and if we have the Remote Area Incentive Scheme, which provides a range of additional benefits to people who do work in rural and remote schools—

Senator STERLE—Sorry to cut in on you, but that provides extra benefits as in financial ones and opportunity for promotion?

Mr Francis—The financial ones are provided through the Remote Area Incentive Scheme. Opportunities for promotion come by going into those locations. We certainly do actively market that as to a young motivated teacher. I will be careful about that because there are plenty of people whose motivation is to be the very best teacher that they can be—

Senator STERLE—That is you with your IR hat on now.

Mr Francis—Well, bring them on because everyone needs them. But there are other people who come into teaching because it is a stepping stone to a career through the bureaucracy or within schools themselves or onward and beyond—and no doubt there are plenty of senators and other politicians who started their career as a teacher. So we do have all these things but we need to get clear information into people's heads particularly about the rural and remote opportunities. I noted the notion John Clark referred to about the perception of 'rural and remote'.

Over the last year that I have been in this position a number of schools have shown me what they are doing locally. Kowanyama State School, in Queensland, have developed their own video which they have sent to higher education institutions. The video promotes the town, and working in the town, but it was created by teachers for new teachers. Forgive my technical inexpertise, but the video mentions things like: 'Second-generation phones will not work here. You need to have a third-generation phone if you want to text your friends 24/7.' But what still has not been provided is real promotion of the value of working in rural and remote locations.

Through the ‘Make a difference. Teach’ campaign, we are developing a part of the website that will link video and other images to highlight the advantages of working in schools in rural and remote locations. But a big part of that is about resourcing up our regions—because the regions have a responsibility for getting out into higher education institutions, particularly the ones that are away from the south-east corner, and marketing the department and also marketing what it is like to work in rural and remote Queensland. So communication is something that we really need to ramp up. But it is not only that. It is about getting it into first-year teachers’ heads that, if you are general primary or general secondary, we have more than enough to meet demand but if you are in an early stage of your teaching training and would fit with moving into studying maths or science—those critical areas—and you want to go rural and remote then you are enhancing your employment prospects. We employ about 2,000 permanent teachers a year, and many more in a temporary or casual capacity, but we are not getting that flow in those critical areas. That is national data that I am aware of and that my colleagues in other jurisdictions have shared with me. So it is about getting better communication out to the students.

There is one other proposal at the moment. It is not an original idea. Very few original ideas come from public servants, I have found. This proposal came from a school in an Indigenous community in New South Wales. I think it works in a range of contexts—whether it be rural or remote, high local Indigenous population, metro Indigenous population or a low-SES location. It works with the universities to develop units of study that would be electives in the first instance but hopefully become core units. They focus around community engagement. You were talking about the understanding of what it is like to be in the country. There is some research that was developed. I do have a copy here that I could make available at the end of this session. I have the executive summary here, in any case. It was run out of the Australian Catholic University and looked at rural and remote attraction and retention. It is all about getting people aware of what is ahead and linking them with the community outside of the school. The electives would be framed around the universities having a pedagogical and teaching role in rural and remote areas, but it would also be about community engagement.

Where the model would work is if students go out and do an internship in a rural and remote location. We would see that as a funded option, where we would pay them to go out there and work in a part-time capacity—if they were the right person. While they are out there, the key engagement would be with a community member who is not part of the school. In the first instance, it is about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. So it would involve linking them with a community member and engaging them in some actual research focus that would be completed in the second unit back at the university. We would see that as a key way of identifying and working with our university partners. That is what we really want included in a pre-service teacher education program for the 21st century in state schooling in Queensland—because we are diverse, we are different and our university partners, working well with us, are still delivering broadly generic teachers. The teachers emerge and then we provide significant induction. But, even so, particularly when they go to a rural or remote community, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community or a low-socioeconomic community, they really struggle. Coming into a very challenging location at the start of your career can be tough.

Senator STERLE—That is amazing. From my own observations in the west, a number of the young teachers who get out to these areas become part of the community and feel that they have achieved something. They see the kids go from grade 1 to grade 3 or grade 4. Especially in Aboriginal communities, they will go to their homes to get them to come to school. When I tried

to move them, they did not want to go. They were part of the community. They were playing footy, they were fishing, they were playing golf, they were playing netball or whatever. Teachers in the Kimberley would fight tooth and nail to stay there but in a bigger town. Is it similar in Queensland? Those teachers are still part of the area but they do not want to head back. They are accruing points for promotion. It is a great place to bring up their own children. It is safe. And they escape back to their hometown three times a year anyway because of the school holiday system.

Mr Francis—I have no hard data. I have anecdotal data, through a recent review of the Remote Area Incentive Scheme, that that could be occurring. If it is the right person, with the right fit, and they are delivering, I would have fewer concerns. Although anecdotally it has been put to me that sometimes it is not the right person, it is not the right fit, and they are just availing themselves of the incentives. There are incentives to stay in such a location and then move on to the next school after a few years. Some principals have suggested to me that we need to look at that, and that is exactly what we are going to do.

Senator ADAMS—The biggest issue in rural and remote communities seems to be getting appropriate housing for those people so that they will be attracted to go and live there, especially if they have a family. The other thing is for the partner to get a job. There are a lot of other issues surrounding this. How do you deal with that?

Mr Francis—I can give you some information on housing. I cannot talk about locations or that side of things. From an HR perspective, in terms of attracting the right people, we expect that there would be appropriate housing. Over the past year, I believe the whole of government in Queensland has reviewed all available housing for government employees, including teachers, against a revised set of standards. That process is continuing. I simply agree that we need to ensure that there is suitable housing available. It becomes a local issue, through local accommodation councils, to identify where issues arise. They work through their region which then, in a bureaucratic way, comes back to the facilities area in central office to identify areas of need.

Senator ADAMS—In some of the more remote areas, the Aboriginal communities perhaps, how do you get on there?

Mr Francis—I am aware of no current matters that I have come across in this role. I am also a member of the department's housing committee and I have had no specific things raised in that regard. What I would flag is that the new Commonwealth early childhood educational and care requirements that we are delivering—the 15 hours a week of education services in early-years centres by a registered teacher—are going to create some issues in that area. While we might be able to tick the boxes right now, if we are putting new people into facilities then we are going to require additional housing. That is an area of concern.

Senator ADAMS—I come from Western Australia and I have had a lot to do with the Kimberley. Our biggest single issue is trying to provide appropriate housing for teachers. Have you had any feedback on the new rules associated with youth allowance, especially about how rural students in particular are going to be able to access tertiary education?

Mr Francis—In my discussions with higher education they felt it was a bit early to make a determination on that.

CHAIR—Mr Francis, thank you very much. Please do not feel that anybody else would have been better in your place. You have been extremely helpful and we do appreciate your giving us your time today.

Proceedings suspended from 12.30 pm to 1.15 pm

BYRNE, Mrs Therese Jane, Principal, Charters Towers State High School, Education Queensland

CAPELL, Mr Jeffrey Thomas, Acting Principal, Ayr State High School, Education Queensland

MORRIS, Mr David Michael, Principal, Northern Beaches State High School, Education Queensland

WAGER, Mr Kevin Henry, Principal, Ingham State High School, Education Queensland

CHAIR—Welcome. I remind senators that the Senate has resolved that an officer of a department of the Commonwealth or of a state shall not be asked to give opinions on matters of policy and shall be given reasonable opportunity to refer questions asked of the officer to superior officers or to a minister. This resolution prohibits only questions asking for opinions on matters of policy and does not preclude questions asking for explanations of policies or factual questions about when and how policies were adopted. Officers of a department are also reminded that any claim that it would be contrary to the public interest to answer a question must be made by a minister and should be accompanied by a statement setting out the basis for the claim. Would you like to make some brief opening statements before we move to questions?

Mr Morris—I will just give the context of my school, Northern Beaches State High School. It is 20 kilometres north of the central business district of Townsville. At the moment it has 480 students from year 8 to year 12. The vast majority of those students travel by bus, probably more than six kilometres every day, with some travelling from as far as 40 kilometres away by bus. That goes as far north as Rollingstone, and we draw kids from the main catchment as far south as the Bohle River, which is only five kilometres to the south. We also have students coming from other parts of Townsville.

CHAIR—Mr Wager?

Mr Wager—I am principal of Ingham High School. Ingham is a rural community approximately 110 kilometres north of Townsville. We have roughly 520 students from year 8 to year 12.

CHAIR—What is the population of the town, just to put it in context?

Mr Wager—The total population of Hinchinbrook shire is around 12,000. In the town itself the population is around 4,000. It is a very rural area, agricultural. Sugar cane is a major industry. We have two sugar mills operating in the town which provide quite a bit of work. A lot of it obviously is seasonal. The town's wealth fluctuates depending on the season and the year. At the moment, we have had a good year but last year was not so good—it is just the vagaries of farming. A lot of our students travel considerable distances. The school covers from Rollingstone in the south up to the Cardwell Range in the north, out to Mount Fox in the west and all of the beach communities in Hinchinbrook shire. It is a reasonably homogeneous industry base for the

area but there are other emerging industries such as engineering and manufacturing, but they are still relatively small compared to the sugar industry.

Mr Capell—We are in the Burdekin region. Ayr State High School currently has 540 students ranging from year 8 to year 12. We are partnered in the Burdekin region by Home Hill State High School, which is a smaller campus across the Burdekin River. They have 250 to 300 students. The Burdekin area is very parallel to the Ingham area where sugar cane is the major industry—it is seasonal. Employment rates within Burdekin shire are very seasonal and employers are able to attract unskilled labour through backpackers and so on for that seasonal work. Within the context of the school and the shire socioeconomically, there are both ends of the spectrum—there are very wealthy people and those who rely on benefits and welfare around the Burdekin.

Mrs Byrne—I am from Charters Towers. We are 130 kilometres west of Townsville. We have 370 students from year 8 to year 12. In the town there are three non-government, P to 12 boarding schools and they have day students as well, and there are three state primary schools. The population of the Charters Towers region is about 12,500, about 8,000 in the town. The main employment is in the cattle and mining industries. The unemployment rate in the town is 5.6 per cent but on the school records, looking at the highest earner in the family, 32 per cent are unemployed or on benefits of some description. The socioeconomic index of disadvantage in Charters Towers in quintile 1 is 47 per cent in the most disadvantaged area, as opposed to 20 per cent in the state. In quintile 5, the least disadvantaged, we have no representation in that area. So we have a lot of low-income families.

Senator O'BRIEN—We are obviously interested in aspects of regional educational disadvantage. What can you tell us about the main issues for your school communities in that regard?

Mr Morris—Transport for all the kids getting to school is a significant issue. Obviously students who travel a great distance are having to get up at 6.30 in the morning to get onto busses by seven o'clock. So the length of the day is an issue for them. Certainly moving on to tertiary education is an issue. Over the last four years typically about one-third of our students graduating from grade 12 qualify to go to tertiary education but close to 50 per cent of those would defer because they cannot afford to. Also they are restricted largely to having to go to JCU in Townsville because they cannot afford to travel to Brisbane or to other universities further away. Those are two significant aspects.

Senator O'BRIEN—They cannot afford to because of parental means?

Mr Morris—Yes. In the context of my area, it is a fairly low socioeconomic area with a high level of employment but low-paid work. So it is definitely financial disadvantage due to the parents not being able to afford the cost of university in Brisbane or elsewhere.

Senator O'BRIEN—Do you have any idea what a common parental income would be?

Mr Morris—I could find out, but I do not know.

Mr Wager—For us, certainly the distance is a big issue. The costs for students to do anything outside of the immediate area is considerable, and there is no public transport of any sort. There is a bus that runs occasionally around various areas of Hinchinbrook shire but it certainly would not cater for the needs of students if they wished to travel to Townsville, for example, to study. Therefore they are limited to relying upon other people to transport them down there or for the school to organise excursions or buses. It is quite a considerable cost for parents and the school to ensure that our students are not disadvantaged because of the distance they live from the major centre, which is Townsville.

The other issue for us is that employment in the area is very seasonal, so quite a few of our families rely on the five or six months when the cane harvest is happening to make their income, and often they struggle to find employment for the other six months. For farmers, their income is coming in only during the time when they are harvesting and they are getting returns from the mill. So their income is obviously concentrated around the latter half of the year. Often the school will have to accept debt from parents through the first half of the year until they start to get payments through for the sugar cane.

One of the issues of concern for our people is the gap year. A lot of our students do need to take advantage of the gap year to generate some income so that they can afford to survive when they come down to Townsville to attend university or if they head off to Brisbane or elsewhere. It is a very considerable cost for the families and those children. The costs can appear in a multitude of different ways. There is the cost of finding accommodation and furnishing it, if it is unfurnished; the basic cost of living and the fact that they are accumulating HECS bills while they are university. All of this acts as a deterrent for our students. In fact, if you look at the results of Ingham High School, as a school we perform above average in the state. Our students do quite well. But when you look at the number of students who go on to university, we actually have fewer than the state average attending university. What we do have is above state average taking on apprenticeships and traineeships. By doing that, they are immediately accessing an income and they are not being a burden to their family. It mostly means that they can stay home. They do not have to leave the town. The cost of having to relocate to attend a university is a considerable burden for our students.

Senator O'BRIEN—You are talking about the boys staying home and getting an apprenticeship, are you?

Mr Wager—Yes. If you look at our data, you can see it is through the roof—boys are picking up apprenticeships in the local area.

Senator O'BRIEN—And girls?

Mr Wager—We see girls picking up traineeships. There is a clear division between those two. The girls take up the traineeships, often in the local accountants, the solicitor or wherever it happens to be, whilst the boys are taking up apprenticeships as electricians, plumbers, mechanics, boilermakers, et cetera.

Senator O'BRIEN—Thank you.

Mr Capell—At Ayr State High School we have two specific issues around alternative pathways. We have a TAFE campus, which is a very small campus because it is in a regional area at Home Hill. So even accessing transport to go across to the other side of the river is difficult. We have no other specific alternative pathways for students. It is very school based and school orientated. We do get some success in school based apprenticeships and traineeships and that also flows on. With regard to tertiary education, about 35 per cent of students are eligible, or accepted, under the OP eligibility, but only about 16 per cent to 18 per cent take up those.

I was new to the school in July, so I cannot talk too much historically. However, some case scenarios this year have been around talking to those students who are going to university. Around 90 per cent of the parents of those students are property owners. They have the affordability to go to university. With regard to strategies to overcome some of the cost burdens of going to university, again, the majority of property owners will buy a house in Townsville and their child will stay there and then rent out the other rooms to get additional income to support them at university.

The strategy of students whose parents are average wage earners, or are basically wage earners, is scholarships. If they do not get a scholarship then their third option is a gap year. Anecdotally, from talking to a deputy principal who has been at the school for a while, the take-up rate once students start gap-year employment is then diminished probably by another 50 per cent. Those students are usually lost to full-time employment because their pathways and life choice change is around that.

As I have said, currently, out of our cohort of about 100, we probably have 20 students who are eagerly awaiting scholarship notifications. Probably 10 of those students have not even told their parents they have applied for university, because they know there is no affordable way that they can do it. Again, from talking to a deputy, anecdotally a lot of students do that; they just apply. If they get a scholarship they will tell their parents; if they do not get a scholarship, no-one knows anything about it.

Senator O'BRIEN—You are all very well aware of the proposed changes which would provide upfront assistance for dependent children who have to move away from home to study?

Mr Capell—Yes.

Senator O'BRIEN—You are all well aware of income threshold issues and the like? We were talking to John Clark from the Charters Towers School of Distance Education earlier. Clearly, he was under a misapprehension that a family, with two kids going to university, with an income of under \$80,000 were ineligible, whereas in fact they were not and they would have received benefits, a start-up scholarship, a relocation allowance and rent assistance.

Mr Capell—When you asked whether we are fully aware—as of yesterday, I became fully aware. That is only because of our participation here today.

Mr Wager—I have a copy of this, and there are certainly things in there that will be of benefit to our students. I was looking through it, and one thing that struck a chord was the fact there is an increase in the parental income test threshold. I am not sure whether that increase is beyond a

CPI increase, whether there is a significant increase over the previous one. I am not aware as to how that was calculated.

Senator O'BRIEN—It is calculated in two ways. Firstly, the base threshold has gone from \$32,000-odd to \$44,000-odd. Secondly, the so-called taper rate has changed from 25c in the dollar to 20c in the dollar. That means that the cut-off point for any benefit—for example, if you have two kids at university—goes from \$79,000 to \$140,000. There are many variations to it.

Mr Wager—But that is a very good, significant improvement. I am sure that will help a number of our students.

Senator O'BRIEN—It seemed to me that the student population that you are talking about is the group which would benefit the most from this set of changes.

Mr Wager—The one concern that I do have is the gap year—the 18 months, the 30 hours.

Senator O'BRIEN—But you do not need that if you are independent. If you are under the parental income thresholds, you do not need to take a gap year at all.

Mr Wager—No, but there are students who are just outside that. If their parents are at \$140,729, they would not have to undertake the 18 months. That is my understanding.

Senator O'BRIEN—No, the parental income threshold at that end sees a removal of all benefits except for rent assistance, which goes to, I think, \$168,000. Firstly, if the student is eligible for any youth allowance at all, even a dollar, and they have to move away from home to study, they get the \$4,000 in the first year and \$1,000 in subsequent years; they get the \$2,254, I think it is, per year; and they are eligible for rent assistance as well—you would have to look at the scales in the family income to determine what they get. At that end of the scale, that group with parental income between \$80,000 and \$140,000, there is a significant increase in benefits available as a dependent without a gap year, without the need to prove independence. But beyond that level there is no access to Youth Allowance and, if you wanted to establish independence under the new test, you would have to establish employment of at least 30 hours per week over an 18-month period.

Mr Wager—To me there seem to be a lot of benefits in the package, but it is the 18 months that I am concerned about, simply because—well, not simply; for a number of reasons. One of them is the fact that 18 months is effectively two years for those students and it is not possible to defer university two years, so they would have to reapply.

Senator O'BRIEN—But that is not right. It is possible to defer for over two years. Some unis—a lot, in fact—will take you in the middle of that second year.

Mr Wager—They will; it depends on the course.

Senator O'BRIEN—Yes, it does.

Mr Wager—Yes.

Senator O'BRIEN—We have asked this question about two years deferral and we have invariably got the answer, 'Well, yes, we are going to go to that.'

Mr Wager—I am pleased to hear that, because normally it is a 12-month deferral at universities. That is great. The issue, though, in terms of the independence of the students, is that having to do 30 hours per week for 18 months in a rural setting, where the work is often seasonal, would be very difficult. For example, some of our students may decide to take 12 months off to accumulate funds to assist them and their parents to pay for a university education, for the accommodation and so on, and they could certainly earn the \$19,000 by doing seasonal work, because seasonal work can be quite well paid. The problem that they would really have is doing 30 hours a week for a consistent, 18-month period of time, and in the rural centres I think many of our students would find that very difficult—much harder than someone in a major centre, who, if they did opt to take the two-year deferral, could get a job down at the local shop or in the local whatever and that work would go on for a considerable period of time. But when your area is, as we are in Ingham, very much a seasonal employer it does become very difficult for those students to accumulate the 30 hours. That is my biggest concern—the 30-hour component. It would be easier even if it was an amount of money during that period. But the 30 hours requirement is really going to prevent quite a few students from being able to access youth allowance after the gap year.

Senator O'BRIEN—I think there is a concern that that amount of money, if I can put it this way, could be easily accessed by those whose families have a means to create an employment opportunity to put that amount of money into an income somehow.

Mr Wager—Yes, I would certainly accept that. The concern would be that others whose parents are not in that position may be penalised.

Senator O'BRIEN—yes.

Senator ADAMS—Mr Wager, what is the population of Ingham?

Mr Wager—There are around 12,000 people in Hinchinbrook itself. In Ingham, which is the major centre, there are roughly 4,000 people.

Senator ADAMS—I come from rural Western Australia, so a 12,000 population catchment is pretty big as far as students living in a town that has under 2,000. Who is going to employ them for 30 hours a week for the next 18 months knowing full well that, after all the training and the work that they put into them, and in a rural community normally they become a jack-of-all-trades and are very handy after 18 months work, they will then be going on to university if they meet the criteria for the youth allowance. Once again, when you get down to the smaller centres, it is terribly difficult. That student will have to relocate to a larger area in order to get a full-time job and, really, 30 hours is just about full-time. Where do we go then?

Mr Wager—In Ingham I certainly have examples of students who have had to relocate to Townsville to work and not stay in Ingham. They immediately go to Townsville, and they have the added expense of relocation and supporting themselves, along with all the emotional things that go with that. It is a great difficulty for them because it also means that it is so much harder

to save, and one of the great purposes of doing the gap year is so that they can save money to help themselves get through university without having to spend too much time in the workforce.

The same applies in Ingham. I am sure there are employers who would think twice about taking on those young people when they know their intention is to leave. One of the ways that can be overcome to some degree is through traineeships, where it is supported by the government and where they will be taken on as a trainee and complete their Certificate II or III or whatever it happens to be. Some employers we have certainly do that. Actually our school captain from last year deferred for a year and has worked in a local business. They have been willing for her to complete her certificate course with the intention of her leaving. But not every employer is of the same view.

Senator ADAMS—Then we could go further out to the remote Indigenous communities where you have students who really have done the hard yards and want to go on. It has been probably twice as hard for them to get to the level where they can go to university. There is just no employment whatsoever there. It is hard enough for someone who has come from a rural area, but for those remote people it is such a huge change in their culture. Everything is really difficult. I have a big problem with the 30-hour a week stipulation simply because I have seen, having lived in these small communities, how difficult it is going to be for them. How many of your Indigenous students, in the schools that you are involved with, look to go on to university?

Mrs Byrne—In our town we have an Indigenous population of about eight per cent and in my school it is about 30 per cent. About one student per year will go on to university, so it is not very many. There are lots of reasons around that. Some are not eligible to go to university, but leaving home is a big thing for our Indigenous students. We find that they really do not want to leave their home.

CHAIR—If there is an Indigenous population of eight per cent in the town and a 30 per cent population at your school, why the discrepancy?

Mrs Byrne—We have three private schools in the town, and most of the Indigenous kids come to our school. The Catholic school has a high percentage as well.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Senator ADAMS—Could these students go through TAFE?

Mrs Byrne—There is not much access to TAFE in Charters Towers. We have very limited TAFE options. There are a couple of courses: they can do business or certificate II engineering and that is probably it. In terms of doing online courses, in Charters Towers only 48 per cent of people have got internet in their houses, as opposed to 63 per cent in the rest of Queensland, and for our Indigenous students that would be even lower I would imagine. I do not have any data on that.

Senator ADAMS—So really there is not much opportunity for them to go forward, apart from doing their certificates—

Mrs Byrne—A lot of kids do traineeships and apprenticeships. Even when they do apprenticeships, they have to be sent away to do the TAFE component of that usually. That is another issue.

Senator ADAMS—What about in the other areas?

Mr Capell—We are very comparable. We have about 25 per cent Indigenous students at the school and around seven per cent in the full population because of a Catholic school in our area. The annex of the TAFE at Burdekin offers a very small number of courses. There are zero of the technical things that reflect a university or tertiary based education. They are around the practical components—the engineering and so forth. The actual courses offered are considered to be at the lower level rather than at the higher and intellectual level. Traineeships and apprenticeships are highly sought after, and those are the majority of students who do have some gainful activity after school. Again our statistics show that the majority of the unemployed after year 12 are Indigenous.

Mr Wager—We have approximately 10 per cent Indigenous population. Very few go on to university and a number do go on to TAFE, though the TAFE offerings are extremely limited. We often ask for certain courses to be run at TAFE but we just cannot get the numbers for TAFE to justify running the courses. As a consequence, very little is offered and it tends to be the child-care and hairdressing type courses that are run. One of the disappointments we have at the moment is that the numbers are not there for the scientific aid course to continue. That is unfortunate, because when you have sugar mills running that is something that can provide employment. That is a frustration for us.

Mr Morris—Last year we had one Indigenous student who went on to university out of six who were in that year 12 cohort. Basically one-third of the mainstream students were eligible to go on to university. There is a significant disadvantage for Indigenous students there as well as the disadvantage of the number being retained from grade 10 through to grades 11 and 12.

There is also the whole social and emotional aspects when families are dislocated when students are required to move to chase work or go to university in Brisbane. That is another factor. In terms of means testing and whatever, that is not accounted for. I think there needs to be some accounting for the social and emotional stress on families. If they are able to afford to send their child to Brisbane to go to university, there are all the additional costs of the family trying to catch up, travelling down and moving furniture down as well as the strain on the family.

There is also the loss of social capital from a community. Large numbers of obviously intelligent students have to leave the towns to pursue a university degree. So there is an effect on communities which is detrimental and a disadvantage for people in small communities as opposed to in cities like Brisbane, Sydney or Melbourne.

Senator ADAMS—And the problem of trying to attract them back again.

Mr Morris—Yes, absolutely.

Senator ADAMS—Do you have any solution to how we can attract students once they are qualified back to their communities?

Mr Morris—Decentralising a number of services from larger cities, getting things like trade training centres and other larger industry out and away from the bigger cities so that there business and employment opportunities for the young people back in those outlying centres is a solution. Obviously there is a limit to how much you can do that, but at least if it is more regionalised there is potential for providing those opportunities. Particularly with the way of the world in its use of the internet to do business now, if there were incentives given to businesses to get out of Sydney, Brisbane or Melbourne and set up shop in places like Townsville, Mackay, Rockhampton or Ingham, where they can still do their business electronically, that would create some opportunities for people to have those businesses in those outlying areas.

CHAIR—On that, what sorts of incentives would you see? Are you talking about things like zonal taxation?

Mr Morris—Yes, financial incentives for a business or a company to set up, whether it be through tax or other rebates. I think it would be essentially through taxation.

CHAIR—The reason I am asking this is that it is a bit of a recurrent theme now. So government intervenes in such a way as to give preferential treatment to a business going to the region?

Mr Morris—Yes.

Mr Capell—Can I comment on that. In my past life I have seen examples of that in the numerous shires and areas throughout Queensland. That type of thing is really driven by the local council and at the local level. If you see the local council being proactive in setting up industrial areas and giving incentives to set up a business, that gets reflected in the school, provision of traineeships and developing those pathways and futures for our students as well. Who delivers that now? In my experience I have only seen it at a local council level.

CHAIR—Would it be fair to say that the principle should apply at the next level of government? If it works at a local government basis where that incentive arrangement operates, would it be fair to say that if you applied that at the next level or the next level again of government that that same principle should apply?

Mr Capell—Again, from what I have seen it has not been in Rockhampton or the large centres; it has been in the rural and remote areas, especially out around the Roma and Charleville areas. They are small businesses but those small businesses provide a multitude of opportunities for our students in developing different pathways and opening up their futures.

CHAIR—The bigger picture obviously relates back to the education issues that we are talking about. If we can grow the regional communities, make them more sustainable and attract more business and more professionals to the towns, then there is more capacity for those towns to provide better educational facilities, which then would encourage students to stay because those things are on offer.

Mr Morris—It is that whole erosion of social capital, and it would probably address a whole range of issues, including getting doctors back into the bush. If there is a bigger centre to go to it becomes more viable and would become almost a self-fulfilling prophecy.

CHAIR—Senator Sterle.

Senator STERLE—Chair, I have questions but, with your indulgence I would like Senator O'Brien to continue his line of questioning. I will give my time to Senator O'Brien.

Senator O'BRIEN—Thanks. Ms Byrne, you did not give us the perspective of Charters Towers in answer to my original question, which was to give us a bit of an outline of the educational disadvantage in your area—although you did do that in your opening in part.

Mrs Byrne—The main things were access to uni, which we talked about before, the cost of accommodation, leaving home and that sort of stuff. I spoke about access to trade courses. One of the things that causes disadvantage is a bit of a one-size-fits-all approach. It does not matter whether you are in the city or in a regional area, you get the same amount of funding for things. Everything costs us more. For instance, with the Building the Education Revolution, it is great to get that money, but we get 20 per cent less—not money but goods for our money. It is the same with maintenance of schools. So, when you look at the resourcing for schools in regional areas, we might get the same as the city schools but our money does not go as far, so the kids are at a disadvantage because the resourcing is not as good. Sending our staff away to professional development costs us more in time and money. For a two-hour professional development course they have to go for a full day, whereas in the city they go for two hours with a small amount of travelling time.

There is staff experience and the turnover of staff. That is another thing that impacts on kids' education in regional centres. We tend to get people who come up from Brisbane to teach. They stay from three years and they go back to Brisbane. I do not know the answer to that, but it does make a big difference.

Senator O'BRIEN—How many teachers at your schools, collectively, grew up in the areas that the schools are in?

Mr Wager—We have quite a few in Ingham. It is quite amazing. We are a little bit different. We have a lot of staff who have been there a long time. We have very experienced staff. We certainly get the younger ones coming and going after three, four or five years, but we have staff who have been at the school for well over 20 years. We have quite a few staff who attended Ingham high school and have come back to the area and have continued to teach. That gives us a real strength. Those people are committed to the community.

Senator O'BRIEN—Are you the exception?

Mr Wager—Me?

Senator O'BRIEN—Not to you but your school. You may be the exception in a very positive way! Your colleagues may want to comment on that!

Mr Morris—At Northern Beaches, approximately one third are Townsville born and bred people.

Senator O'BRIEN—And they could have done all of their education in Townsville, couldn't they?

Mr Morris—Yes. Approximately one third have gone through and finished at JCU, doing their teaching degree, and are now teaching in Townsville.

Mr Capell—We would reflect exactly the same.

Mrs Byrne—We must be the odd ones out. I think we have one who grew up in Charters Towers. Mostly they come from Brisbane and sometimes Townsville.

Senator O'BRIEN—Can you think of a reason why you would be different from Ayr or Ingham, except for being further from the coast?

Mrs Byrne—That might be part of it. It is not a preferred location. I am not really sure of the reason. I do not see it as being a long way from the coast—it is only 1½ hours—but people tend to. I do not know why.

Senator O'BRIEN—Who would be the main advisers for students as to their career pathways and tertiary education opportunities at your schools?

Mr Morris—All of us would have a guidance officer. Unfortunately, we do not have a full-time guidance officer through the staffing allocation, but we see them as very valuable people, so we make sacrifices elsewhere in the budget so that we can have a person full time. She is primarily the key adviser and also the person who organises most of the career visits to universities or TAFES. The whole package around career would be through the guidance officer and through individual teachers in each class.

Senator O'BRIEN—If you want the students in your school communities to understand where they fit in this proposed new scheme, the guidance officer would need to understand it for students to get the necessary information or they would need to understand the departmental website to be able to get it themselves?

Mr Morris—Yes, particularly because the guidance officer goes through it with each of our year 12 students who are applying for tertiary entrance. They go through the process with them. That would very much be an awareness thing for students, and the guidance officer would be responsible for making sure that students can see the possibility for them to go to university.

Senator O'BRIEN—We have heard evidence elsewhere—I suspect there is a bit of generalisation—that everyone was told that the pathway was to have a gap year, establish the earning pattern to be independent and then you could get youth allowance. Is that what people in your school communities understand?

Mr Wager—No. For some students that is the better way to go, but some students need to go straight to university; it is in their best interests and their parents are able or willing to make the sacrifice so that they can start from day one. It is put there as an option, certainly. We will get speakers in from Social Security and so on to speak to the students and explain to them what their entitlements are once they finish school, so they get the information from the source. But

certainly the guidance officer is also a key. It is put there as a path but it is not something that we hold up in lights and say, 'This is the way we recommend.'

Mr Capell—I suppose in our situation—and it is probably reflected across education in Queensland schools—it is through the SET Plan process. In doing interviews with students around the SET Plan when they are developing their education or training pathway from year 8 onwards, either from year 8 selecting year 9 subjects or from year 9 selecting year 10 subjects, a lot of students have already made their mind up and say, 'I am not going to go to uni because mum said it is too dear.' Initially in those early years they have already developed an opinion around it; tertiary education is devalued. 'Go out and get a job.' As a school we have a responsibility to show them the different elements and some alternatives to be able to do that. However, based on subject selections and what they can do, really it starts in grade 9. If they take a vocational pathway through subject selections it is very difficult for them to change across to a tertiary element at a later stage, in grades 11 and 12.

Mrs Byrne—I had an interesting conversation with a year 9 boy the other night. He told me that he wants to do engineering at uni but he wants to do a school based apprenticeship so that he can fund himself to go through engineering after school. He hopes to start his apprenticeship in year 10 and have a year or so after—

Senator O'BRIEN—Would his family have a significant income?

Mrs Byrne—No.

Mr Capell—Another developing scenario with tertiary based education is through cadetships, as I think they are called. Students are looking to gainfully access employment knowing that those employers will put them through a tertiary based study as well. That is an extremely fast-growing area of interest for students and for parents, because it takes away that burden. Whether those incentives can recognise or help those corporate based choices may be something else as well.

Senator O'BRIEN—Do you find there is a gap between the sexes as to those likely to pursue tertiary education?

Mr Morris—No, it is fairly even balanced.

Senator O'BRIEN—We have had evidence to the contrary—a suggestion that there is a much higher level of tertiary participation among young women than young men.

Mr Capell—When we look at those students who are taking the pathway to tertiary, we have a lot of boys in the scientific field, and that is probably a reflection within our school. We have a very strong scientific and engineering background and in offering students opportunities there. Most of our boys are taking that pathway. If we did not have strong course offerings in that area, that may be reduced. That is our story.

Mr Wager—Approximately 22 per cent of our male students and 24 per cent of the female population go on to university. So it is relatively similar.

CHAIR—I think one of the issues, as Senator O’Brien quite rightly points out, is a lot of confusion around the changes. We have found that from one side of the country to the other. I think though that some of the difficulty for people is coming when they are comparing \$371.40 per fortnight they could have got under the independent classification under the old arrangements. Senator O’Brien is quite right—those bottom thresholds have been lifted, but of course once you get to that point the full amount starts decreasing. It is then the crossover between parental earnings and how much they drop off from that full amount. Even with some of the other additional funding that is not as much as they would have got under the independent classification. That point, in that middle-income area, is where people are experiencing a lot of difficulties with the changes.

Thank you very much for being here today. It is great to be able to have such a collective view from principals in the region. We really appreciate you taking the time. It has been very, very useful. Thank you.

[2.06 pm]

MURRAY, Mr Dale Bruce, National Administrator, Youth+, Edmund Rice Education Australia

CHAIR—Welcome. Do you have anything to add about the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Murray—Yes. I am the principal, at the moment, of the Edmund Rice Education Australia Flexible Learning Centre Network, which is a mouthful.

CHAIR—It is indeed. Would you like to make some opening remarks before we move to questions.

Mr Murray—Yes. I thought I would give you an overview of what the Edmund Rice Education Australia Flexible Learning Centre Network is so that you are not in a vacuum. There are two bits to it, really. There is that part which is in Queensland at the moment. The second part—what we are about to do in 2010—is a new initiative of Edmund Rice Education Australia called Youth+, which will develop responses for young people who are marginalised from mainstream education across the nation. I will talk to that further when you ask some questions about that, if you like.

For about the last 20 years I have been working for Edmund Rice Education. If you are not sure who that is, it is the educational wing of the Christian Brothers organisation in Australia. The brothers have divided the provinces up. The Oceanic province sits across the country, and Edmund Rice Education has taken responsibility for 40 schools. The vast majority of those schools are mainstream Catholic fee-paying private boys schools—places like St Kevin's College in Toorak or Ignatius Park College here. They work with middle to upper class young people.

About 20 years ago the order took a step back towards the founder's direction—that is, Edmund Rice—to work with young people who are disenfranchised or marginalised. About 20 years ago we began some of this work in Brisbane. In Queensland at the end of this year there will be six schools. They are registered non-state schools, in the tradition of Edmund Rice. They are Catholic schools in that sense, but the people coming to them would not be experiencing liturgy or the Eucharist on a daily basis. They are small schools. The largest will have about 90 young people in it. They are all young people who have, either formally or informally, slipped through the cracks of the mainstream education setting. Ninety-nine point nine per cent of the young people we work with would be from the state setting. Very few come from the private sector.

This year, we currently have enrolled across the state around 500 young people. We have turned away just over 2,000 who were referred to us. Simply because of the way we operate schools, they are too full. The sites are: Logan City, which is just south of Brisbane, one in the city, in Brisbane; one in Deception Bay, which is a new facility we have just built in partnership with the state that sits on state land; one in Noosa; one here in Townsville; and one out in Mount

Isa, which is in the process of being registered. We have just purchased a second-hand facility there that we are refurbishing. So they are the schools.

We have about 120 staff, ranging from teachers to youth workers, support staff, psychologists, social workers et cetera. The cohort of young people are aged between 12 and 23 years. There is a large percentage of young mothers. Twenty-five to 30 per cent are Indigenous young people, and about 48 per cent of the overall population of the schools we work with in Queensland is young women. So it is not all naughty grade 9 boys.

In that sense, that is what I am currently looking after in Queensland. Attached to that are a number of outreach services that work literally on the streets with young people. We have seven of those. They are a bus with a teacher and a youth worker working with about 15 young people on a daily basis. Those services have fantastic retention because they are very small groups and they use community infrastructure as the places where the educational framework takes place. They use PCYCs, local computer labs and libraries. What happens there is you get this fantastic re-immersion in the community, where young people who felt like they had been outside the community are out doing things in the community again.

They are working quite well. We are building a new facility in Gympie as we speak. We are developing another facility in Ipswich into next year. As I said, we are in the process of registering a new facility in Mount Isa; we have just purchased that. The Mount Isa one, in my head, would be the first step out into the rural aspect of this conversation. We are currently aware of about 75 to 80 young people in Mount Isa who are probably in the middle school age, are all Indigenous and are not in school. They are the ones we know of. We are also aware of a range of another 50 or 60 kids heading toward the senior phase of learning not being at school and not having been at school for a fairly long time. How we know that is we have an outreach running there at the moment. We are knocking on doors in the morning, picking kids up, taking them to a site and working with them. Their brothers and sisters are running out, saying, 'We want to come to school.' We are saying, 'No, you're too little.'

Over the last couple of years we have been working mainly with the education department in the Isa and the Kalkadoon nation to develop a response there. As fate would have it, the Mount Isa Christian College closed and it became available for purchase. Edmund Rice Education Australia bought it through a bit of haggling, and we took ownership of it last Friday. Now we have to refurbish it. This leads into some of the questions. Staffing it is complicated, as you would be aware; as soon as you step outside of the metropolitan areas, it is complicated, particularly around incentives for staff and particularly in places like mining communities, where rent is extraordinary. For us to buy facilities to house people is complicated, so we have to work out how we do that.

We have been lucky with our staffing arrangements, though, because we are quite specialist in the nature of the work that we do, so we are getting more and more people who have a sense of dissatisfaction with the mainstream classroom environments and are looking for something different. In recent staffing additions we have been getting really good applications. Even in the Isa we have had enough to work through and employ people that look okay. We have a small advisory group in Mount Isa that has been helping us build toward this next step. They will all be Indigenous kids. The push will be for us to take nine-, 10- or 11-year-olds who are not engaged in school. That is complicated because we do not really want to run primary schools for

this cohort of kids. It is not like you want a flexible learning centre for primary schools to transition to the flexible learning centre for adults. It is better if a young person can maintain at a mainstream high school; they get a wider cross-section of choice. But a lot of the kids we are talking about, particularly the 13-, 14- or 15-year-olds, will not ever walk back into a mainstream high school. Once they have fallen out of there, they will never walk back in there again.

As soon as we began this work in the Isa, the next conversation that our advisory group has been interested in is how people want us to go to Doomadgee, to Dajarra, to run stuff up into the gulf country and all that. We have applied for some of the Youth Connections money to see if we can do something in the gulf area. We will see what happens if we get it. Also, in the mid-west of Western Australia around the Geraldton region we are beginning some work, which leads me to the next bit: Youth+.

As I said, I have worked in this field for 20 years and for the last eight of those years I have been the principal of this network of schools for young people on the margins. When Edmund Rice Education Australia was born in 2007 out of the amalgamation of the four provinces of the Christian Brothers' organisation, the board of Edmund Rice Education Australia, which sits across the nation, asked me to generate a report on what I thought could happen for this cohort of young people from the metropolitan areas and the wider rural and remote areas, with a particular focus on young Indigenous people. For some time we had been generating a report on that to take to the board; however, in August the board got antsy and wanted something to happen more quickly. So I wrote a three-page report and gave it to them, and they endorsed the development of an initiative called Youth+.

Youth+ has four main pillars. One is the creation of flexible learning arrangements involving accredited non-state schools, not necessarily in the Catholic sector but in the religious institute group of schools' sector across the nation, such as I just described in Queensland. That is the central pillar. The reason for that is that, if you think about what money is available to the youth sector in the nation, the only long-term recurrent money is through schools. If we are thinking about creating these opportunities for marginalised young people, we need to access that money. So we create schools and we register schools and we try to comply with all the requirements in doing that. Without the infrastructure of Edmund Rice Education Australia, that would be a very complicated thing to do. The centre pillar of Youth+ is the creation of more flexible learning arrangements in schools across the nation, in partnership with the states and territories.

Research advocacy and partnership is another portfolio. We are currently working with three universities on three Australian Research Council grants. One is with this university, one is out of QUT and one is out of James Cook University. We are doing some research on a variety of things. I can talk about that if you want. We have a range of partnerships with places like Education Queensland, Brisbane City Council and non-government agencies. That is the research advocacy and partnership pillar.

The other pillar is non-school related initiatives. A whole bunch of stuff comes to us around supporting young people who are trying to get into school. Life Without Barriers is a national care organisation that fosters kids out; it brokers all of that. They have about 1,200 young people in New South Wales in care. They have asked to us begin personal learning plans and screening assessment procedures for every young person who comes into their care with some educational

psychologists that we employ. This is to develop some more leverage as these young people go back into the mainstream system. Instead of fronting up to a school with a young person in care and saying to them 'Off you go', we are going to get a package together with them to support them back into school. That is just about to start. It is another non-school related initiative.

The most recent non-school related initiative which we have been funded for is the Bridge project. It is a \$3 million project out of the Queensland state government that is designed to work with 12- to 15-year-old people who are in contact with the juvenile justice system, in residential care programs or in child protection services. There will be three teams: one in Mount Isa, one here in Townsville and one in Deception Bay. The teams work on a very intensive 10-week program developing things like self-regulation, advocacy, self-efficacy and resilience for that group of kids. They will have five kids for 10 weeks. This program is to get the kids ready to go back to some educational framework—and it will not necessarily be to us. Although, having said that, I think we are the only place to go to in Mount Isa. That is the program and it is just getting up and running now. That is that portfolio.

The fourth area of work in the Youth+ initiative is something that we have not done but it is to do with the transition out of high school for 17- to 25-year-olds. This cohort of young people has been really marginalised. For most young people who come to us and who stick with the program, there is the next step. As you would be aware, at every transition point you lose people—that is, from primary to high school and from high school out into the workforce. We are really keen to figure out how we can support young people to transition to more positive futures. We have watched, particularly as the economics change in the nation, this group of young people become the highest unemployed group very quickly. At the moment in Logan City, and it would be the same in Mount Isa, you can see—these are hidden figures—that 15- to 23-year-olds are becoming the group with the highest level of unemployment. So, from our point of view, it is a bit frustrating when we work with somebody for three, four or five years to get them ready to transition to somewhere and, because there is no work and because they are competing against such a mainstream cohort, they basically fall over again. That is what we have been doing.

The success is extraordinary. We are talking about young people who have not been in schools for years in some cases. They find us, we work with them and they get some traction again. I am really interested in the next step: transitioning to positive adult lives. How we go about that I am not exactly sure yet, because it is more complicated, obviously, with adults. As I said earlier, the states and territories are very supportive of us. They fund us in all sorts of different ways. I basically juggle deals wherever I can to make it add up. Roughly, it is about \$20,000 a head. It is a bit cheaper as you get into town, but if you are at Mount Isa you are looking at about \$20,000 a head to run these schools.

I was in the Territory last week talking to the CEO of the education department. We are beginning conversations with people in the Territory around something in Palmerston. They want to talk about Alice Springs as well—the town camp stuff—but that is complicated work. We would not want to rush into stuff like that. If you compare that to having a young person in detention for a year in town here, it would be probably cost \$110,000 a year.

The other piece of research I would like to do, and we have begun discussions with a university, is to try to map the economic benefits—economic in a social sense as well—of

having these facilities in communities. What does it actually do for a community? We are working with people in poverty. As you know, poverty often brings dislocation from social inclusion. What the schools provide is not only an educational framework for accredited learning but also a wider framework for attachment to a community. What has been really interesting is to watch these places as they grow, like the one in Townsville. We bought an old primary school here about five years ago. You watch the way the community starts to build itself around it, because their kids are there. You struggle to push away some of the people in the community, because they are complicated and are probably not who you want there. It is balancing all of that. You watch young people get hooked on these places. We are talking about kids who have not been at school. At most sites we are sitting on around 65 or 70 per cent attendance. The question people normally ask is: how do you measure success in these places? My measure is that kids are there. If you have 70 per cent of 500 kids attending on a reasonably regular basis and there were 500 kids who were not attending anywhere, that is getting somewhere.

The other thing we do in each place is feed everybody. At the moment we would be feeding around 500 young people every day because they are hungry. I have lots of other comment around rural and remote stuff, around what is going on. We have places in the mid-west of Western Australia asking us to do stuff. I have sat in meetings with shire councils and all that sort of stuff. Some of the places are just too small. Some of these towns are slowly winding down. There are schools with a population of, say, 300 kids or something like that and maybe 200 turn up every day. You cannot even begin to think about how you would establish something in the town because there is just not the infrastructure to support it. I really do not know the answers to some of these things. It is often a plea from the councils for us to pick up some of these young people who have fallen through the net. Mullewa is a good example of a town outside Geraldton. I do not know whether this is the same group that travels around the nation and hears this stuff, but there is a fellow called Don Boyd from Western Australia, from the organisation SPERA, the rural and remote mob. I think he gave a paper.

CHAIR—We started in WA.

Senator STERLE—The name does not ring a bell.

Mr Murray—He has been talking to us. We have been invited to begin some work in the Geraldton region. He worked for the Western Australian department. We have been talking to him about what that would look like and how that sits on the ground in the west. We will start with a small outreach program so we get a feel for the community and the kids out there. In any town the size of Geraldton, which I think is about 30,000 people, there are at least 100 to 150 young people of high school age that are not attached to a school. They will be in a census somewhere, but they are not going to school. That is my experience over the last five years, and the reason we have developed this response of Youth+ is to try and do some of this work. The interesting thing is that we have now got invitations from Moree and Echuca, and there are about three in South Australia, but there is a limit to how much four of us can do at a national level with this. That is a snapshot of what is going on.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Murray, and congratulations on what you have done. It is quite extraordinary to sit here and listen to what you have done in the communities in an area we really have not had much contact with.

Senator STERLE—You talked about mining towns in your opening statement, Mr Murray, and obviously Edmund Rice Education Australia could not operate without funding. There are no ifs or buts about that and it is good to hear that governments are getting behind you. What about the large mining companies or those captains of industry where your schools are centred? Have they been approached? Are there ongoing conversations or is there just no interest?

Mr Murray—The only one I can really talk about at this stage is in Mount Isa. There have been approaches. The mine in Mount Isa is very much tied up with the community and it does a lot of work, as you know, but it is probably on really big infrastructure like the new showgrounds and all of that sort of stuff. They are not so focused on buying a bus and things like that. There is some personal politics with that mine around who is the principal of the local high school and who is second in charge of the mine. They are kind of close and so there is stuff there in the community. Strike all that from the record!

We have had some conversations with the mine regarding transition of apprenticeships and things like that, but again the cohort we are talking about is so far behind the eight ball compared to kids coming out of the mainstream high schools or catholic colleges in Mount Isa. We are talking about 15-, 16- and 17-year-olds who have got a reading age of grade 2 or 3. Scaffolding those kids up to that level is a big ask. In terms of their homelessness and substance misuse and all that sort of stuff, we are lucky to keep them safe and keep a roof over their heads. In general, there are a few kids who could get there, but trying to get most of those young people to a point where they could engage in an apprenticeship at the mine would be complicated.

Senator STERLE—It would be wonderful if they could get apprenticeships in the mine, but surely there are other avenues of work around towns that these students could be targeted for if you have got the host employers who are willing to step forward and put themselves in that position.

Mr Murray—We work closely with a range of agencies. In Mount Isa we partner with and host a Sydney based company called Break Thru Employment Solutions. They have just secured a Get Set For Work contract, so they will sit in our site and we will have young people who we think are ready to go into those programs. But it is almost one to one in this sort of relationship. It is a bit different to your normal Get Set For Work programs where you farm young people out to jobs. This is a really focused and intensive piece of work. I hope that will have some traction there.

Senator STERLE—You say that the test of the positiveness of your courses is attendance, and that is fantastic. Do you have figures for this committee—and you can take it on notice if it is easier—on people coming out and then going into employment?

Mr Murray—It is hard to track. Often when people leave us they disappear off into their worlds. The latest figures would be in a paper on the website that has some information about where young people transition to.

Senator STERLE—That will make it easy. We can check that.

Senator ADAMS—Coming back to Western Australia, you were talking about Mullewa, and there are a number of other small towns. This is where we have problems. The eastern states are

so much more heavily populated, so a small town here is probably a very large town in Western Australia and we do not have many of those. We probably have three or four and that is it, with Geraldton being one of them.

Mr Murray—Exactly.

Senator ADAMS—But it might be possible to start something over there, as you have indicated, and have it as a hub-and-spoke type thing, perhaps, just to get the program going.

Mr Murray—That is the intention, yes. At this stage we are looking at starting a sort of outreach, but it would be a bit bigger than an outreach. We would probably work with around 20 or 25 young people in Geraldton. I think that in early December we will get information regarding the Youth Connections funding from the federal government. We have applied for a funding arrangement in that mid-west region. If that were to be realised, it would allow us to create three more teams. There would be one up towards Esperance—or not Esperance. What is the place up north?

Senator ADAMS—Karratha?

Mr Murray—Not that far.

Senator ADAMS—Roebourne? Not that far up?

Mr Murray—Yes, but up that way. There would be one out towards Mullewa and another around Wannanup. So it is sort of speaking out across the mid-west region.

Senator ADAMS—Meekatharra and Three Springs—anywhere around there?

Mr Murray—Yes, Three Springs was one of the places. It is trying to cover those regions. They would be more about connecting young people, like brokerage services, as opposed to a daily education program such as we would offer in an outreach. We have done that on a number of occasions. Once, along the Logan-Ipswich corridor, we had some funding from the old Central Purchasing Unit out of Education Queensland. It was not to run an educational program as such but to provide brokerage services for young people to be linked to another service—Get Set for Work programs, health services, mental health services, substance misuse services or homeless services. Often what happens is that young people get disconnected from community infrastructure, and then they get really lost and fall over again. So that is kind of what we are hoping for. It will depend on whether the funding gets off the ground.

As you would be aware, the federal government has really reshaped the funding that goes into the youth sector, and that has had a lot of smaller youth agencies around the nation all running together trying to form consortiums to hold the money and figure out how they are going to rebuild the infrastructure they place on the ground. So there has been a lot of competition, and people have been building situations where one agency joins with another really quickly. It would be really interesting to see how all this goes when these agencies start getting funded, because developing the capacity to run partnerships like that is quite complicated. It may get funded that way, but in my head I wonder whether a lot of it is tied up already in big

organisations—whether the Mission Australias or the Red Crosses have it. Perhaps those bigger agencies will come in and get the tenders because they have people who write tenders.

It changes the flavour of what happens in small communities. It was very interesting to watch what happened out of Darwin and down towards Batchelor and places like that when the intervention happened. Tonnes of money was poured into agencies, but big agencies came in and took it over, so they swallowed up the workers out of the smaller agencies. So things that had had close relationships with small communities, with 100 kids or something like that, disappeared. So it will be interesting to see who gets the money out of this Youth Connections funding.

Senator ADAMS—The reason I was asking about that area is that it is about to really explode with all the mining companies and so on going ahead. So it would be a great area if you could get the money and work it as a bailiff or something to show what can be done.

Mr Murray—To come back to the other senator's question, in the west there has been an approach from one mining company to us. They are talking about traineeships and that kind of thing again.

Senator STERLE—Traineeships with Indigenous people or with those that have fallen through the gaps?

Mr Murray—They are saying Indigenous, and we would be saying Indigenous and those that have fallen through the gaps. But there is often a vast difference between saying these things and actually making them work.

Senator STERLE—Don't we know it!

Mr Murray—Yes. We are talking about young people that have extraordinarily fractured lives and a whole range of really complex experiences. They take a lot of healing to get to a place where they are going to be going to work every day and be happily in their traineeships. It is not impossible—I am not saying that—but they are not well-adjusted mainstream kids coming out of grade 12 at Geraldton High and getting into a traineeship. These are a different cohort of young people. But we will have those conversations with the mining company over there for sure.

CHAIR—Any further questions?

Senator ADAMS—Just on the youth allowance, you are saying you do not really follow your groups once they leave you, but are any of them going on to university? Do any of them want to go on to university or are any capable of going on to university?

Mr Murray—We have got two ex-students that now work for me as teacher aides, and they are at the point now where they are in their second year of uni doing teaching. And we have just applied for some national partnerships funding. I run a pretty big RTO as well, a registered training organisation, and we are trying to work out, if we get this money from the National Partnership Agreement on Improving Teacher Quality, how we can build the capacity of the RTO to deliver—it will have to be jointly badged with a university somewhere—up to a diploma

course. We will identify the workers that we have got—I employ a fairly large number of Indigenous people who are unqualified, apart from culture, which is a fantastic qualification—and provide that professional development opportunity for adults. There are also a number of young people with us at the moment whom you could offer the opportunity to step into a youth worker role. They are students with us now, but they have shifted.

So it is about the capacity for the RTO to do that and then step it through to a point where we can transition from the diploma course in our RTO into a university. If we get this national partnerships funding sorted out, there is a possibility of that happening. So I have looked into how the RTO can do that.

What I have been focusing on in the RTO mainly is providing cert I and II courses for young people in schools so it builds up the accreditation package for kids to get their 20 points and a Queensland Certificate of Education. But the other part of the RTO is we run cert IV in train the trainer and cert III and IV in language, literacy and numeracy. We work with so many young people who have got such poor literacy skills. I am an English teacher by trade and I cannot teach anybody to read or write; that is a primary school thing. We are struggling with this stuff all the time, particularly if you are working across a couple of different language groups, with young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. So there is all that complication.

So we have written that course and that has just been approved by the VET organisation. The other one is in career development for young people. We have written a cert IV course for that as well. We train teachers to do this stuff and we farm that out across Queensland. The teachers come and do it and pay us, and I put the money back into the schools.

Senator ADAMS—Are you working with the TAFEs at all?

Mr Murray—TAFE is tricky. Our kids really struggle in TAFE, because TAFE is very different to the model we would use. Some kids out of our cohort go to TAFE and do all right, but again it is pretty independent, and often if your behaviour slips a bit you do not last. It is interesting: I had a group of kids once at the Logan site, I remember; I had them enrolled in a TAFE course around some art thing. And TAFEs are big institutions. They would get on the train, and we did all the train trips with them. They did it three or four times with me—this is years ago—and it was going okay. One day I was not going with them or something, they had to go on their own, and someone had changed the sign on the door, saying, ‘The lecture is not on here today; it is in this other room,’ or whatever, and they just went, ‘Oh,’ and literally you could not get them to ever go back. We are talking about people who have really been hurt in big institutions and they struggle to get back into it.

Senator ADAMS—I am done, Chair.

CHAIR—Senator O’Brien.

Senator O’Brien—Sorry I missed your opening comments, Mr Murray, but I did hear you talk about a scale issue. You mentioned a school of 300, with 200 attending, and suggested that that was too small for your model to work, if I understood you correctly. Could you explain that a bit more?

Mr Murray—It would be somewhere like Mullewa, for example, a small community, where they have got a school with about 300 kids enrolled there, and on any given day there might be 50, 60 or 100 who are not going to school, because you sit in the street and you talk to the kids. The vast majority are Indigenous kids; they are just sort of floating around. Some of this stuff gets complicated because, if we were going to put something into a community like that, we would not be able to get workers to go live there, to start with. That is the first issue.

Another issue with this sort of stuff is shown with what happened about five years ago in the Cherbourg-Murgon region in Queensland with the Cherbourg-Murgon education group. Actually, the Christian Brothers were running an outreach there for kids who were undiagnosed but the vast majority had foetal alcohol syndrome or some undiagnosed disability. We had about 25 or 30 young people in that outreach we were working with there. The community then asked us to start a school—create a new flexible learning centre there for that group of kids. One of the things that would have happened in a community like that would be a bit or like what I said about Mission Australia: if we come in and do that, we actually then fundamentally take away from the mainstream high school. In that case, taking 30 or 35 young people out of that school would have dropped its rating and they would have lost two staff from the school. We also start to go and take money out of other NGOs in the youth sector, because we build wraparound services. These are the sorts of conversations I have with communities when they invite us in: ‘This is what we’ll do if you want us to do it. Invite us and we are up for it, but, remember, it changes the landscape of what you have in the community.’ There, the state was in the conversation with us and they said, ‘Well, we don’t want that to happen.’ I went, ‘Yeah, of course.’ So we didn’t.

In other places they will invite us. I think Mullewa is a complicated place. I do not know who we would get to work there. I think we are going to struggle to get workers to go to Geraldton. From what I understand, there is a huge shortage of people teaching in rural and remote in the West. They are all on temporary visas and all this sort of stuff from other parts of the world. There are all these language issues, cultural issues and cross-cultural awareness issues. Currently we have three people in Geraldton we are working with who have accepted positions for a couple of years with us. I think we will be okay. It is complex in that sense, yes.

Senator O’Brien—I have spoken with some of the communities up on the Cape and one of the problems is that families go bush, take the kids and they may be gone for two or three years. When they come back the kids have not been to school, they are lost and re-integrating them is a problem. That is the system you are working in.

Mr Murray—That is what we are working in, yes. The complication of that is that these are flexible learning centres. They get funded at the highest recurrent grant money we can get out of the feds and out of the states. But that also relies on counting the kids at the census dates in February and in August, which is around attendance. Typically what happens in Queensland would be that the state system holds most of their young people until the end of February before they start flicking them out, because they are looking for the numbers as well. We get this real spike in March of grade 9s being referred—past our census date.

There is a funding thing about it. You could fund it in a different way around participation. I know in Western Australian there is a different kind of model around care schools for participation rates. You could fund it on that, but that has complications as well. It is a bit of the

game you have to play with this stuff, I suppose. We build budgets around what we think the numbers will be. We have got to a point now where these schools are there in the community long enough to know that, say, at the Logan site, there will be 90 young people next year. We have had over 400 referrals in the last term to that site. Mount Isa will start with 30 kids next year. We know we could do that tomorrow, so we keep it small. The other thing about this is that if you get above 85 or 90 young people on these sites, if they all turned up on the day—they are complex young people. They are great kids, but they are kind of out there.

Senator O'BRIEN—Name us a government funding model and someone will point to a game that is played so that one group will maximise their advantage and others will find that they are disadvantaged because it does not twist the way that it needs to to fit their circumstances. I suppose that is a problem with any sort of bureaucratic model.

Mr Murray—That is right.

Senator O'BRIEN—There is no magic solution for any of them.

Mr Murray—No. I have been thinking about going through EREA in Melbourne, where we are based, and lobbying and leveraging government around this issue but, in reality, what are we saying? We want to change the census arrangements for currently 500 kids. The government is not going to do that. There might be other ways of getting money to support it, which we have been successful in doing, whether it is cash or whether it is like here in Queensland, where we have five or six teachers who are literally seconded out of the state system to us. So there are those kinds of structural things that we put together to get that level of support.

The young people who disappear and go bush literally just disappear for ages and turn up again years later. There is a lot of work in trying to hold those kids and give them an opportunity to get some language that is going to work for them. The next question around going to university and TAFE et cetera is around aspiration. You are not talking about families that have long-term histories with universities or higher degrees or any of that sort of stuff. You are talking about families that have been generationally unemployed, so there is often no aspirational sort of stuff around that.

CHAIR—Thanks, Mr Murray. I am just wondering when you sleep!

Mr Murray—Not a lot in more recent times; it has been very busy.

CHAIR—Obviously you do an extraordinary job of filling a hole where things are falling through the cracks, and this inquiry is looking very broadly at secondary and tertiary education. What do you see as improvement in the role of the federal government in what you are doing? Is there anything that you see that the federal government could do for the type of educational delivery that you have that they are not currently doing? I do not necessarily mean this particular government; I mean federal government in general. I am very happy for you to take that on notice and give it some thought as well as answering now.

Mr Murray—Yes. I kind of have an idea. As I said at the start, really the only long-term recurrent money to the youth sector is for schools. That holds us in a place where we can fund things, and we will not be gone in five years time, like a lot of youth agencies that fall over with

these sorts of things. Part of my responsibility in this organisation is that when we build things and create them, they are there forever; they are not going away. But wrapped around the school infrastructure is this social inclusion kind of idea. What sorts of levels of support are there? In the past we have been brokering and partnering with other agencies that have substance misuse support, homeless support, mental health support, women's support, teenage pregnancy support—that sort of stuff. We bring those places with us and wrap them around us. That works to some extent but there is something around the long-term maintenance of those kinds of partnerships that is very complex and requires an enormous amount of administrative support plus governance.

At the end of the day, the school is the lead entity in all of these things. They are registered schools, so you have to be careful about how you manage the governance of that. If there were potential for long-term social inclusion funding to be wrapped around school frameworks, I think that would be a step in the right direction. From what I have watched for the last 20 years, particularly in these schools—and my daughter is in Somerville House, which is an elite private girls' school in Brisbane—they become focal points for the community, where those things 20, 30 or 40 years ago might have been church or those sorts of places. There is a shift there, so schools become the focal point, particularly these schools that become this place of inclusion. So if you can bring more service to the sites that are well funded then I think there is the capacity to develop inclusive practice around those places and people will feel connected. I am talking about a cohort of people who are disconnected and often really struggle to get to health services and to walk into a mental health service in Mount Isa or even here, for example. So it is about trying to build places of inclusivity. My experience has been that, like all families, we want to educate our kids to the best of our ability.

We are talking about a small percentage of young people. I am talking about probably one or two per cent of the nation's young people, but they represent an enormous cost if we do not do something about their capacity to engage in a productive and positive life. It is about breaking that cycle of poverty that unfortunately seems, from my experience, to be growing in the nation. So it is about investing in those places to develop other services that wrap around—health services and mental health services. The level of undiagnosed disability that we face on a day-to-day basis is extraordinary. It really blows us over and we think, 'What do we do with that?' Then there are justice services. Young people are drifting in and out of the justice system all the time and it is really complex. It is about creating a place of inclusion that has a value base around it.

My final remark would be to say thank you to Edmund Rice Education Australia and particularly to the Christian Brothers, who have been able to step from being a very strict Catholic order 40 or 50 years ago to saying yes to all of this kind of stuff. It has re-envisioned some of their work, I think.

CHAIR—Mr Murray, thank you very much. We do appreciate you giving us your time today and it has been extremely useful for the committee.

Mr Murray—Thank you.

CHAIR—That concludes today's hearing. Thank you to all witnesses who appeared. Thank you, Hansard.

Committee adjourned at 2.51 pm