



# The delivery of VET in regional, rural and remote Queensland

**Report No. 1, 57th Parliament**

**Education, Employment, Training and Skills Committee**

**February 2024**

## **Education, Employment, Training and Skills Committee**

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<b>Deputy Chair</b>	Mr James Lister MP, Member for Southern Downs
<b>Members</b>	Mr Joe Kelly MP, Member for Greenslopes
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### **Acknowledgements**

The Education, Employment and Training Committee ceased to exist on 13 February 2024 following a motion agreed to by the Legislative Assembly. Its portfolio responsibilities were transferred to the Education, Employment, Training and Skills Committee, as were Inquiries into matters including the delivery of VET in regional, rural and remote Queensland.

The former Education, Employment and Training Committee had adopted its Report 43, Inquiry into the delivery of VET in regional, rural, and remote Queensland, prior to its dissolution. The Education, Employment, Training and Skills Committee has accepted the report unamended and agreed to its tabling in the Legislative Assembly.

The committee acknowledges the work of the former committee in undertaking this Inquiry, and the assistance provided by officers of the Department of Education, the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training (formerly the Department of Youth Justice, Employment, Small Business and Training) and TAFE Queensland.

All web address references are current at the time of publishing.

**Appendix E** at the back of this report lists abbreviations and acronyms used.



# The delivery of VET in regional, rural and remote Queensland

Report No. 43, 57th Parliament

Education, Employment and Training Committee

February 2024

## **Education, Employment and Training Committee**

<b>Chair</b>	Ms Kim Richards MP, Member for Redlands
<b>Deputy Chair</b>	Mr James Lister MP, Member for Southern Downs
<b>Members</b>	Mr Mark Boothman MP, Member for Theodore
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	Mr Jimmy Sullivan MP, Member for Stafford*

Note\*: Mr Don Brown MP, Member for Capalaba, was appointed to the committee by the Leader of the House on 22 December 2023 in accordance with SO 202, as a substitute for the Member for Stafford who was unavailable for committee business from that day.

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### **Acknowledgements**

The committee acknowledges the assistance provided by officers of the Department of Education, the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training, (formerly the Department of Youth Justice, Employment, Small Business and Training) and TAFE Queensland.

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**Appendix E** at the back of this report lists abbreviations and acronyms used.

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## Chair's foreword

On behalf of the Education, Employment and Training Committee, I present this report on the committee's Inquiry into the delivery of vocational education and training (VET) in regional, rural and remote Queensland.

The committee chose to undertake this self-referred inquiry because the accessibility and quality of VET in regional, rural and remote areas is an important issue for all Queenslanders, especially our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Prior to launching the inquiry, the committee received briefings from a variety of experts who emphasised the particular importance of place-based approaches to VET in regional, rural and remote Queensland. The particular focus of this inquiry is a response to their evidence.

During the inquiry, the committee received written submissions from a range of stakeholders across the state. The committee also received a mix of written and oral briefings from the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training, the Department of Education and TAFE Queensland. The committee received additional evidence from key stakeholders at a public hearing in Brisbane, and community forums in Cairns, Thursday Island and Roma.

The committee made several key findings relating to six areas: Queensland's VET landscape, community involvement in VET planning, the operation of the Skills Assure system, financial incentives and support for VET, improving completion rates, and reducing digital barriers to VET.

In light of these findings, the committee has made a number of recommendations designed to ensure Queenslanders in regional, rural and remote areas have access to high-quality VET. I encourage the government to act on these recommendations.

On behalf of the committee, I thank those individuals and organisations who made written submissions on the Bill. I also thank our Parliamentary Service staff, the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training, the Department of Education and TAFE Queensland.

I commend this report to the House.



Kim Richards MP

**Chair**

## Recommendations

### Recommendation 1 16

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training consider devising a sustainable funding model for TAFE Queensland that recognises its critical community service obligations in regional, rural and remote areas of Queensland, providing incentives for the organisation to manage its operating costs and reduce inefficiencies strategically whilst delivering the highest quality, industry-leading VET.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills**

### Recommendation 2 23

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training further develop strategies for sharing best-practice examples of community consultation between its regional offices.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills**

### Recommendation 3 28

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training: (i) clarify when it will open the next round of general applications for Skills Assure status, and (ii) clarify how it decides whether to issue more targeted invitations to apply for Skills Assure status in response to an identified need.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills Development**

### Recommendation 4 28

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training upgrade the central register of Skills Assure suppliers to ensure that members of the public can easily identify (i) which training providers are operating in their local area (ii) whether the training they provide in a local area is delivered in person or online, and (iii) any costs to employers associated with training they provide.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills Development**

### Recommendation 5 33

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training regularly review the adequacy of the travel and accommodation allowances paid to trainees.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills Development**

### Recommendation 6 38

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training review the current system of location loadings to ensure it delivers equitable access to vocational education and training in regional, rural and remote Queensland. This review should include an assessment of whether the 'country' category groups together diverse locations in a manner that adequately reflects the varying costs of delivering vocational education and training in different parts of the state. Any resulting changes to location loadings should be brought to the attention of registered training organisations.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills Development**

**Recommendation 7** **44**

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training investigate how existing payments could be restructured to provide stronger incentives for training providers to support students to complete VET qualifications. This could include considering changes that would provide training providers with scaled payments as their students progress towards completion of their qualifications.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills Development**

**Recommendation 8** **49**

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training consider developing a plan to support existing and new regional study hubs working with all levels of government.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills Development**

**Recommendation 9** **55**

The committee recommends that the Department of Education maintain appropriate strategies to ensure state schools in regional, rural and remote areas have access to internet speeds sufficient to facilitate students' participation in VET in Schools.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Education and Minister for Youth Justice**

**Recommendation 10** **55**

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training and the Department of Education work with the Federal Government to identify additional ways in which improved internet access could be leveraged to reduce digital barriers to VET in regional, rural and remote Queensland.

**Ministers responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills Development; Minister for Education and Minister for Youth Justice**

## Report in brief

The delivery of high-quality vocational education and training (VET) is particularly important in regional, rural and remote Queensland. Its availability in such areas can make higher education more accessible to Queenslanders who live outside of major cities, while allowing local communities to 'grow their own' solutions to critical skills shortages.

With this in mind, the Education, Employment and Training Committee (the committee) resolved to inquire into the delivery of VET in regional, rural, and remote Queensland. This report presents the results that inquiry.

During its inquiry, the committee consulted with key stakeholders through several channels. This included a public hearing in Brisbane and three community forums: one in Cairns, one on Thursday Island, and one in Roma. These community forums provided valuable insights into the barriers that people in regional, rural and remote Queensland face in accessing high-quality VET and ways in which they might be overcome.

The committee has made a number of findings across six key areas.

- **Queensland's VET landscape**  
Queensland's VET sector delivers more training in regional, rural and remote areas than most other states and territories. Students in these areas face a range of well-known barriers stemming from factors such as geographic isolation, socioeconomic disadvantage and the 'digital divide' between major cities and the rest of the state.
- **The importance of community involvement in VET planning**  
The government uses a variety of mechanisms to consult with local communities about VET needs and priorities. These should be further strengthened.
- **The operation of the Skills Assure system**  
The operation of the Skills Assure system is a source of concern for some communities in regional, rural and remote Queensland. Improving clarity of information regarding the operation of system may help to address many of these concerns.
- **The financial incentives and support available for VET**  
Queensland's location-based subsidies for VET are appropriately targeted at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where training is most costly. However, there is a need to review how some other locations are classified for the purposes of location-based subsidies. The travel and accommodation allowances available to VET students who must travel away from home to complete their training should also be reviewed more regularly.
- **Strategies for improving the proportion of VET students who complete their qualification**  
Queensland has made progress in improving completion rates, but people living in regional, rural and remote Queensland remain less likely to complete their VET qualifications, as do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Restructuring how VET funding is paid to training providers, and supporting the expansion of regional study hubs, may help to further improve completion rates.
- **Reducing digital barriers to VET**  
Digital barriers, including poor internet connectivity, have a disproportionate impact on regional, rural and remote communities. Recent internet upgrades at state schools delivered by the government may create new opportunities to address these barriers.

Based on its findings across these areas, the committee has made 10 recommendations. All of these recommendations are designed to strengthen existing government initiatives, helping to ensure that Queenslanders can access high-quality VET regardless of where they live.

## 1 Introduction

On 24 October 2022, the Education, Employment and Training Committee (the committee) resolved to inquire into, and report on, the delivery of vocational education and training (VET) in regional, rural, and remote Queensland. The committee commenced the inquiry on 10 November 2022.

### 1.1 Scope of the inquiry

Under the terms of reference adopted by the committee, this inquiry encompassed:

1. the role of public providers in VET delivery in rural, remote and regional Queensland, including:
  - a. VET pathways, participation rates and outcomes
  - b. VET delivery for Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including enablers and barriers to VET
2. the major barriers to the provision of localised and place-based VET, and priority areas and cohorts in Queensland
3. existing programs that might assist in reducing barriers or supporting priority cohorts in accessing localised and place-based VET
4. examples of successful localised VET models and how learnings might be applied in other locations
5. opportunities for the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training (the department) to facilitate improvements in these areas.

During this inquiry, the committee consulted with key stakeholders through several channels, including via written submissions, public and private briefings, public hearings and community forums. To ensure the committee was able to hear directly from Queenslanders living in regional, rural and remote areas, the committee also held three community forums in Cairns, on Thursday Island, and in Roma. These community forums provided valuable insights into the barriers those communities faced in accessing high-quality VET.

### 1.2 Motivation for the inquiry

In the lead up to this inquiry, the committee received briefings from a variety of officials and experts. Many of them emphasised the particular importance of place-based approaches to VET in regional, rural and remote Queensland. The focus of this inquiry is a response to their evidence.

At a public briefing on 28 March 2022, officials from the department advised the committee:

...the [Queensland Workforce] summit reinforced and highlighted the value of place-based approaches and local partnerships. In the final session of the day, a number of the speakers spoke about the critical local connection between employers, training providers and students, and highlighted the opportunities at a local level that are available to students in particular.<sup>1</sup>

At a public briefing on 23 May 2022, Dr Stephen Billet, Professor of Adult and Vocational Education in the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University, emphasised that regional, rural and remote communities are often quite distinctive, creating 'a need for a localised and inclusive

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<sup>1</sup> Public briefing transcript, Brisbane, 28 March 2022, p 14.

assessment of those needs and how those needs are responded to'.<sup>2</sup> Professor Billet advised of the need for a greater focus on place-based responses.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, officials from the National Indigenous Australians Agency at a public briefing held by the committee on 29 August 2022, also emphasised the importance of localised approaches to VET to address the needs of Indigenous students and communities.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.3 Defining regional, rural and remote Queensland

There is no widely accepted definition of regional, remote and rural areas. Different actors have defined these terms a variety of ways, with definitions often shaped by the purpose for which they are required.<sup>5</sup>



The committee has defined **regional, rural and remote Queensland** as all areas of Queensland outside of major cities for the purposes of this inquiry. This means areas located outside of parts of south east Queensland classified as major cities under the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (including Brisbane, Ipswich, Logan, Caboolture, Caloundra, Maroochydore, Mooloolaba and Noosa). These areas are shaded dark blue in the map in **Appendix D**.

In adopting this definition, the committee acknowledges that regional, rural and remote areas are diverse and shaped by a wide variety of factors – not merely their distance from major cities.

### 1.4 Defining place-based approaches to VET

In recent years, 'place-based approaches' have become increasingly popular in several sectors, including social services, health, and education. While there is no universally agreed definition of place-based approaches, there is a significant degree of similarity in how government entities in Queensland and other Australian jurisdictions have defined them.<sup>6</sup>



The committee has defined **place-based approaches to VET** as approaches that target the specific circumstances of the place and engage local communities in the development and implementation of training programs, for the purposes of this inquiry.

Place-based approaches can include, but are not limited to:

- tailoring the training to the skills required by specific local employers
- reflecting the forms or patterns of work in regional areas
- providing the opportunity to complete training within the regional area
- providing the opportunity for flexible delivery of training.

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<sup>2</sup> Public briefing transcript, Brisbane, 23 May 2022, p 2.

<sup>3</sup> Public briefing transcript, Brisbane, 23 May 2022, p 4.

<sup>4</sup> Public briefing transcript, Brisbane, 29 August 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Parliament of Australia, Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralisation, *Regions at the Ready: Investing in Australia's Future*, Final Report, June 2018, para 4.3 and 4.5.

<sup>6</sup> For examples, see: Queensland Government, *Framework for Place-Based Approaches*, 2018, <https://cabinet.qld.gov.au/documents/2018/Jul/TCAQ/Attachments/Framework.PDF>; Victorian Government, *A framework for place-based approaches: The start of a conversation about working differently for better outcome*, February 2020. <https://www.vic.gov.au/framework-place-based-approaches>.

## 1.5 Key findings

This report makes several key findings relating to six central issues.

### 1. Queensland's VET landscape

Queensland's VET sector delivers more training in regional, rural and remote areas than most other states and territories. TAFE Queensland, the state's largest public provider of VET makes a significant contribution to the Queensland economy, and to improving the skills and employability of Queensland workers, especially in regional, rural and remote areas.

Students in the state's regional, rural and remote areas face a range of barriers, including issues that result from geographic isolation, socioeconomic factors, environmental factors, and the 'digital divide' between major cities and more isolated areas. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples often face these barriers as well as additional challenges.

### 2. Community involvement in VET planning in regional, rural and remote areas

Community involvement is essential for effective place-based VET, especially in regional, rural and remote areas. However, evidence from stakeholders suggests there remains scope for improvement in this area. The committee applauds the department for its efforts to consult with regional stakeholders regarding the new VET strategy.

### 3. The operation of the Skills Assure system in regional, rural and remote areas

The availability of Skills Assure suppliers, and the scope and mode of training that they offer, remains a concern for some communities in regional, rural and remote Queensland. The department may be able to address some of these concerns by clarifying when the next general call for Skills Assure status will open, and taking steps to make information about suppliers' operations more accessible to prospective students and employees.

### 4. Financial incentives and support for VET in regional, rural and remote areas

The government provides a range of financial incentives and support for VET in regional, rural and remote areas. Evidence before the committee suggests there is a need to:

- regularly review whether travel and accommodation allowances paid to students who must travel away from home to complete their qualifications are adequate
- review whether the location loadings paid to Skills Assure suppliers in different parts of the state are equitable.

### 5. Strategies for improving completion rates in regional, rural and remote areas

The government has made progress in increasing the percentage of VET students who complete their qualification (known as the completion rate). However, completion rates for Indigenous students, and students in regional, rural and remote areas, continue to lag behind.

The government provides a significant amount of funding for VET. There may be opportunities to restructure this funding to create stronger incentives for training providers to support students to complete their qualifications, without increasing the overall volume of funding.

Regional study hubs may also provide a way to improve completion rates in regional, rural and remote areas. The government should consider supporting the expansion of regional study hubs, both by providing funding and through non-financial measures, such as setting out a clear vision for the role of regional study hubs as part of the department's VET strategy.

### 6. Reducing digital barriers to VET in regional, rural and remote areas

Digital barriers, including poor internet connectivity and limited digital literacy, have a disproportionate impact on the ability of regional, rural and remote communities to access

VET. Regional study hubs may provide a practical strategy for addressing some of these barriers. There may also be opportunities to leverage recent upgrades to internet access at state schools to reduce digital barriers to VET in regional, rural and remote areas.

## 2 Queensland's VET landscape

### Summary

- Queensland has the country's highest VET participation rate, with more VET training in regional, rural and remote areas than most other state and territory VET sectors.
- In regional, rural and remote areas the delivery of VET in regional, rural and remote areas is critically important to addressing skills shortages and ensuring the viability of industries and communities in these areas.
- VET participation rates in regional, rural and remote areas are significantly higher than rates in major cities.
- Since 2019, a number of significant reviews and inquiries have examined VET in Australia, with several focussing on VET in regional, rural and remote areas.
- As a result, the barriers to VET in regional, rural and remote areas are relatively well known. They include issues that result from geographic isolation, socioeconomic factors, environmental factors, and the 'digital divide' between major cities and more isolated areas.
- Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples often face the same barriers as other people living in regional, rural and remote areas, though are disadvantaged to a greater extent, as well as additional barriers such as discrimination and poor mental health.
- Queensland has one of the most diverse VET sectors in the country, with both public and private providers playing a significant role in the delivery of VET.
- Government investment in Australia's TAFEs, including TAFE Queensland, generate significant economic and social benefits.

### 2.1 Queensland has a large and complex VET sector

Queensland has the highest VET participation rate in Australia. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) estimates that in 2022, 27.5 per cent of Queensland residents aged between 15 and 64 participated in nationally recognised VET programs.<sup>7</sup> In comparison, in New South Wales (NSW), the estimated VET participation rate was 23.3 per cent, while the national average was 25 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Queensland's high participation rate means it has a large VET sector. In 2022, over 1.19 million people enrolled in VET in Queensland. Of these, approximately 520,000 students (44 percent) were enrolled in a nationally-recognised VET program. This figure includes around 232,000 students who received government funding for their program. Of these students, almost 90,000 were apprentices and trainees undertaking off-the-job training, and just over 43,000 were school students.

In 2022, more than half of Queensland's government-funded VET students were enrolled at the Certificate III level.<sup>9</sup>



Queensland has a larger proportion of VET students who live in regional, rural and remote areas, compared to most other states and territories. Almost 41 per cent of

<sup>7</sup> The National Register of VET has the details of all nationally recognised training products, including accredited courses, endorsed training package qualifications, units of competency and skill sets. The register is administered by the federal government's Department of Education, Skills and Employment on behalf of state and territory governments. For further information see <http://training.gov.au>.

<sup>8</sup> NCVER, *Total VET students and courses 2022*, Statistical report, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/total-vet-students-and-courses-2022>.

<sup>9</sup> NCVER, *Total VET students and courses 2022*, Databuilder, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/data/databuilder#tva-students>.

Queensland's government-funded VET students live in regional, rural and remote areas.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, in NSW about one-third of government-funded VET is delivered to students outside of major cities, while in Victoria about one quarter of government funded VET is delivered to students in such locations. Only Tasmania and the Northern Territory deliver a greater percentage of VET to students located outside of major cities than Queensland. This is because neither Hobart nor Darwin is classified as a 'major city'.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.2 Administration and delivery of VET in Queensland

Australia's VET sector is administered by federal, state and territory governments. The federal government is responsible for the national VET framework, regulation, quality and training package development.

Within the national framework, the Queensland Government is responsible for VET strategy, funding, policies and programs, apprenticeship and training regulation, and the delivery of VET by public and private training providers in Queensland. Within the Queensland Government, VET is administered by the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training (the department).

The four entities recognised as public providers of VET in Queensland are: TAFE Queensland and its subsidiary company, Aviation Australia; CQUniversity (CQU); and the Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts (ACPA). These four entities receive a State Contribution Grant to support them in their role as public providers.<sup>12</sup>

TAFE Queensland is the largest training provider in Queensland, especially in regional centres. On behalf of the Queensland Government, DESBT owns and manages 45 TAFE sites. TAFE Queensland leases and manages a further 15 sites.<sup>13</sup>

In Queensland, VET in Schools (VETiS) is administered by the Department of Education and delivered by participating government and non-government secondary schools.

## 2.3 The importance of VET in regional, rural and remote areas

Since 2019, there have been several significant national-level reviews and inquiries that have examined VET in Australia. Some of these focussed specifically on regional, rural and remote areas, while others touched on the challenges faced in those areas as part of a broader inquiry.

- The **Joyce Report**, released in 2019, presents an independent review of Australia's VET sector. Commissioned by the Australian Government in 2018, it was led by Honourable Steven Joyce, a former New Zealand Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> NCVER, *Government-funded students and courses 2022*, Databuilder, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/government-funded-students-and-courses-2022>.

<sup>11</sup> NCVER, *Government-funded students and courses 2022*, Databuilder, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/government-funded-students-and-courses-2022>.

<sup>12</sup> Department of Employment, Small Business, Training, Correspondence, 24 March 2023, p 2.

<sup>13</sup> Department of Employment, Small Business, Training, Correspondence, 24 March 2023, p 2.

<sup>14</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System*, 2019 (Joyce Report). <https://www.pmc.gov.au/publications/strengthening-skills-expert-review-australias-vocational-education-and-training-system>.

- The **Napthine Review** was conducted by a Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, led by the Hon Dr Denis Napthine, a former Victorian Premier. Commissioned by the Australian Government in 2018, and reporting in 2019, the goal of the review was to develop a national strategy for regional, rural and remote tertiary education.<sup>15</sup>
- The **Shergold Report** presents a review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training. Published in 2020, it was conducted by a team of independent experts commissioned by the Education Council of the Council of Australian Governments.<sup>16</sup>
- In 2020, the **House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Training** conducted an inquiry into education, including VET, in remote and complex environments.<sup>17</sup>

All of these recent reports and reviews have highlighted the importance of VET in regional, rural and remote areas. For example, the Napthine Review observed that VET participation is generally higher in such areas. Citing data from 2016, it found that the national VET participation rate was 31.0 per cent for inner regional areas, 32.4 per cent for outer regional areas and 36.2 per cent for remote areas, compared to 22.1 per cent in major cities. These higher participation rates, however, masked a disparity in educational attainment: students in major cities were more likely to complete higher-level VET qualifications (i.e. Certificate 4 or above).<sup>18</sup>

More recently, state and national government strategies have discussed the critical role of VET in addressing skills shortages, especially in regional, rural and remote areas. For example, the Queensland Workforce Strategy, launched in 2022, emphasises the importance of VET in helping regional areas to ‘grow their own’ workforce by training local people to meet local skills needs, ensuring that skilled workers remain in communities over the longer term, a point echoed at the committee’s hearings and community forums.<sup>19</sup>

## 2.4 The role of public and private providers

Across Australia, VET is delivered by a range of private and government-owned providers, particularly state and territory TAFEs. In Queensland, private providers deliver around half of government-funded VET, proportionally more than in any other state or territory, as shown in Figure 1. In 2022, TAFE Queensland delivered around 41 per cent of government-funded VET provided in Queensland. This

<sup>15</sup> Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy*, Final Report, 2019 (Napthine Review). <https://www.education.gov.au/access-and-participation/resources/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy-final-report>

<sup>16</sup> Council of Australian Governments Education Council, *Looking to the Future*, Report of the Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training, June 2020 (Shergold Report). <https://cica.org.au/final-report-of-the-education-council-review-of-senior-secondary-pathways-into-work-further-education-and-training/>.

<sup>17</sup> Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, *Education in remote and complex environments*, November 2020. [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Employment\\_Education\\_and\\_Training/RemoteEducation/Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Employment_Education_and_Training/RemoteEducation/Report).

<sup>18</sup> Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy*, Final Report, 2019 (Napthine Review), p 12. <https://www.education.gov.au/access-and-participation/resources/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy-final-report>.

<sup>19</sup> Queensland Government, *Good people, Good jobs: Queensland Workforce Strategy 2022-2032*, <https://www.publications.qld.gov.au/dataset/queensland-workforce-strategy-2022-2032/resource/ff453627-3e2a-4dc5-96c5-a3e7bdf963fa>.

was similar to South Australia and Victoria, but differs from NSW and Western Australia, where TAFEs delivered around two-thirds of government-funded VET.<sup>20</sup>

The market share of different types of providers is relatively stable across Queensland's major cities and regional and remote areas.<sup>21</sup> However, public providers, such as TAFE Queensland, are particularly important in regional, rural and remote areas. This is because they are sometimes the only provider to maintain a permanent local presence in 'thin markets', that is, areas where there are low student numbers, and the costs of delivering training are higher. The difficulties of providing VET in these areas create challenges for the financial sustainability of public providers, including TAFE Queensland.

The data also shows the relatively small market share held by community education providers (CEPs) in Queensland, compared to other states, particularly Victoria.<sup>22</sup> In Queensland, CEPs accounted for only 1.50 per cent of student enrolments in 2022, compared to 4.2 per cent in NSW and 14.0 per cent in Victoria.

## 2.5 The economic and social benefits of Australia's TAFE system

In 2020, a study by the Australia Institute's Centre for Future Work examined the costs and benefits generated by Australia's TAFE system.<sup>23</sup> The study found that, despite years of significant funding pressure and policy confusion, the TAFE system continues to make a strong and disproportionate economic and social contribution to the Australian economy. Findings from the study's quantitative benefits assessment include:

- an estimated \$84.9 billion in total annual benefits generated through the TAFE system's accumulated contribution to the skills of Australians
- an increase in employment of around 486,000 positions through increased employability of the VET-educated population, relative to those without post-school education
- a reduction in social expenses valued at \$1.5 billion annually through lowering unemployment and supporting a healthier workforce and society
- an estimated total annual benefit of \$92.5 billion to the Australian economy from an estimated total cost of \$5.7 billion.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> NCVER, *Government-funded students and courses 2022, Databuilder*, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/government-funded-students-and-courses-2022>.

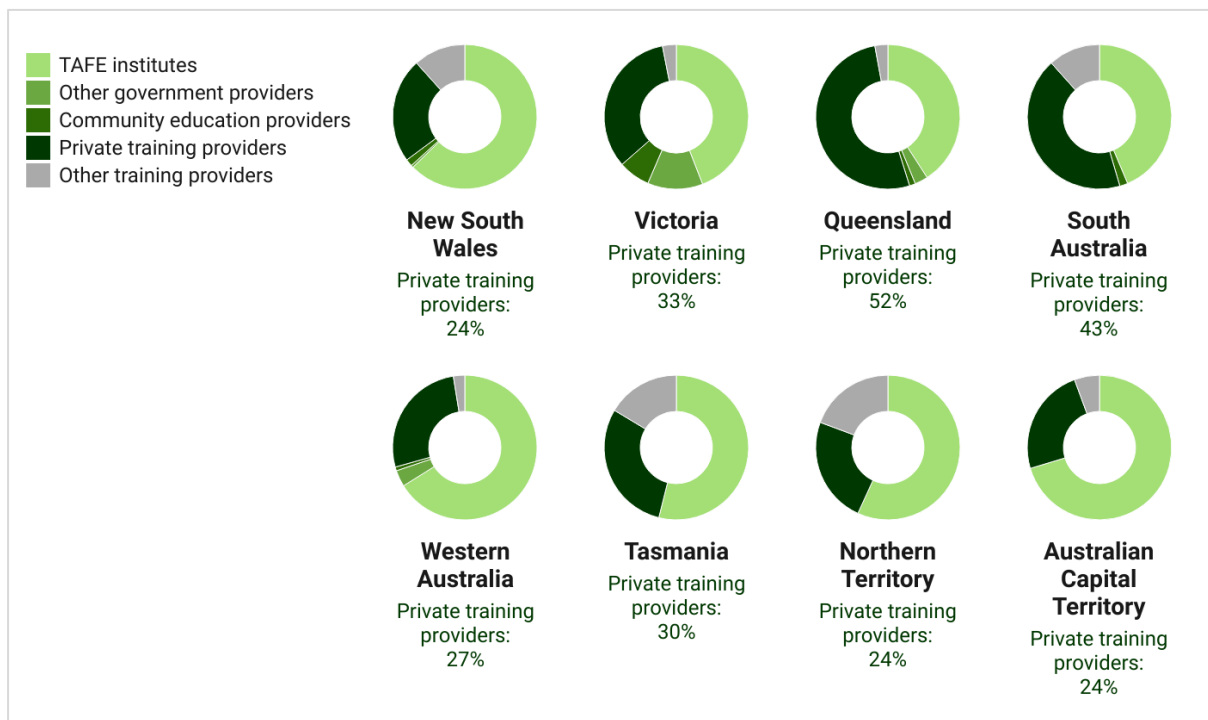
<sup>21</sup> NCVER, *Government-funded students and courses 2022, Databuilder*, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/government-funded-students-and-courses-2022>.

<sup>22</sup> CEPs are generally community-owned, not-for-profit entities that provide training. They may be registered RTOs. Some CEPs focus on supporting the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable learners.

<sup>23</sup> Pennington, A., 2020. An Investment in Productivity and Inclusion: - *The Economic and Social Benefits of the TAFE System*, The Australia Institute. Australia. Retrieved from <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/2038994/an-investment-in-productivity-and-inclusion/2791437/> on 16 Jan 2024. CID: 20.500.12592/m3xskq.

<sup>24</sup> Pennington, A., 2020. An Investment in Productivity and Inclusion: - *The Economic and Social Benefits of the TAFE System*, p-49.

**Figure 1 – Market share of public and private providers differs between jurisdictions**



*Note:* This figure shows the proportion of government-funded courses and programs delivered by different types of providers in 2022, by enrolments. Figure created by the Committee Secretariat using Datawrapper.

*Source:* NCVER, *Government-funded students and courses 2022*, Databuilder, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/government-funded-students-and-courses-2022>.

The study further noted that the education opportunities provided through the TAFE system underpin a wide array of other social and community benefits that are harder to quantify, but which must be considered in any evaluation of the TAFE system's importance. These benefits include:

- training opportunities in regional areas which are not well served by universities or other tertiary facilities that tend to be concentrated in capital and larger cities
- the provision of 'bridging' access to further education and jobs pathways for disadvantaged and at-risk groups, who would otherwise have little likelihood of entering promising vocations
- greater social cohesion, thanks to the TAFE system's ability to engage young people from all economic and cultural backgrounds in vocational pathways
- reductions in crime and other dimensions of social dysfunction, as a result of incremental improvements in inclusion and economic participation.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Pennington, A., 2020. An Investment in Productivity and Inclusion: - The Economic and Social Benefits of the TAFE System, pp 5-6.

## 2.6 The economic and social contribution of TAFE Queensland

A study in 2018 by KPMG examined TAFE Queensland's economic and social contribution to Queensland.<sup>26</sup> The study concluded that TAFE Queensland makes a significant contribution to the state, highlighted through:

- generating \$2.55 of value-added in the Queensland economy for every \$1.00 spent by TAFE Queensland
- contributing \$1.8 billion to Queensland's Gross State Product (GSP)
- productivity benefits supporting an additional \$1.1 billion of industry value-added in the Queensland economy
- increasing employment for its student cohort from 63.9 percent before, to 72.1 percent after, training
- attracting over 10,000 international student enrolments in Queensland.<sup>27</sup>

### **Committee comment**

Consistent with TAFEs around Australia, TAFE Queensland, the state's largest public provider of VET, makes a significant contribution to the Queensland economy and to raising the skills and employability of Queenslanders. The role of TAFE Queensland is especially important in regional, rural and remote areas that may not be commercially attractive to private training providers.

The committee suggests that a sustainable funding model is needed that would allow TAFE Queensland to operate in thin markets where required, as a community service, providing incentives for the organisation to manage its operating costs and reduce inefficiencies strategically whilst delivering the highest quality, industry-leading VET.

### **Recommendation 1**

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training consider devising a sustainable funding model for TAFE Queensland that recognises its critical community service obligations in regional, rural and remote areas of Queensland, providing incentives for the organisation to manage its operating costs and reduce inefficiencies strategically whilst delivering the highest quality, industry-leading VET.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills**

## 2.7 Barriers to VET in regional, rural and remote area

Recent national reports and reviews, including those detailed above, have made very similar findings relating to the barriers to accessing VET in regional, rural and remote areas. There is a broad consensus that these barriers include:

- **issues that result from geographic isolation**, such as small class numbers, limited choice of training providers and courses, the need to travel extensively and stay away from home to complete training, the high cost of transport and accommodation, and the difficulty of attracting and retaining trainers

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<sup>26</sup> KPMG, 2018, *The Importance of TAFE Queensland to Queensland's Prosperity*, TAFE Queensland, <https://tafeqld.edu.au/content/dam/tafe/en/documents/pdfs/about-us/reports-submissions-applied-research/kpmg-report-tafe-qld-contribution-to-state-economy.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> KPMG, 2018, *The Importance of TAFE Queensland to Queensland's Prosperity*, TAFE Queensland, p 9.

- **socioeconomic factors**, for example higher rates of poverty and poorer housing
- **the ‘digital divide’**, the fact that limited access to internet and computing facilities disproportionately affects people in regional, rural and remote areas, particularly the lack of affordable and reliable high-speed internet in many such areas
- **environmental factors**, such as bushfires and droughts, which can exacerbate the effects of both geographic isolation and socioeconomic disadvantage on regional, rural and remote communities.<sup>28</sup>

Many of the recent national reports and reviews note that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and students in regional, rural and remote areas typically face these barriers (which affect them disproportionately) as well as additional barriers.<sup>29</sup>

Other factors raised during the inquiry include:

- the lack of block release in the local community. As a result, apprentices and trainees must travel to other centres to receive the training, sometimes travelling vast distances (over 600 kms in one example)<sup>30</sup>
- the absence of staff at training venues who can identify with Indigenous cohorts<sup>31</sup>
- insufficient consultation with the correct Indigenous groups about training<sup>32</sup>
- difficulties, inflexibility and a lack of communications regarding remote training delivery
- the lack of transport and accommodation to access training and work experience<sup>33</sup>
- inadequate subsidies paid to apprentices for accommodation and meals if required to travel away for training. The shortfall costs met by employers particularly impact employers in rural areas.<sup>34</sup>
- Lengthy delays to get paperwork for training in place.<sup>35</sup>

## 2.8 VET participation and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Research indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples participate in VET at a higher rate than other forms of tertiary education. However, they face a range of barriers that affect their educational and employment outcomes. Although there have been some improvements in recent years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are more likely to undertake lower level qualifications, less likely to complete those qualifications and, on average, experience poorer

<sup>28</sup> See for example: Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, *Education in remote and complex environments*, November 2020, p 37. [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Employment\\_Education\\_and\\_Training/RemoteEducation/Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Employment_Education_and_Training/RemoteEducation/Report).

<sup>29</sup> See for example: Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, *Education in remote and complex environments*, November 2020, p 37. [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Employment\\_Education\\_and\\_Training/RemoteEducation/Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Employment_Education_and_Training/RemoteEducation/Report).

<sup>30</sup> Queensland Training Ombudsman, Correspondence, 9 January 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Public hearing transcript, Brisbane, 14 July 2023, p 23.

<sup>32</sup> Public hearing transcript, Brisbane, 14 July 2023, p 23.

<sup>33</sup> Public briefing, Brisbane, 29 August 2022, pp 5-6; Community forum transcript, Thursday Island, 11 July 2023, pp 8-9.

<sup>34</sup> Community forum transcript, Roma, 27 October 2023, p 4.

<sup>35</sup> Community forum transcript, Roma, 27 October 2023, p 4. pp 1-2.

employment outcomes than their non-Indigenous counterparts.<sup>36</sup> In 2019, the Joyce Report found that 'Indigenous VET graduates are also less likely to be employed than non-Indigenous graduates, with the difference particularly marked in rural, remote and very remote regions.'<sup>37</sup>

As notes above, these divergent outcomes are due to a range of factors. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students face similar barriers as other students in regional, rural and remote areas. However, they often find these barriers exacerbated by additional factors, such as discrimination, trauma, high rates of family violence and poor mental health.<sup>38</sup>

Existing evidence points to a variety of ways in which the barriers facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander VET students can be overcome. Generally, research suggests that Indigenous students are more likely to complete VET courses when training is customised to their cultural, family and community contexts. More specific factors that have been shown to improve training and employment outcomes for Indigenous students include:

- giving the community a central role in selecting the training provider
- minimising the cost to students
- having Indigenous teachers/trainers and incorporating Indigenous knowledge within training
- conducting courses in a culturally appropriate environment
- delivering training in a flexible manner, to allow for family and cultural obligations of students
- providing cultural training to employers and trainers
- offering early and targeted mentorship and support to Indigenous students, including dedicated study spaces
- linking training to local employment opportunities.<sup>39</sup>

At the Thursday Island community forum, it was suggested to the committee that better coordination by the numerous government agencies on Thursday Island could help to provide vital work experience for students, and help to address very high rates of over-training:

...our region is historically overtrained. We have, I dare to say, thousands of people with qualifications that stop at that ... I think that transition between gaining a qualification and getting at least work

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<sup>36</sup> G Windley, *Indigenous VET participation, completion and outcomes: change over the past decade*, NCVER research report, 22 May 2017. <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/indigenous-vet-participation-completion-and-outcomes-change-over-the-past-decade>.

<sup>37</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System*, 2019 (Joyce Report), p 109. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/publications/strengthening-skills-expert-review-australias-vocational-education-and-training-system>.

<sup>38</sup> See for example: Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, *Education in remote and complex environments*, November 2020, p 37. [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Employment\\_Education\\_and\\_Training/RemoteEducation/Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Employment_Education_and_Training/RemoteEducation/Report).

<sup>39</sup> See, for example: K Gwynne, J Rojas, M Hines, K Bulkeley, M Irving, D McCowen and M Lincoln, 'Customised approaches to vocational education can dramatically improve completion rates of Australian Aboriginal students', *Australian Health Review*, 2020, 44(1), pp 7-14. doi: 10.1071/AH18051; R Cameron, L Stuart and T Bell, 'Race based inequalities for Indigenous Australians' participation and engagement in VET: a targeted review of the research', *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 2017, 69(3), pp 311-332, DOI: 10.1080/13636820.2017.1289553; G Windley, M Ackehurst and R Polvere, *Indigenous participation in VET: understanding the research*, NCVER research summary, 22 May 2017, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/indigenous-vet-participation-completion-and-outcomes-change-over-the-past-decade>.

experience is our issue. Ultimately, it would be wonderful to think that with every government agency on this island—I think there are 120 agencies on this island—there was some kind of agreement or commitment so that some kind of Indigenous procurement could perhaps be honoured. Again, previous mayors have talked about that extensively, that we are some of the most trained peoples in the country.<sup>40</sup>

Other suggestions raised at the committee’s hearings and forums to address VET barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples include:

- providing more transport and accommodation support
- funding for Indigenous support staff in regional, rural and remote areas
- providing work experience opportunities in government agencies within students’ local communities
- improvements to digital services for remote communities

At the committee’s briefing held in Brisbane on 29 August 2022, The National Indigenous Australians Agency also identified the Skilling Queenslanders for Work program as a program providing critical support for Indigenous people in relation to employment and training.<sup>41</sup>

### **Committee comment**

The delivery of VET in regional, rural and remote areas is critically important to addressing skills shortages and ensuring the viability of industries and communities in these areas. Its importance is reflected in significantly higher VET participation rates in regional, rural and remote areas than rates in major cities.

Queensland’s large and complex VET sector delivers more training in regional, rural and remote areas than most other state and territory VET sectors. Queensland has one of the most diverse VET sectors in the country, with both public and private providers playing a significant role in the delivery of VET.

Since 2019, a number of significant reviews and inquiries have examined VET in Australia, with several focussing on VET in regional, rural and remote areas. As a result, the barriers to VET in regional, rural and remote areas are relatively well known. They include issues that result from geographic isolation, socioeconomic factors, environmental factors, and the ‘digital divide’ between major cities and more isolated areas.

Queensland’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples often face the same barriers as other people living in regional, rural and remote areas, though are disadvantaged to a greater extent, as well as additional barriers such as discrimination and poor mental health.

The committee has made a number of recommendations throughout this report that, if acted on, will help to reduce these barriers.

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<sup>40</sup> Community forum transcript, Thursday Island, 11 July 2023, p 7.

<sup>41</sup> Public briefing transcript, Brisbane, 29 August 2022, p 4.

### 3 Community involvement in VET planning

#### Summary

- Community involvement in VET planning is particularly important for ensuring the needs of regional, rural and remote communities are met.
- The regional offices of the Department of Employment and Small Business (DESBT) are primarily responsible for local engagement with stakeholders, including for VET planning.
- A number of submitters expressed challenges in engagement for VET stakeholders in regional, rural and remote areas. These stakeholders express concern that these challenges have resulted in VET that in some instances does not align with industry and employee training needs.

#### 3.1 The importance of community involvement in planning

Recent research published by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) indicates that community involvement in VET planning is particularly important in regional, rural and remote areas. This is because statistical data often becomes unreliable or patchy when analysed at the local level. As a result, it does not always provide an accurate picture of the training needs and priorities of smaller communities.<sup>42</sup>

Community involvement in VET planning is also very important for Indigenous students. Research shows that Indigenous students are more likely to complete VET courses when training is customised to their cultural, family and community contexts. Delivering training via partnerships with Indigenous communities can increase the odds of this happening.<sup>43</sup>

#### 3.2 Issues raised by stakeholders

A number of submitters raised issues about how the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training (DESBT) and TAFE Queensland engage with stakeholders regarding the planning and delivery of VET in regional, rural and remote areas.

For example:

- Cairns Regional Council advised the committee that there is currently no liaison between council and public providers of VET or within the government regarding employment issues despite the council being a major employer.<sup>44</sup>
- Queensland Alliance for Mental Health stated that the content of VET qualifications does not always align with industry needs, suggesting this problem is more acute in regional, rural and remote Queensland,<sup>45</sup> and may contribute to low course completion rates.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See T Griffin and U Andrahannadi, *VET delivery in regional, rural and remote Australia: barriers and facilitators*, NCVER Research Report, 24 April 2023. <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/vet-delivery-in-regional-rural-and-remote-australia-barriers-and-facilitators>.

<sup>43</sup> R Cameron, L Stuart & T Bell, 'Race based inequalities for Indigenous Australians' participation and engagement in VET: a targeted review of the research', *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* (2017) 69:3, pp 311-332, pp 317-318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2017.1289553>.

<sup>44</sup> Submission 12.

<sup>45</sup> Submission 9.

<sup>46</sup> Public hearing transcript, Brisbane, 14 July 2023, p 6.

- Queensland Resources Council warned that VET packages are lagging behind technology and environmental industry drivers, such as decarbonisation, and need urgent updates.<sup>47</sup>
- AgForce Queensland alluded to significant gaps in agricultural VET courses linked to the lack of engagement with industry to develop these courses.<sup>48</sup> Agforce also stated that there is no mechanism for industry to engage with providers to describe training demand, with the incorrect assumption being made that agriculture industry requirements are little different to requirements of other industries.<sup>49</sup>
- Bowen Gumla Growers Association stated that there is a lack of alignment of VET with its industry skills requirements.<sup>50</sup>
- Queensland Catholic Education Commission advised the committee that Catholic school authorities in regional, rural and remote areas are unsure if TAFE Queensland is focused on building a direct relationship with schools. The Commission called for stronger relationships between the DESBT's regional offices and school VET leaders.<sup>51</sup>
- Caravanning Queensland stated that regional community forums, which are critical to provide insights, are often too far away for businesses to attend.<sup>52</sup>
- Professor Stephen Billett, from Griffith University, stated that DESBT should consider more regional decision-making about VET, using regional advisory committees to facilitate regional level engagement with industries.<sup>53</sup>

However, some stakeholders offered a more positive assessment of how DESBT facilitates community engagement in VET planning. At the community forum in Cairns, Mr Houghton, the Principal of Bentley Park College, explained that his membership of the Regional Jobs Committee in Cairns (a departmental initiative discussed in more detail in section 3.3.2) helped him to build partnerships with industry, including local employers. He explained the importance of this to the success of VET in schools:

If you do not have industry partnerships and collaboration then you are wasting your time.... I am very fortunate that I sit on the Cairns Regional Jobs Committee. We know what the key industry areas are that are looking for work. We had a massive expo organised through Marine Jobs and a lot of companies came on board around it... That is really what is required for success: getting those industry partnerships and getting the students to see that they can go in and take on a VET course where they will get guaranteed employment at the end.<sup>54</sup>

### 3.3 Response from the department

DESBT provided the committee with written briefings that responded to the terms of reference, as well as issues raised by stakeholders in their written submissions. Those briefings, published on the committee's website, included information about how DESBT engages with stakeholders via the Skilling Queenslanders for Work (SQW) program and Regional SQW advisory committees, regional jobs committees (RJs) and its regional offices.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Public hearing transcript, Brisbane, 14 July 2023, p 22.

<sup>48</sup> Public hearing transcript, Brisbane, 14 July 2023, p.9.

<sup>49</sup> Submission 13.

<sup>50</sup> Submission 7.

<sup>51</sup> Submission 14.

<sup>52</sup> Submission 15.

<sup>53</sup> Submission 8.

<sup>54</sup> Community forum transcript, Cairns, 10 July 2023, pp 6-7.

<sup>55</sup> Department of Employment, Small Business and Training (DESBT), briefing paper, 12 January 2023; DESBT, briefing paper, 24 March 2023. Both briefing papers are available at

### **3.3.1 Skilling Queenslanders for Work**

According to the department, The Skilling Queensland for Work program (SQW) operates under a place-based model that has strong local connections to training and employment opportunities. The department also told the committee that the strong local employer networks, fostered by community-based organisations delivering projects, are key to the success of the SQW program.<sup>56</sup>

The department has established regional SQW advisory committees in each of the seven DESBT regions (North Queensland, Far North Queensland, Central Queensland, Darling Downs South-West, North Coast, South-East and Metropolitan regions) to review and assess applications for funding, taking into consideration the local skills and employment needs. These regional committees are made up of community, local government, employer and employee representatives.<sup>57</sup>

A review in 2020 by Deloitte Access Economics found the place-based SQW model to be particularly effective in generating employment outcomes in remote areas, for the long-term unemployed and for participants from Indigenous backgrounds.<sup>58</sup>

### **3.3.2 Regional jobs committees**

RJCs provide government with advice on local training delivery to ensure investment is aligned with local skills needs. The government has established 9 RJCs to bring together local stakeholders including employers, local industry groups, training providers, unions, schools and councils to develop and implement collaborative place-based solutions to workforce challenges and opportunities within their regions.<sup>59</sup> The department explained the role that RJCs play in engaging with regional communities using the example of Cairns.

It stated that the Cairns RJC:

- has a focus on engagement and local leadership of skills and workforce challenges, contributing positively to the Queensland Workforce Strategy
- has discussed the need for a workforce plan for Cairns and has started work on developing a proposal for presentation to government, including identification of key partners
- is working with industry, training providers, the small business community and different levels of government to support the upcoming Cairns Maritime Careers Open Day, helping to raise the profile of the maritime sector, Cairns maritime precinct and draw attention to a critical industry opportunity for Cairns and the surrounding region.<sup>60</sup>

### **3.3.3 Regional offices**

The department advised the committee that its 17 regional offices have primary responsibility for engagement with stakeholders, including employers, other government agencies and industry stakeholders, small business, RTOs, schools and participants of the VET sector. According to the department, these regional offices deliver targeted and place-based responses that link up economic and regional development activities and provide a critical footprint across regional Queensland.<sup>61</sup>

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<https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/Work-of-Committees/Committees/Committee-Details?cid=166&id=4214>.

<sup>56</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 12 January 2023, p 13.

<sup>57</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 12 January 2023, p 15.

<sup>58</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 12 January 2023, p 14.

<sup>59</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 12 January 2023, p 16.

<sup>60</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 12 January 2023, p 10.

<sup>61</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 12 January 2023, p 17.

The department states that its regional offices work collectively to facilitate access and participation in VET pathways, funded support and programs to enable Queenslanders to gain employment and skills in current and future industries. Industry skills advisors focus on the needs of the VET supported workforce and provide industry-specific intelligence to support the work of the department in identifying skills needs, jobs growth and new industry directions to guide investment decisions and program design across Queensland's regions.<sup>62</sup>

#### **Committee comment**

The evidence before the committee makes it clear that community involvement in VET planning is vital for ensuring the needs of regional, rural and remote communities are met. Given our state's size and diversity, the department's regional offices play a central role in facilitating engagement with local communities.

While the department has provided examples that highlight the good work done by many of its regional offices, submissions from stakeholders suggest that the consistency of community engagement sometimes presents challenges in certain locations. The committee therefore recommends that the department develop and implement further strategies for sharing best-practice examples of community consultation between its regional offices. This will ensure staff working across regional parts of Queensland are able to leverage, and learn from, the expertise of colleagues in other parts of the state.

Better engagement at the local level will only lead to improved outcomes if there are clear and effective channels for regional offices to provide feedback and input on central decisions. As such, the committee also encourages the department to maintain effective channels of communication between its regional offices and central decision-makers.

#### **Recommendation 2**

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training further develop strategies for sharing best-practice examples of community consultation between its regional offices.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills**

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<sup>62</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 12 January 2023, pp 17-8.

## 4 The operation of the Skills Assure system in regional, rural and remote areas

### Summary

- The availability of Skills Assure suppliers, and the scope and mode of training that they offer, remain challenging for some communities in regional, rural and remote Queensland.
- Despite improvements, it remains challenging to access information about where different Skills Assure suppliers operate, and whether they offer face-to-face training in those areas.
- There may be geographical areas and/or critical skills where the coverage provided by existing Skills Assure suppliers is not adequate to meet local needs.

### 4.1 The Skills Assure supplier system

Registered training organisations (RTOs) must register as a Skills Assure supplier to deliver training and assessment services that are subsidised by the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training (the department).

The Skills Assure supplier system provides a central register of pre-approved RTOs for the delivery of training and assessment services subsidised by the department. This includes subsidised or free training available through the Certificate 3 Guarantee, User Choice, Higher Level Skills, Free apprenticeships for under 25s, Fee Free TAFE, Skilling Queensland for Work, Trade Skills Assessment and Gap Training, Back to Work and VET in Schools programs.<sup>63</sup> Students can only access government-funded training programs if they undertake the training through a Skills Assure supplier.

The department's website explains:

The SAS system is based on a performance framework for the assessment, selection and monitoring of RTOs linked to national standards and department-specific requirements in quality management.

It aims to provide training participants with a level of assurance that their chosen RTO is able to deliver high-quality, industry-standard training that best meets their skilling and learning needs and supports employment opportunities.<sup>64</sup>

When briefing the committee, the department acknowledges the critical importance of the SAS system.<sup>65</sup>

The Skills Assure Suppliers framework is a critical framework that we use to contract registered training organisations, or RTOs, in Queensland. It is over and above the national regulation and national registration process for RTOs which is administered through the Australian Skills Quality Authority. Historically, Queensland has contracted with more Skills Assure Suppliers or RTOs than most other jurisdictions across Australia. We currently have around 350 RTOs we contract with.<sup>66</sup>

In a brief for the committee in March 2023, DESBT advised that there are approximately 397 contracted Skills Assure suppliers across Queensland, with 230 reporting as servicing regional and

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<sup>63</sup> Queensland Government, *Subsidised training and incentives*, <https://desbt.qld.gov.au/training/training-careers/incentives>.

<sup>64</sup> Queensland Government, *Skills Assure supplier framework*, <https://desbt.qld.gov.au/training/providers/sas/framework>.

<sup>65</sup> Public briefing transcript, Brisbane, 14 July 2023, p 2.

<sup>66</sup> Public briefing transcript, Brisbane, 14 July 2023, p 2.

remote areas.<sup>67</sup> This includes TAFE Queensland and CQU, who are the suppliers with the largest presence in regional Queensland.<sup>68</sup>

RTOs that want to become Skills Assure suppliers can only apply to do so if the department:

- has opened a general application process, or
- invites an RTO to apply for Skills Assure supplier status, to address a need identified by the department.

On its website, the department states that it decided not to open a general application process in 2022–23.<sup>69</sup> As a result, at present RTOs can only apply for Skills Assure supplier status if they are invited to do so by the department.

## 4.2 Issues raised by stakeholders

Several submitters expressed concern that:

- there are not enough Skills Assure suppliers in some regional, rural and remote areas
- there are not enough Skills Assure suppliers who can deliver training in certain critical skills, especially water industry operations (a critical skill for local councils) and mental health support
- there is a lack of clarity regarding how DESBT decides whether existing Skills Assure suppliers provide adequate coverage in different parts of the state
- they have concerns about the data that DESBT uses to assess whether there are enough Skills Assure suppliers in different parts of the state
- it is difficult to find information about which Skills Assure suppliers operate in regional, rural and remote areas, their methods and cost of delivery, and any gap costs for employers
- oversight of suppliers could be improved.

According to the Queensland Training Ombudsman, for some trade occupations there are only 5 RTOs in Australia, making access in regional, rural and remote communities more difficult.<sup>70</sup>

Narbil Training stated there are not enough Skills Assure suppliers based in Gladstone to meet local demands, including demand for VET in schools. They explain that:

DESBT has refused new SAS [Skills Assure supplier] applications for 2 years consecutively and provided no guidance for RTOs who are actively seeking funding as a direct result of the invalid statistical evidence they have gathered. Their stance is there is sufficient suppliers to meet regional QLD demands. Whilst on paper that may seem the case at the coal face it is a completely different story.<sup>71</sup>

At the public hearing in Brisbane, Associate Professor O’Shannessy, the Chief Executive Officer of Rural Medical Education Australia also expressed frustration with how DESBT makes decisions about Skills Assure applications, and its decision not to open applications for Skills Assure Status for several years. She explained:

We have been trying to get Skills Assure Supplier status for three years now and have been refused each round. In the last round they did not even open up SAS. Even though I could demonstrate that we are in

<sup>67</sup> Department of Employment, Small Business and Training, Correspondence, 24 March 2023, p 2.

<sup>68</sup> Queensland Government, *Become a Skills Assure supplier*, <https://desbt.qld.gov.au/training/providers/sas/become>.

<sup>69</sup> Queensland Government, *Become a Skills Assure supplier*, <https://desbt.qld.gov.au/training/providers/sas/become>.

<sup>70</sup> Queensland Training Ombudsman, Correspondence, 22 December 2023.

<sup>71</sup> Narbil Training, submission 1, p 1.

a thin market, that there were no other RTOs where we are and that there is nobody else delivering the training that we are doing, still the department has refused us for three years.<sup>72</sup>

Similarly, Golden West Apprenticeships stressed that while Skills Assure suppliers are approved to deliver training across Queensland, many of them do not operate in regional areas. This leaves regional communities underserved despite the apparent sufficiency of suppliers at the state level. They explained that in their experience, many RTOs with Skills Assure status ‘simply refuse to accept a Training Contract for an apprentice or trainee based in rural or remote Queensland (or charge outrageous gap fees to deliver)’.<sup>73</sup>

Golden West Apprenticeships suggested that this problem could be partly address by improving access to information about where different Skills Assure suppliers operate. Specifically, they proposed that these suppliers be required to publish specific information about their delivery methods and locations, including how they incorporate online, classroom and on-the-job training and assessment.<sup>74</sup> They note that this recommendation was previously made by Jobs Queensland in their *Positive Futures* report.<sup>75</sup>

A significant number of submitters stated that the current pool of Skills Assure suppliers is too limited with respect to certain types of skills, particularly water management and wastewater operations, which are in high demand by local government. Central Highlands Regional Council, Cairns Regional Council, Livingstone Shire Council, Mackay Regional Council and the Queensland Water Directorate (also known as qldwater) all expressed this concern.<sup>76</sup>

Several local councils noted that there are only two Skills Assure suppliers approved to deliver certain water industry operations training: one based in Brisbane and the other based in Melbourne. Central Highlands Regional Council expressed particular concern that DESBT is not fast-tracking applications for Skills Assure status from RTOs who can provide training for such niche and critical skills.<sup>77</sup> Dr Davis, the CEO of the Queensland Water Directorate, echoed this concern at the public hearing in Brisbane. She stated:

In May 2022, TAFE Queensland ceased delivery of the National Water Training Package and all associated units of competency. This means that in Queensland we now have no public provider delivering this critical national training package. There are two private training providers within Queensland who provide the urban water sector with access to that training package, but new providers are currently unable to access the Skills Assure Suppliers, or SAS, platform, and the criticality of that is that new training providers cannot access the skills subsidy on offer for the relevant industry qualifications. This leaves students and water providers paying full fee for service.<sup>78</sup>

The Group Training Association of Queensland and Northern Territory recommended that training providers be subject to a probation period and close service delivery accountabilities before they are awarded long-term contracts.<sup>79</sup>

New and prospective providers should be required to evidence over time their capacity and capability to provide delivery and assessment services in regional Queensland, and for the first year of the agreement

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<sup>72</sup> Public hearing transcript, Brisbane, 14 July 2023, p 15.

<sup>73</sup> Golden West Apprenticeships, submission 6, p 4; Roma community forum, 27 October 2023, transcript p 2.

<sup>74</sup> Golden West Apprenticeships, submission 6, p 4.

<sup>75</sup> See recommendation 7 in Jobs Queensland, *Positive Futures: Apprenticeships and Traineeships in Queensland*, 2017. [https://jobsqueensland.qld.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/positive\\_futures\\_apprenticeships\\_traineeships\\_queensland.pdf](https://jobsqueensland.qld.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/positive_futures_apprenticeships_traineeships_queensland.pdf).

<sup>76</sup> Submissions 12, 22, 23, 25 and 27.

<sup>77</sup> Central Highlands Regional Council, submission 25.

<sup>78</sup> Public hearing transcript, Brisbane, 14 July 2023, p 20.

<sup>79</sup> Group Training Association of Queensland and Northern Territory, Correspondence, 10 July 2023.

be on a form of probation and close service delivery accountability before the awarding of long-term agreements.<sup>80</sup>

The association further recommended that, where a supplier requires special fees or conditions for the training they provide, or uses a blended delivery model, that information should be made publicly available on the Queensland Training Information Service website to inform user choice.<sup>81</sup> At the Roma community forum, the committee heard of an example where an RTO was charging \$28,000 to deliver a priority 1 qualification, on top of it being eligible for User Choice funding and the 15 per cent location loading.<sup>82</sup>

### 4.3 Response from the department

In its response to submissions, the department:

- re-iterated the information provided on its website, stating that it had decided not to open a general application process for Skills Assure suppliers in 2022-23
- advised that it ‘will continue to assess and manage requirements for additional suppliers and may invite registered training organisations to apply for SAS status if a need is identified’
- stated that it provides a central register of Skills Assure suppliers.<sup>83</sup>

Regarding the specific issues raised by Narbil Training in relation to Gladstone, DESBT stated that:

- several Skills Assure suppliers currently operate in Gladstone, including CQU and TAFE Queensland<sup>84</sup>
- it recently liaised with the Department of Education ‘to seek local intelligence regarding accessibility of VET in Schools for students in the Gladstone region’ and was advised that this was not a major issue.<sup>85</sup>

Regarding the concerns raised by submitters about the limited number of Skills Assure suppliers who deliver training in water industry operations, DESBT stated that it ‘is aware of the Water Operations issue, having had discussions with qldwater to address [it], and notes there are two current private Skills Assure suppliers who are available to deliver this training.’<sup>86</sup>

### 4.4 Accessibility of information

It is difficult to assess whether submitters’ concerns about the availability of Skills Assure suppliers are well-founded. This is because it is very difficult to access information about the geographic scope of suppliers’ training operations. Indeed, it appears there is no central portal or website which allows members of the public to work out which training providers are operating in a particular location, and how those providers deliver training.

For example, members of the public can search the register of Skills Assure suppliers through the Queensland Skills Gateway website. However, the ‘find a provider’ function only shows the head office of each RTO. The website advises those seeking further information about alternative delivery locations to contact the relevant training provider.

<sup>80</sup> Group Training Association of Queensland and Northern Territory, Correspondence, 10 July 2023.

<sup>81</sup> Group Training Association of Queensland and Northern Territory, Correspondence, 10 July 2023.

<sup>82</sup> Roma community forum, 27 October 2023, transcript, p 3.

<sup>83</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 24 March 2023, Attachment 1, p.2.

<sup>84</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 24 March 2023, Attachment 1, p 2.

<sup>85</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 24 March 2023, Attachment 1, pp 3-4.

<sup>86</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 24 March 2023, Attachment 1, p 22.

In addition, since the vast majority of RTOs have head offices in South East Queensland, the Queensland Skills Gateway generates very few results in response to searches for Skills Assure suppliers in regional, rural and remote locations.

#### **Committee comment**

The committee notes the challenges some stakeholders expressed regarding the availability of Skills Assure suppliers, and the scope and mode of training that they offer, in regional, rural and remote areas. These appear to have been heightened by the lack of clarity regarding when the next round of general applications for Skills Assure status will open, and a lack of clarity around how DESBT decides whether to issue more targeted invitations to apply for Skills Assure status in response to an identified need.

In light of these factors, the committee recommends that DESBT clarifies both of these matters. Doing so would help to assure stakeholders that DESBT has a pro-active and robust approach to ensuring Skills Assure suppliers provide adequate coverage across regional, rural and remote Queensland.

Improving the accessibility of information about existing Skills Assure suppliers may also help to build community confidence about their coverage of regional, rural and remote areas. Although the department maintains a central register of Skills Assure suppliers, it remains difficult for prospective students and employers to access information about the geographic scope of suppliers' training operations, and any costs of training that employers will need to meet. The committee therefore recommends that the department upgrades the central register of Skills Assure suppliers to ensure that members of the public can easily identify which training providers are operating in their area, and how they deliver training (in person or online) and any costs that employers will incur for the training.

#### **Recommendation 3**

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training: (i) clarify when it will open the next round of general applications for Skills Assure status, and (ii) clarify how it decides whether to issue more targeted invitations to apply for Skills Assure status in response to an identified need.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills Development**

#### **Recommendation 4**

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training upgrade the central register of Skills Assure suppliers to ensure that members of the public can easily identify (i) which training providers are operating in their local area (ii) whether the training they provide in a local area is delivered in person or online, and (iii) any costs to employers associated with training they provide.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills Development**

## 5 Financial incentives and support for VET in regional, rural and remote areas

### Summary

- Queenslanders in regional, rural, and remote areas face significant financial barriers to VET.
- Travel and accommodation allowances play an important role in making VET more accessible to those in regional, rural and remote areas. However, recent cost-of-living increases demonstrate the need to regularly review whether these payments are adequate.
- Offering greater flexibility about when travel allowances are paid, and to whom, may allow these allowances to more effectively reduce barriers to VET in regional, rural and remote areas.
- The provision of additional payments, known as location-based loadings, to VET providers who offer training in regional, rural and remote Queensland, is also important for ensuring people in these areas can access high-quality VET.
- Queensland's location-based loadings for VET delivery appear to be appropriately focussed on certain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where VET delivery is particularly complex and costly.
- There appears to be a degree of inequity in how some locations are classified for the purposes of calculating location-based loadings for VET delivery. Certain remote areas (e.g. St George) and outer regional locations (e.g. Roma and Townsville) attract the same subsidies as locations much closer to major cities (e.g. Toowoomba).

### 5.1 Travel and accommodation allowances for trainees and apprentices

Existing evidence consistently identifies the need to travel away from home for training, and the cost of doing so as a barrier to VET for people living in regional, rural and remote areas. This includes recent national level reports, including the Joyce Report,<sup>87</sup> Naphthine Report,<sup>88</sup> Shergold Report,<sup>89</sup> and the report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Training.<sup>90</sup> Those reports found, for example, that students from regional, rural and remote areas were

<sup>87</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System*, 2019 (Joyce Report). <https://www.pmc.gov.au/publications/strengthening-skills-expert-review-australias-vocational-education-and-training-system>.

<sup>88</sup> Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy*, Final Report, 2019 (Naphthine Report). <https://www.education.gov.au/access-and-participation/resources/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy-final-report>.

<sup>89</sup> Council of Australian Governments Education Council, *Looking to the Future*, Report of the Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training, June 2020 (Shergold Report). <https://cica.org.au/final-report-of-the-education-council-review-of-senior-secondary-pathways-into-work-further-education-and-training/>.

<sup>90</sup> Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, *Education in remote and complex environments*, November 2020. [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Employment\\_Education\\_and\\_Training/RemoteEducation/Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Employment_Education_and_Training/RemoteEducation/Report).

more likely to experience socioeconomic disadvantage (including poverty) yet faced higher transport costs compared to their counterparts in major cities.

Trainees and apprentices who travel away from home to undertake VET may be able to access travel and accommodation allowances to offset some of their costs, paid by the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training (DESBT). One goal of these allowances is to improve access to VET in regional, rural and remote areas.

### 5.1.1 Current travel and accommodation allowances in Queensland

Trainees and apprentices who must travel away from home to complete VET may be eligible to receive allowances designed to partially offset their costs. Prior to 1 July 2023, these allowances covered:

- up to 26c/km for road and rail travel
- the full costs of flights (if travelling more than 1100 km return, or in Cape York Peninsula or Torres Strait)<sup>91</sup>
- \$40 per night for intrastate accommodation
- \$76 per night for interstate accommodation.<sup>92</sup>

Since 1 July 2023, the payments available in Queensland increased as follows:

- up to 32c/km for road and rail travel
- \$55 per night for intrastate accommodation
- \$105 per night for interstate accommodation for stays after 1 July 2023.<sup>93</sup>

To be eligible for these payments, a person must:

- be a registered apprentice or trainee in Queensland
- be part-time or full-time, but not school-based (allowances for school students are managed under a different scheme)
- travel more than 100km return
- go to the closest RTO offering their course
- claim their allowances within 6 months of travel.<sup>94</sup>

DESBT also confirmed that many Modern Awards require employers to reimburse apprentices for costs associated with off-site training, but noted that ‘the amount payable by an employer can be reduced by the amount an apprentice or trainee is eligible to receive through state government travel and accommodation allowances.’<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 24 March 2023, Attachment 1, p 2.

<sup>92</sup> Queensland Government, *Travel and accommodation allowance*, <https://www.qld.gov.au/education/apprenticeships/for-apprentices/support/travel>.

<sup>93</sup> Queensland Government, *Travel and accommodation allowance*, <https://www.qld.gov.au/education/apprenticeships/for-apprentices/support/travel>.

<sup>94</sup> Queensland Government, *Travel and accommodation allowance*, <https://www.qld.gov.au/education/apprenticeships/for-apprentices/support/travel>.

<sup>95</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 24 March 2023, Attachment 1, p 2.

**Table 1 – Travel and accommodation allowances available in selected jurisdictions**

State /Territory	Minimum travel distance	Travel by road/rail	Airfares	Accommodation (per night)
<b>Queensland</b> (from 1 July 2023) <sup>96</sup>	100 km (return)	32 cents/km	Yes, if more than 1100 km return, or in Cape York Peninsula or Torres Strait	\$55 intrastate \$105 interstate
New South Wales <sup>97</sup>	120 km (return)	33 cents/km	For Lord Howe Island residents	\$56
South Australia <sup>98</sup>	150 km (return)	30 cents/km	For interstate travel	\$60 intrastate \$110 interstate
Western Australia <sup>99</sup>	71 km (return) for travel 150 km (return) for accommodation	40 cents/km or actual fare for bus/train journeys \$20 for each transfer to airport or bus/train station	Only for travel over 1100 km	\$100 intrastate below 26 <sup>th</sup> parallel \$150 intrastate, above 26 <sup>th</sup> parallel OR interstate
Tasmania <sup>100</sup>	> 21 km (one way) for travel > 40km (one way) for accommodation	41 cents/km 45 cents/km from West Coast	Yes, if booked via designated agent	\$55 intrastate \$100 interstate
Northern Territory <sup>101</sup>	100 km	50 cents/km or actual fare for bus journeys up to 1000 km return Actual cost of transfers to airport or bus station	Yes, based on discounted fares available	\$50
Australian Capital Territory <sup>102</sup>	Outside ACT	\$80 per trip, regardless of mode of travel	\$80 per trip, regardless of mode of travel	Allowance for living expenses including accommodation: \$60 (Sydney) \$50 (Wollongong and Wagga Wagga)

*Note: Information about location loadings paid in Victoria is not readily available online.*

<sup>96</sup> Queensland Government, *Travel and accommodation allowance*, <https://www.qld.gov.au/education/apprenticeships/for-apprentices/support/travel>.

<sup>97</sup> NSW Government, *Travel, Accommodation and Relocation Assistance*, August 2020. [nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/noindex/2022-03/vtas\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/noindex/2022-03/vtas_guidelines.pdf).

<sup>98</sup> Skills SA, *Travel and Accommodation Allowance Guidelines*, April 2023. <https://skilledworkers.business.sa.gov.au/file/downloads/travel-and-accommodation-allowance-guidelines>.

<sup>99</sup> Government of Western Australia, Department of Training and Workforce Development, *Procedures for the Travel and Accommodation Allowance for Apprenticeships*, July 2023. <https://www.dtwd.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/uploads/Uploader/dtwd-taa-procedures-for-the-travel-accommodation-allowance-for-apprenticeships-jul2023-v2.pdf>.

<sup>100</sup> Skills Tasmania, *Apprentice and Trainee Travel and Accommodation Allowances Policy and Payment Rates – Effective 1 January 2023*. [https://www.skills.tas.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0012/199677/Travel\\_and\\_Accommodation\\_Allowance\\_Policy\\_Statement\\_and\\_Guidelines.pdf](https://www.skills.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0012/199677/Travel_and_Accommodation_Allowance_Policy_Statement_and_Guidelines.pdf).

### 5.1.2 How allowances in Queensland compare to other states and territories

There is significant variation in the travel and accommodation allowances that different states and territories pay to trainees and apprentices who travel away from home to complete components of their training. Table 1 summarises this variation.

As Table 1 shows, recent increases made by DESBT during the committee's inquiry have brought the travel allowances that Queensland pays to eligible trainees and apprentices into line with those paid in most other jurisdictions. For example, Queensland pays \$55 per night for intrastate accommodation, compared to \$56 per night in NSW and \$60 per night in South Australia.

Queensland also reimburses trainees and apprentices 32 cents per km travelled, compared to 33 cents per km in NSW and 30 cents per km in South Australia. However, both Western Australia and the Northern Territory pay significantly more per km travelled.

Prior to recent increases (detailed in section 5.1.1), there was a significant gap between the amounts paid in Queensland, and the amounts paid in other states. For example, Queensland paid just \$40 per night towards the cost of intrastate accommodation, when most jurisdictions states paid more than \$50.

### 5.1.3 Issues raised by stakeholders

A significant number of submitters identified the cost of travel and accommodation as a major barrier to VET in rural, regional and remote areas.<sup>103</sup>

At the Roma community forum, the committee heard that apprentices in western Queensland travel vast distances to access VET, including in one example a 10 hour drive each way.<sup>104</sup> Several stakeholders stated that a review of current travel and accommodation allowances is necessary.<sup>105</sup> These stakeholders argued that the travel and accommodation allowances paid by the department are well below the actual costs incurred by trainees and apprentices.

CUC Balonne explained:

A large discrepancy in equity for rural and remote students to access VET is cost... The cost of travel and accommodation, meals etc far exceeds any government incentives offered when students need to live away from home at Toowoomba or Brisbane. Employers have identified the gap costs as prohibitive. Students still have financial commitments that need to be met while living away from home and also need to cover additional incidental travel costs on minimum Apprentice wages.<sup>106</sup>

Some submitters also expressed concern that current administrative arrangements do not allow for the fact that some employers pay the costs of travel and accommodation, rather than their apprentices. In many cases, employers are required to do so.

This arrangement creates an additional administrative and financial burden for employers, since they must pay 'up front' for travel and accommodation, then rely on their employees to first apply for the relevant allowances and then reimburse them once those payments are received. Mackay Regional Council explained that they often find themselves in the 'awkward position' of having to try and get

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<sup>101</sup> Northern Territory Government, *Apprenticeship travel and accommodation help*, <https://nt.gov.au/employ/apprenticeships-and-traineeships/support-for-apprentices/apprenticeship-travel-and-accommodation-help>.

<sup>102</sup> Treasury and Economic Development Directorate, ACT Government, Correspondence, 9 October 2023.

<sup>103</sup> Submissions 4, 5, 6, 10, 15, 21, 22, 24, 26 and 27; Roma community forum, 27 October 2023, transcript pp9-13.

<sup>104</sup> Roma community forum, 27 October 2023, transcript pp1-2.

<sup>105</sup> For example, Golden West Apprenticeships, submission 6; Group Training Australia and Northern Territory, Correspondence, 10 July 2023.

<sup>106</sup> CUC Balonne, submission 24, p 5.

trainees and apprentices to reimburse them, a problem which could be avoided if they were allowed to apply directly for the relevant payments.<sup>107</sup>

Other issues raised by stakeholders regarding travel and accommodation for apprentices and trainees include:

- the need for additional funding to support regional VET students who need to travel away from home to complete their studies<sup>108</sup>
- the recommendation that training providers should assist with organising travel and accommodation for apprentices and trainees<sup>109</sup>
- The need for accommodation on Thursday Island for VET students from outer Torres Strait islands who are undertaking VET at the Thursday Island TAFE campus.<sup>110</sup>

#### 5.1.4 Response from the department

In its response to submissions, DESBT advised that the travel and accommodation allowances paid to trainees and apprentices:

- are intended to offset the costs incurred by trainees and apprentices, not cover them in full
- are reviewed annually, with CPI increases applied.

#### **Committee comment**

The committee commends DESBT for its recent decision to increase the travel and accommodation allowances paid to trainees and apprentices in Queensland so that they are comparable with those offered in most other states and territories.

The committee recommends that the department regularly reviews the adequacy of the travel and accommodation allowances paid to trainees and apprentices in Queensland.

#### **Recommendation 5**

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training regularly review the adequacy of the travel and accommodation allowances paid to trainees.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills Development**

## 5.2 Location loadings for the delivery of VET

Existing evidence consistently identifies the higher cost of delivering VET in regional, rural and remote areas as a significant challenge. This includes recent high-level reports, such as the Joyce Report,<sup>111</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Mackay Regional Council, submission 27, p 4.

<sup>108</sup> Public hearing transcript, Brisbane, 14 July 2023, p 13.

<sup>109</sup> Group Training Association of Queensland and Northern Territory, Correspondence, 10 July 2023.

<sup>110</sup> Community forum transcript, Thursday Island, 11 July 2023, pp 8-9.

<sup>111</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System*, 2019 (Joyce Report). <https://www.pmc.gov.au/publications/strengthening-skills-expert-review-australias-vocational-education-and-training-system>

Napthine Report,<sup>112</sup> Shergold Report,<sup>113</sup> and the report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Training.<sup>114</sup> As those reports explain, the additional cost of delivering training in regional, rural and remote areas limits the number of RTOs and range of courses available to students, apprentices and trainees.

To address this problem, the government provides additional funding to training providers who deliver training in regional, rural and remote Queensland. Specifically, DESBT makes a higher payment to registered training organisations (RTOs) that deliver training under the User Choice program in certain regional, rural and remote areas. The scale of that additional payment is determined by the location-loading category that a specific training location falls within.

### 5.2.1 Current location loadings for VET in Queensland

The User Choice program ‘provides a public funding contribution towards the cost of training and assessment for eligible Queensland apprentices and trainees, with funding paid directly to the approved training supplier’.<sup>115</sup>

DESBT currently pays location loadings at 4 levels, as set out in Table 2.

**Table 2 – Current location loadings in Queensland<sup>116</sup>**

Category	Examples of locations included	Location loading (in addition to base)
Special areas	Cape York, Torres Strait, Palm Island and Doomadgee	150%
Remote	Quilpie, Barcaldine, Longreach, Cloncurry, Mount Isa, Cherbourg and Port Douglas	75%
Country	most of the Scenic Rim, Toowoomba, Lockyer Valley, Southern Downs, Western Downs, Goondiwindi, Roma, Gladstone, Rockhampton, Townsville and Cairns	15%
---	Brisbane, the Gold Coast, urban centres in the Sunshine Coast	none

Source: Committee Secretariat, based on the Priority skills localities and loadings list available at: <https://desbt.qld.gov.au/training/providers/funded/priority-skills-list>.

The special and remote categories (as defined by the department) correspond roughly to the locations classified as ‘very remote’ under the Australian Statistical Geography Standard - Remoteness Areas (see Appendix D). However, as illustrated in Table 3, the country category used by DESBT captures a wide variety of locations, including areas classified as remote, outer regional and inner regional under the Australian Statistical Geography Standard.

<sup>112</sup> Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy*, Final Report, 2019 (Napthine Report). <https://www.education.gov.au/access-and-participation/resources/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy-final-report>.

<sup>113</sup> Council of Australian Governments Education Council, *Looking to the Future*, Report of the Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training, June 2020, (Shergold Report). <https://cica.org.au/final-report-of-the-education-council-review-of-senior-secondary-pathways-into-work-further-education-and-training/>.

<sup>114</sup> Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, *Education in remote and complex environments*, November 2020. [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Employment\\_Education\\_and\\_Training/RemoteEducation/Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Employment_Education_and_Training/RemoteEducation/Report).

<sup>115</sup> Queensland Government, Department of Employment, Small Business and Training, *User Choice 2021-23 Policy*, p 4. [https://desbt.qld.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0021/7824/user-choice-policy.pdf](https://desbt.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/7824/user-choice-policy.pdf).

<sup>116</sup> Queensland Government, Department of Employment, Small Business and Training, *Priority skills localities and loadings list*, <https://desbt.qld.gov.au/training/providers/funded/priority-skills-list>.

**Table 3 – Classification of selected locations**

Location	Classification by the department	Classification under the Australian Statistical Geography Standard
Blackwater	Country	Outer regional
Capella	Country	Remote
Charters Towers	Country	Outer regional
Clermont	Country	Remote
Hughenden	Country	Very remote
Richmond (CQ)	Country	Very remote
Rockhampton	Country	Inner regional
Rolleston	Country	Remote
Roma	Country	Outer regional
St George	Country	Remote
Texas	Country	Outer regional
Toowoomba	Country	Inner regional
Townsville	Country	Outer regional

Source: Committee secretariat, based on the map at Appendix D and the Priority skills localities and loadings list available at: <https://desbt.qld.gov.au/training/providers/funded/priority-skills-list>.

### 5.2.2 How location loadings in Queensland compare to other states and territories

In 2020, the Australian Government's Productivity Commission analysed the VET subsidies offered by different jurisdictions as part of its review of the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development. It found that in general, Queensland tends to have lower subsidies for VET than other states, with a more limited range of subsidy levels (for courses based on priority). However, the Productivity Commission noted that comparisons are complex because subsidies depend on the course (subject matter and level), the identity of the student (Indigenous or not) and their location (regional/remote). The Productivity Commission also observed that, overall, subsidies in Queensland are less widely dispersed and more focussed on priority courses, students, and locations.<sup>117</sup>

At present, there is substantial variation in the eligibility for location loadings offered by other jurisdictions, and the subsidy levels paid. Table 4, below, summarises this variation.

The top location loadings in Queensland are higher than those available in most other jurisdictions. For example, while Queensland pays an extra 75 per cent for VET delivered in remote areas, South Australia pays an extra 40 per cent in areas it classifies as 'very remote regional,' and New South Wales pays an extra 20 per cent in 'remote' areas.

However, New South Wales appears to adopt a broader definition of 'remote', including areas classified as 'outer regional' by the ARIA+ Index and Australian Statistical Geography Standard. As a result, some Queensland locations (such as Roma and Townsville) receive a lower rate of subsidy than comparable locations in New South Wales.

The location loadings paid in Queensland appear to be more targeted than in other states. For example, Queensland's highest rate of subsidy is only available in selected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, where VET delivery is particularly complex and costly.

<sup>117</sup> Productivity Commission, *National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review*, Productivity Commission Study Report, December 2020, pp 268-269. <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/skills-workforce-agreement/report>.

**Table 4 – Location loadings available in selected jurisdictions**

State/Territory	Basis for classification	Location categories	Location subsidy (% in <u>addition</u> to base)
Queensland <sup>118</sup>	By department	Special areas	150
		Remote	75
		Country	15
New South Wales <sup>119</sup>	ARIA+ Index/Australian Statistical Geography Standard	Remote	20
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Regional' includes inner regional</li> <li>• 'Remote' includes outer regional, remote and very remote</li> </ul>	Regional	10
South Australia <sup>120</sup>	By department	Very remote regional	40
		Remote regional	30
		Moderately accessible regional	20
		Accessible regional	10
Northern Territory <sup>121</sup>	By department	Remote	80
		Regional	25
Australian Capital Territory <sup>122</sup>	Does not pay location loadings; the ACT as a whole is considered to be a regional location.		

*Note: Information about location loadings paid by Victoria and Tasmania is not readily available online.*

It is difficult to determine precisely what the different location loadings mean in financial terms. As the Productivity Commission observed in 2020, the base subsidy paid by each state differs depending on both the background of the student and the specific qualification they are undertaking.

### 5.2.3 Issues raised by stakeholders

The Queensland Training Ombudsman's review of VET delivery in Central Queensland and North Queensland regions included a review of location loadings.<sup>123</sup> In his briefing for the committee, the Queensland Training Ombudsman flagged the need to consider increased regional loadings to assist RTOs in regional, rural and remote areas.<sup>124</sup>

Several submitters expressed concern that the inclusion of diverse locations within the 'country' grouping is inequitable and means that the subsidies available for VET provision in certain locations – such as Roma – fail to reflect the higher costs faced by RTOs in those areas.

<sup>118</sup> Queensland Government, Department of Employment, Small Business and Training, *Priority skills localities and loadings list*, <https://desbt.qld.gov.au/training/providers/funded/priority-skills-list>.

<sup>119</sup> NSW Government, *Smart and Skilled loadings for training providers*, <https://www.nsw.gov.au/education-and-training/vocational/funding/smart-skilled-loadings>.

<sup>120</sup> Government of South Australia, *Vocational Education and Training Fee Framework – Attachment 3, Delivery Location Loading*, <https://mytraining.skills.sa.gov.au/assets/uploads/downloads/supportingSkilledCareers/2023-Training-Fee-Framework.pdf>.

<sup>121</sup> Northern Territory Government, *For registered training organisations (RTOs) – Private provider AHR rates*, <https://nt.gov.au/learning/adult-education-and-training/for-registered-training-organisations-rtos/private-provider-ahc-rates>.

<sup>122</sup> Treasury and Economic Development Directorate, ACT Government, correspondence to Committee Secretariat, 9 October 2023.

<sup>123</sup> Queensland Training Ombudsman, Correspondence, 22 December 2023.

<sup>124</sup> Queensland Training Ombudsman, Correspondence, 22 December 2023.

CUC Balonne explained:

Whilst there may be subsidies and incentives for trainers to travel outside of major centres, the loading to Toowoomba is the same loading to travel to St George or Dirranbandi. This leads to accessibility barriers, where trainers become unwilling to travel further distances and taking additional time for no higher incentive offer. The ratio of cost per student becomes uneconomical compared to the metropolitan and regional cost ratio and for private providers does not make commercial sense.<sup>125</sup>

Golden West Apprenticeships describes the inclusion of Roma and St George in the same category as Toowoomba as ‘extremely inequitable’ and states that it has made it challenging to attract RTOs to the far south-west of the state.<sup>126</sup> CUC Maranoa describes the current loadings in almost identical terms.<sup>127</sup> In their submission, CUC Maranoa explained:

...while location loadings are provided to students in rural areas, there is a significant inequity regarding regional classifications... Disappointingly, the local categorisation for Roma, being Country, is also the same as Toowoomba. As you would be aware, this is exceptionally inequitable and has resulted in ongoing challenges, especially around Registered Training Organisation (RTO) attraction into our Maranoa region.<sup>128</sup>

Golden West Apprenticeships suggest that a more objective measure of remoteness, such as the Modified Monash Model, would provide a more equitable means of categorising different locations.<sup>129</sup>

The Group Training Association of Queensland and Northern Territory recommended that regional loadings should be based on distance from metropolitan centre or GPO, to ‘reflect that a single loading does not support the variety of access and equity issues existing within a single Queensland region’.<sup>130</sup>

The Queensland Training Ombudsman also told the committee, from his review, that RTOs who are Skills Assure providers may not be aware they are eligible for location loadings to support their delivery training delivery in regional, rural and remote areas.<sup>131</sup>

#### 5.2.4 Response from the department

In its response to submissions, DESBT stated:

The regional boundaries for location loadings have been established for some time and DESBT will continue to ensure the appropriateness of these regional boundaries.<sup>132</sup>

#### **Committee comment**

The committee is satisfied that the most generous location loadings are appropriately focussed on certain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where VET delivery is particularly complex and costly.

However, the committee suggests that the categories used to calculate location loadings in other parts of the state may be contributing to inequitable outcomes in some circumstances. The cost of delivering training in Roma is likely to be significantly higher than in Toowoomba, yet the current system categorises both locations as ‘country’, making RTOs eligible for identical location loadings in both centres. The committee notes that this category was consistently described as problematic by stakeholders, with many identifying it as a barrier to VET in more remote parts of the state.

<sup>125</sup> CUC Balonne, submission 24, p 9.

<sup>126</sup> Golden West Apprenticeships, submission 6, p 2.

<sup>127</sup> CUC Maranoa, submission 11.

<sup>128</sup> Submission 11, p 2.

<sup>129</sup> Golden West Apprenticeships, submission 6.

<sup>130</sup> Group Training Association of Queensland and Northern Territory, Correspondence, 10 July 2023.

<sup>131</sup> Queensland Training Ombudsman, Correspondence, 21 December 2023.

<sup>132</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 24 March 2023, Attachment 1, p 4.

In light of these factors, the committee recommends a review of the current system of location loadings to ensure it delivers equitable access to VET in regional, rural and remote Queensland. This review should include an assessment of whether the 'country' category groups together different locations in a manner that adequately reflects the varying costs of VET delivery in each place.

The details of any agreed changes to location loadings should be brought to the attention of registered training organisations.

#### **Recommendation 6**

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training review the current system of location loadings to ensure it delivers equitable access to vocational education and training in regional, rural and remote Queensland. This review should include an assessment of whether the 'country' category groups together diverse locations in a manner that adequately reflects the varying costs of delivering vocational education and training in different parts of the state. Any resulting changes to location loadings should be brought to the attention of registered training organisations.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills Development**

## 6 Improving completion rates in regional, rural and remote areas

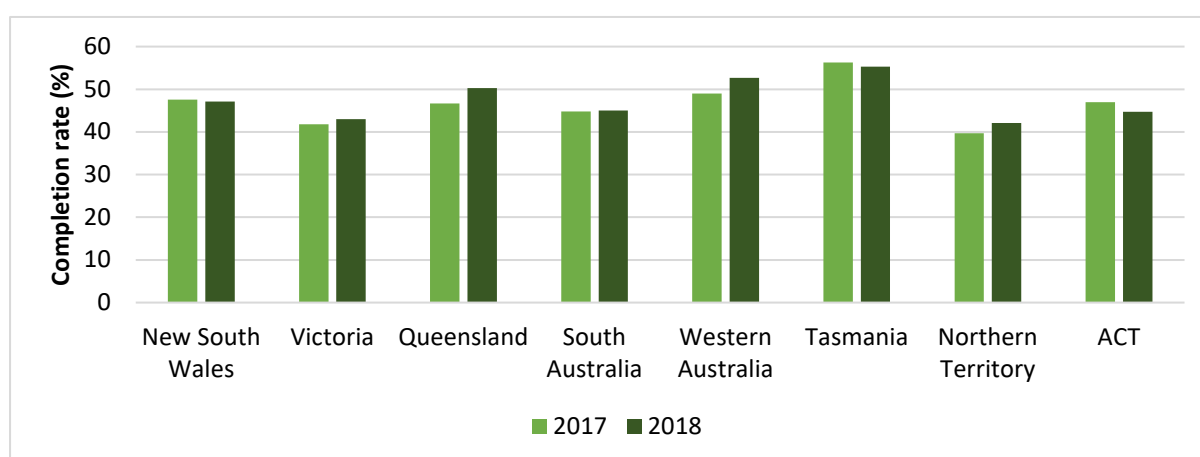
### Summary

- Improving the percentage of students who complete their VET qualifications – known as the completion rate – is a challenge across Australia. In recent years, Queensland has made progress in addressing this challenge.
- Despite recent improvements, people living in regional, rural and remote Queensland remain less likely to complete their VET qualifications, as do the state's Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Expanding regional study hubs to more locations could help to reduce the gap between completion rates in regional, rural and remote areas.
- Funding is not the only way the government could support the expansion of regional study hubs. Setting out a clear vision for the role of such hubs in delivering higher education, including VET, in Queensland could also contribute to their success.
- It may also be possible to restructure existing funding models so that training providers are rewarded for improving completion rates. This could be done without increasing the overall volume of funding provided by the government.

### 6.1 Queensland has made progress in improving completion rates

Improving the percentage of students who complete their VET qualification – commonly known as the completion rate – is a long-standing challenge. Typically, less than half of all students who commence an apprenticeship, traineeship or VET qualification complete it. Among students who commenced VET qualifications across Australia in 2018 (the last year for which observed actual rates are available), just 47.6 per cent completed their qualification. However, this represented an improvement on the previous year, when only 46.4 per cent of students completed their qualification.<sup>133</sup>

**Figure 2 – Completion rates in Queensland are higher than in most other jurisdictions**



*Note:* This figure shows completion rates by the year in which students commenced their qualification.

*Source:* NCVER, *VET qualification completion rates 2022: data slicer*, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/data/all-data/vet-qualification-completion-rates-2022-data-slicer>.

<sup>133</sup> NCVER, *VET qualification completion rates 2022*, Statistical report, 30 August 2023. <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/vet-qualification-completion-rates-2022>.

Completion rates for VET delivered in Queensland are slightly better than the national average, and better than several other jurisdictions, including Victoria and South Australia, as illustrated in Figure 2. Along with Western Australia and the Northern Territory, Queensland has also achieved some of the largest increases in completion rates in the years examined.

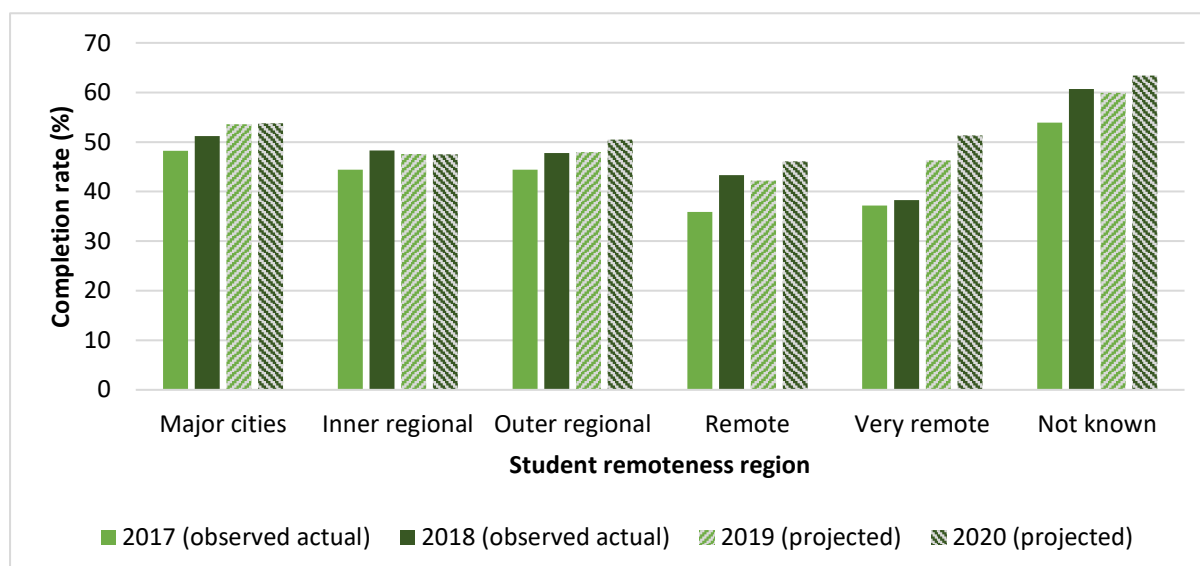
### 6.1.1 Completion rates remain lower in regional, rural and remote areas

Despite recent progress in improving completion rates, data from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) suggests significant gaps between completion rates in Queensland's major cities and regional, rural and remote areas, remain.

Of students who commenced VET qualifications in Australia in 2018, 47.8 per cent of VET students in major cities completed their qualification, compared to 43.4 per cent in inner regional areas, 43.6 per cent in outer regional areas, 40.7 per cent in remote areas, and 31.1 per cent in very remote areas.<sup>134</sup>

These national-level patterns were replicated in Queensland. In the same time period, 51.2 percent of VET students in major cities whose training was delivered in Queensland completed their qualification, compared to 48.3 per cent in inner regional areas, 47.8 per cent in outer regional areas, 43.3 per cent in remote areas, and 38.3 per cent in very remote areas.<sup>135</sup>

**Figure 3 – Completion rates in Queensland's regional and remote areas are improving**



*Note:* This figure shows completion rates in Queensland by the year in which students commenced their qualification.

*Source:* NCVER, *VET qualification completion rates 2022: data slicer*, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/data/all-data/vet-qualification-completion-rates-2022-data-slicer>.

As Figure 3 shows, Queensland appears to be making progress in improving completion rates among students in regional and remote areas. While this trend is projected to continue, students in regional and remote areas of the state continue to have lower completion rates than students in major cities.

<sup>134</sup> NCVER, *VET qualification completion rates 2022: data slicer*, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/data/all-data/vet-qualification-completion-rates-2022-data-slicer>.

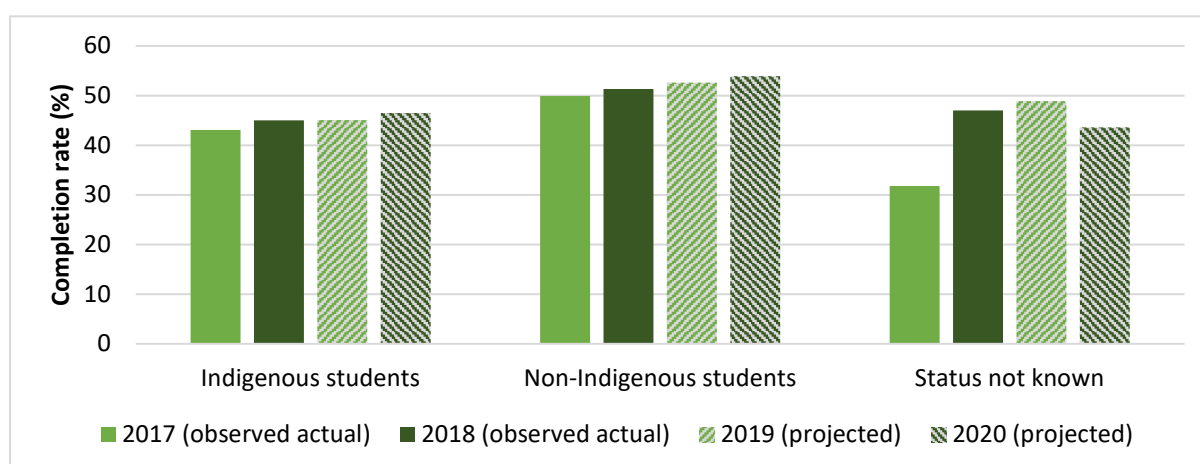
<sup>135</sup> NCVER, *VET qualification completion rates 2022: data slicer*, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/data/all-data/vet-qualification-completion-rates-2022-data-slicer>.

### 6.1.2 Completion rates remain lower among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

Completion rates are also lower among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, both across Australia and in Queensland. Of students who commenced VET qualifications in Australia in 2018, only 34.5 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students completed their qualification, compared to 48.1 per cent of non-Indigenous students.

In Queensland, completion rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are better than the national average, but still lag behind their non-Indigenous peers. In the same time-period, 45 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students whose training was delivered in Queensland completed their VET qualification, compared to 51.3 per cent of non-Indigenous students.<sup>136</sup>

**Figure 4 – Completion rates for Queensland’s Indigenous VET students are slowly improving**



*Note:* This figure shows completion rates in Queensland by students’ Indigenous status and the year in which students commenced their qualification.

*Source:* NCVER, *VET qualification completion rates 2022: data slicer*, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/data/all-data/vet-qualification-completion-rates-2022-data-slicer>.

As Figure 4 shows, Queensland appears to be making progress in improving completion rates among Aboriginal and First Nations students. While this trend is projected to continue, the gap between Queensland’s Aboriginal and First Nations VET students and their non-Indigenous counterparts remains.

## 6.2 Issues raised by stakeholders

Written submissions from stakeholders highlighted a number of factors that affect the ability of students in regional, rural and remote areas to complete their VET qualifications.

Several stakeholders emphasised how digital barriers to VET (which are discussed in more depth in section 6) affect completion rates. For example, the Queensland Teachers’ Union stated:

...remote students experience connectivity issues due to unstable internet and insufficient bandwidth, which mean that Zoom classes and the streaming of video lessons are frequently disrupted. This can lead to student frustration, low levels of engagement, and impact on student completions.<sup>137</sup>

Other stakeholders identified a range of factors that they believe affect completion rates in regional, rural and remote Queensland. These include:

<sup>136</sup> NCVER, *VET qualification completion rates 2022: data slicer*, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/data/all-data/vet-qualification-completion-rates-2022-data-slicer>.

<sup>137</sup> Queensland Teachers’ Union, submission 10, p 18.

- the strength of partnerships between schools and local TAFEs<sup>138</sup>
- the mental and physical health of students<sup>139</sup>
- workplace support, including access to work-based assessment, resources and experience<sup>140</sup>
- the limited academic confidence of some students, including those new to higher education<sup>141</sup>
- the degree of flexibility offered by training programs, including the availability of options that allow students to minimise any time away from home<sup>142</sup>
- support from peer mentors with lived experience.<sup>143</sup>

Some stakeholders drew attention to the additional challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who live in regional, rural and remote areas, including the need for culturally safe spaces. In their view, these factors contribute to lower completion rates among this group. As Mr Nelliman, the Principal Project Officer, Acting Manager Thursday Island, from the Department of Treaty, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, Communities and the Arts explained:

The cultural safe spaces that training providers offer on the mainland is important... Creating a culturally safe space is important as well because they [Torres Strait Islander students] are a long way from home. They are isolated and they may feel they want to hop on the next plane back to Horn Island.<sup>144</sup>

### 6.3 Response from the relevant department

The Department of Employment, Small Business and Training (DESBT) advised the committee that it has a range of strategies in place to improve completion rates across the state. For example:

- Queensland's public VET providers offer 'wraparound services that support the retention of students in training and provide opportunities for successful completion of courses'<sup>145</sup>
- DESBT has provided additional training to its regional offices 'to help them to support employers, apprentices and trainees to better navigate the challenges that jeopardise apprenticeship and traineeship completions'<sup>146</sup>
- DESBT has rolled-out strategically timed SMS campaigns 'to better engage apprentices and trainees in their skills development and inform behaviours that promote increased completions,' including promoting the support provided by itself and other stakeholders.<sup>147</sup>

### 6.4 Strategies for improving completion rates

A range of strategies could be used to improve completion rates across the state, and in regional, rural and remote areas in particular. This section discusses two options:

- creating stronger financial incentives for training provider to support students to complete
- expanding regional study hubs.

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<sup>138</sup> Queensland Catholic Education Commission, submission 14.

<sup>139</sup> Queensland Teachers' Union, submission 10.

<sup>140</sup> Pharmacy Guild of Australia – Queensland Branch, submission 21.

<sup>141</sup> Rural Medical Education Australia, submission 31.

<sup>142</sup> Isolated Children's Parents Association Queensland, submission 5.

<sup>143</sup> Queensland Alliance for Mental Health, submission 9.

<sup>144</sup> Community forum transcript, Thursday Island, 11 July 2023, p 2.

<sup>145</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 12 January 2023, p 4.

<sup>146</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 12 January 2023, p 18.

<sup>147</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 12 January 2023, p 19.

### 6.4.1 Creating stronger financial incentives for training providers to support students to complete training

The government provides a significant amount of funding for VET. At present, it invests \$1.2 billion in VET each year.<sup>148</sup> There may be opportunities to review this funding in a manner that creates stronger incentives for training providers to support students to complete their qualifications, without increasing the overall volume of funding.

The User Choice program, which provides public funding for the delivery of accredited, entry level training to apprentices and trainees, provides an illustration of such an opportunity. In Queensland, a significant portion of government VET funding is disbursed via this program. Under DESBT's current User Choice Policy, Skills Assure suppliers are paid for each unit of competency completed by a student. That policy sets out a number of 'business rules' that govern payments to Skills Assure suppliers. These include the following:

All payments will be made at an individual unit of competency or point level.

All units of competency or points are of equal value, calculated by dividing the government contribution by the designated number of units of competency or points for the particular qualification.<sup>149</sup>

Similar rules apply to payments made to Skills Assure suppliers under several other programs.<sup>150</sup>

This means that Skills Assure suppliers are paid the same amount for the first unit of competency completed by a student as the last. As a result, there are only weak financial incentives for training providers to invest in supports for existing students who may be struggling to complete their qualifications. It may be easier, and cheaper, for training providers to focus on enrolling new students.

Restructuring the way Skills Assure suppliers are paid, so that they receive progressively higher payments as students near completion of their qualification, could change this situation. Such a funding structure would provide stronger incentives for Skills Assure supplier to support existing students to complete their qualification, without increasing the overall volume of funding provided by the government.

#### **Committee comment**

More than half of all students who commence an apprenticeship, traineeship or VET qualification do not complete their qualification, at significant cost to the students, their families and taxpayers. The government has made significant investments in VET in recent years, much of which has taken the form of payments to training providers.

The committee considers that there may be ways to better leverage this existing funding to improve completion rates across the state. This could include restructuring payments made under programs such as the User Choice program to create stronger financial incentives for training providers to support students to complete their qualifications. Such a change could help to accelerate progress towards lifting completion rates, without requiring additional funding from the government.

The committee therefore recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training investigate how existing payments could be restructured to provide stronger incentives for training providers to support students to complete VET qualifications. This should include, but not be limited to, considering changes that would provide training providers with higher payments as students progress towards completion of their qualifications.

<sup>148</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 12 January 2023, p 7.

<sup>149</sup> Department of Employment, Small Business and Training, *User Choice 2021-24 Policy*, p 9. [https://desbt.qld.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0021/7824/user-choice-policy.pdf](https://desbt.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0021/7824/user-choice-policy.pdf).

<sup>150</sup> Department of Employment, Small Business and Training, *Skills Assure Supplier Policy 2021-24 for Queensland VET Investment Programs*, [https://desbt.qld.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0027/11889/sas-policy.pdf](https://desbt.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/11889/sas-policy.pdf).

### **Recommendation 7**

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training investigate how existing payments could be restructured to provide stronger incentives for training providers to support students to complete VET qualifications. This could include considering changes that would provide training providers with scaled payments as their students progress towards completion of their qualifications.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills Development**

#### **6.4.2 Expanding regional study hubs**

Regional study hubs may also provide a way to improve VET completion rates in regional, rural and remote areas. These hubs offer students free access to a range of services and facilities, including:

- high-speed internet
- quiet study spaces, and spaces that can be used for training, exams and assessments
- break out spaces
- ICT equipment, including computers and webcams
- reference material, including text books
- generalised academic support provided by centre staff.

In 2019, the Naphthine Report described regional study hubs as follows:

Regional Study Hubs are a recent innovation, designed to support students who wish to, or who have no alternative but to, stay in their community. The model is particularly important for mature age students, who often have family and work commitments, which prevent them from moving. Hubs are community facilities that provide support for students to study courses delivered externally by an Australian university. They provide physical infrastructure, as well as academic and pastoral support for students studying externally.<sup>151</sup>

In 2019, Hon Steven Joyce recommended that the federal government expand its support for regional study hubs following his review of Australia's VET system (also known as the Joyce Report).<sup>152</sup>

At present, only a small percentage of students in Queensland's regional, rural and remote areas are able to access a regional study hub. The main network of such hubs, Country Universities Centres (CUC), has affiliated centres in Roma, St George and Dirranbandi, Cooktown and Mt Isa. The Tablelands University Centre, which is not affiliated to CUC, is based in Atherton.

As illustrated in Figure 5, on the next page, some other states, most notably NSW, have rolled out regional study hubs to many more locations. This more ambitious rollout of regional study hubs was made possible by financial support from the federal government, as well as the NSW Government,

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<sup>151</sup> Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy*, Final Report, 2019 (Naphthine Report). <https://www.education.gov.au/access-and-participation/resources/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy-final-report>.

<sup>152</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System*, 2019, p 81. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/publications/strengthening-skills-expert-review-australias-vocational-education-and-training-system>.

which has provided at least \$16 million in funding for CUCs to date.<sup>153</sup> Typically, CUCs in NSW receive around \$150,000 to \$180,000 in funding per year, roughly half their annual operating budget.<sup>154</sup>

In addition to the 5 communities with a CUC in Queensland, a further 27 communities have expressed interest with the CUC organisation to establish their own centres.<sup>155</sup>

#### 6.4.2.1 *Evidence about the effectiveness of regional study hubs*

Some recent national reports have strongly endorsed regional study hubs as a tool for reducing digital barriers. For example, the Joyce Report recommended that the Commonwealth Government expand the university-based regional study hub model to provide funding to VET providers to participate in regional study hubs.<sup>156</sup>

In contrast, the Productivity Commission is more sceptical about the idea of expanding regional study hubs to VET. While it takes the view that this may be something that state governments could explore, it warns that model may be less effective for VET (compared to university study) as VET courses tend to be more capital intensive.<sup>157</sup>

There is some evidence that regional study hubs improve completion rates. In 2021, a CUC survey of students who attended their centres provided evidence suggesting they are highly effective. Students who responded to the survey reported improvements in their academic progress as performances, as well as their motivation, confidence and the likelihood that they would complete their qualification. Almost 95 percent of students agreed or strongly agreed that they were more likely to continue with their studies because of the support provided by their CUC.<sup>158</sup>

#### 6.4.2.2 *Case Study: CUC Maranoa*



As part of this inquiry, the committee visited CUC Maranoa in Roma to inspect its facilities. During that visit, the committee heard from staff at the centre, as well as other members of the local community. This visit provided the committee with a first-hand look at the benefits that regional study hubs can deliver to communities in regional rural and remote Queensland.

CUC Maranoa opened in Roma's Community Hub in March 2021. It can be used by any student studying at an Australian university, TAFE or other education institution.

Since the centre opened in 2002, CUC Maranoa had supported students studying with 44 different education providers, including VET RTOs. Typically, almost half of the students it supports are the first in their family to study, and around seven per cent identify as having Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage. The most popular areas of study among students registered at the centre are health and education.<sup>159</sup>

<sup>153</sup> CUC Far West, *Annual Report 2022*, p 7. <https://www.cucfarwest.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/11/2022-Annual-Report.pdf>.

<sup>154</sup> CUC, correspondence with committee secretariat, 8 September 2023.

<sup>155</sup> Country Universities Centre, 2023, Correspondence, 22 August 2023.

<sup>156</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System*, Report, 2019, p 81.

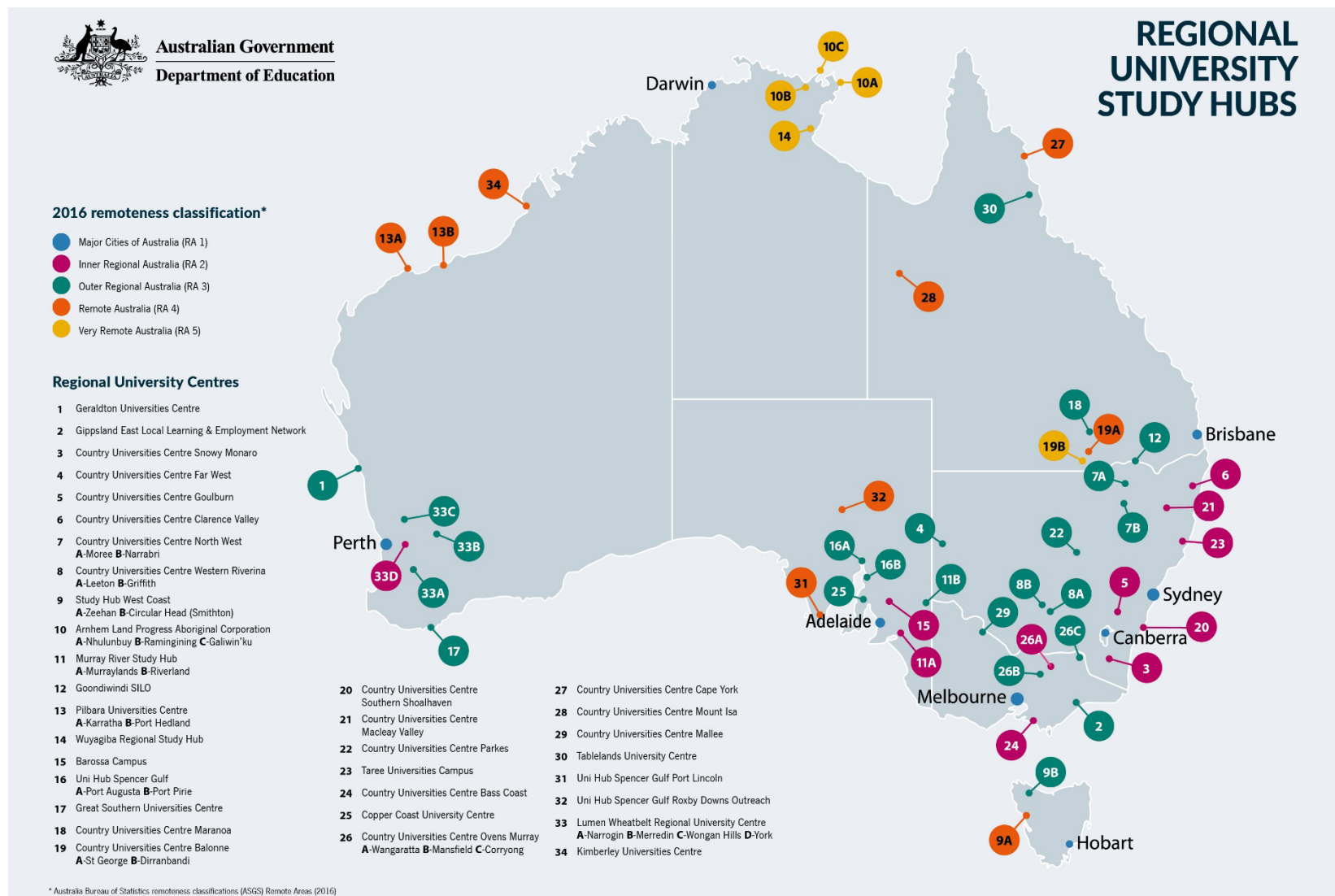
<sup>157</sup> Productivity Commission, *National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review*, Productivity Commission Study Report, December 2020, p 414.

<sup>158</sup> C Stone, N Crawford, C Ronan, & M Davis, 'Improving the Online Regional Student Experience: Findings from the Country Universities Centre (CUC) Student Evaluation' *Student Success*, (2022) 13(2), pp 32-41. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.2313>.

<sup>159</sup> CUC, *CUC Maranoa Centre Statistics as of 30 June 2023*, provided to Committee Secretariat.

**Figure 5 – Map of Regional University Study Hubs**

Although called Regional University Study Hubs, most centres indicated provide support to VET students, as well as those undertaking university courses.



Source: Australian Government, Department of Education, *Regional University Study Hubs*, <https://www.education.gov.au/regional-university-study-hubs>.

At the community forum in Roma, Cr O'Neill noted that 510 students had registered at the centre since opening in 2002, with 196 students currently registered. The current students include 37 studying VET.<sup>160</sup>

The most popular VET courses undertaken by students registered at the centre include Certificate III Early Childhood Education & Care, Diploma of Nursing, and Certificate III in Business Administration.<sup>161</sup>

Cr Cameron O'Neill explained the centre's key support model for students at the centre:

The model of our study centre is not earth-shattering. It simply provides: a dedicated hub that can be used for uninterrupted studying; a space that fosters learning alongside fellow peers: the best of the best technology with the fastest internet possible; access between 5 am and 12 pm, seven days a week, all year round; and dedicated support through our centre manager and learning skill advisers, with their roles aligned to ensuring support is tailored to making studying in a regional setting successful. Our role at CUC Maranoa is to value-add to the learning experience, whether that be through TAFE or university.<sup>162</sup>

In addition to the study support, the centre helps students to build networks with their peers and potential employers. For example, in 2022 the centre hosted discipline-specific social nights that allowed students studying in similar fields to meet each other, as well as other community members working in relevant industries.<sup>163</sup>

In CUC Maranoa's Student Experience Survey, 100 per cent of students who responded indicated that are more likely to continue their studies because of the help they received from the CUC.<sup>164</sup>

In its submission to the committee, CUC Maranoa explained how it collaborates with the local TAFE to improve completion rates:

We see the services provided by the CUC as complementary to TAFE Queensland. We collaborate in consultation to strengthen the uptake of and attrition rates for student undertaking a VET pathway within the district. As the CUC is accessible to students after the operating hours of the TAFE campus, between 5 am to midnight seven days a week, students have a quiet, dedicated learning environment at times that suit their life schedules.<sup>165</sup>

CUC Maranoa currently receives funding from a variety of sources, including the Australian Government and the Country Education Foundation. Maranoa Regional Council provides both financial support, and in-kind support, including the physical space used by the centre at the Roma Community Hub. CUC Maranoa also has a number of industry sponsors, including Santos, Powerlink QLD and Origin.<sup>166</sup>

#### 6.4.2.3 Issues raised by stakeholders

Several stakeholders indicated support for the expansion of regional study hubs in Queensland. For example, the Isolated Children's Parents Association Qld Inc submitted that regional study hubs, such

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<sup>160</sup> Roma community forum, 27 October 2023, p 14.

<sup>161</sup> CUC, *CUC Maranoa Centre Statistics as of 30 June 2023*, provided to Committee Secretariat.

<sup>162</sup> Roma community forum, 27 October 2023, p 14.

<sup>163</sup> CUC Maranoa, *Annual Report 2022*, 23. <https://www.cucmaranoa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2022/10/2022-CUC-Maranoa-Annual-Report.pdf>.

<sup>164</sup> CUC Maranoa, *Annual Report 2022*, 13. <https://www.cucmaranoa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2022/10/2022-CUC-Maranoa-Annual-Report.pdf>.

<sup>165</sup> CUC Maranoa, submission 11, p 2.

<sup>166</sup> CUC Maranoa, *Annual Report 2022*, 11-12. <https://www.cucmaranoa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2022/10/2022-CUC-Maranoa-Annual-Report.pdf>.

as those run by the Country University Centres, ‘may assist rural and remote VET students to successfully engage in online training opportunities where reliable internet is otherwise a barrier.’<sup>167</sup>

At the Roma community forum, ICPA also highlighted the desire of rural students to complete VET qualifications in their home towns where they have family, school and local support.<sup>168</sup>

However, some stakeholders noted that the needs of VET students can differ from university students. They suggest that successfully expanding these hubs to support VET students is likely to require additional resources, including additional staff.

For example, the Country University Centres explains:

Staffing [at CUCs] is at this point directed towards higher education skills and success. However, the CUC suggests that support from the Queensland Government to recruit foundation skills and digital literacy coaches will considerably assist the CUC to support VET students. Those coaches can then leverage off the existing facilities, technology and learning community to enhance VET delivery at low cost in the local region.<sup>169</sup>

#### 6.4.2.4 Response from the department

In its response to submissions, DESBT stated:

DESBT is aware of the role played by Country University Centres (CUC) and their potential to support regional and remote VET students. To this end, DESBT has undertaken initial discussions with the Australian Government on the operations of CUC.

...

Engaging CUC and utilising facilities beyond TAFE Queensland campuses provides learners with a place to meet and collaborate and learn from each other. For this reason, CUC offer the potential to establish a learning hub beyond the TAFE Queensland campus network.<sup>170</sup>

#### 6.4.2.5 Opportunities to support regional study hubs

The federal government recently announced new funding to support the expansion of regional study hubs. This will include \$66.9 million to establish up to 20 new regional study hubs and 14 study hubs in outer suburban areas.<sup>171</sup>

This investment by the federal government may provide an opportunity to expand the number of regional study hubs in Queensland. However, the ability of Queensland’s regional, rural and remote communities to compete for federal funding is likely to be influenced by the extent of support offered by the state government.<sup>172</sup>

At present, at least 27 communities in Queensland are seeking to establish a regional study hub.<sup>173</sup> This is well in excess of the number of study hubs that will be funded through existing and announced federal investments.

There are a variety of ways in which the government could support local communities seeking to establish regional study hubs. These include providing operational funding, which could be used to attract more federal investments to Queensland, as well as non-financial support.

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<sup>167</sup> Isolated Children’s Parents Association Qld Inc, submission 5, p 1.

<sup>168</sup> Roma community forum, 27 October 2023, p 14.

<sup>169</sup> Country University Centres, submission 20, p 5

<sup>170</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 24 March 2023, Attachment 1, p 21.

<sup>171</sup> Hon Jason Clare MP, *Improving access to university in the outer suburbs and the regions*, Media release, 18 July 2023. <https://ministers.education.gov.au/clare/improving-access-university-outer-suburbs-and-regions>.

<sup>172</sup> CUC, correspondence with committee secretariat, 8 September 2023.

<sup>173</sup> CUC, correspondence with committee secretariat, 8 September 2023.

Relevant stakeholders have suggested that non-financial support could make a significant contribution to expanding the number of regional study hubs in Queensland. For example, [the CEO of the CUC] advised the committee that that lack of a clear strategy setting out the government's vision for regional study hubs and their place in VET provided a barrier to further expanding this model. He suggested that the development of such a strategy would accelerate and strengthen the expansion of regional study hubs in Queensland.<sup>174</sup>

#### **Committee comment**

There is a growing body of evidence indicating the ability of regional study hubs to support VET students and bolster completion rates among those they support. During the committee's visit to CUC Maranoa in Roma, members were able to see first-hand the kind of support these centres can offer and the benefits they deliver to local communities.

There is also strong demand among Queensland's regional, rural and remote communities for an expansion of regional study hubs to more locations.

The committee considers that regional study hubs may constitute a valuable strategy for reducing improving completion rates in regional, rural and remote Queensland. However, the committee is aware that this model is not a 'silver bullet'. There will likely be limits on the extent to which regional study hubs can address the needs of VET students, and areas where geographic remoteness renders this model non-viable due to low student numbers.

In light of these factors, the committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training consider working with the Federal Government and Local Governments to support increasing capacity of regional study hubs and expanding the network. This support could include in-kind support such as providing surplus rooms at TAFE campuses to house centres, making them more accessible for students undertaking VET at those TAFE campuses.

#### **Recommendation 8**

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training consider developing a plan to support existing and new regional study hubs working with all levels of government.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills Development**

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<sup>174</sup> CUC, correspondence with committee secretariat, 8 September 2023.

## 7 Reducing digital barriers to VET in regional, rural and remote areas

### Summary

- There is broad consensus that digital barriers, including poor internet connectivity and limited digital literacy, have a disproportionate impact on the ability of regional, rural and remote communities to access VET.
- Regional study hubs may provide a practical strategy for reducing digital barriers to VET in regional, rural and remote areas. However, their reach is limited due to the small number of centres in Queensland.
- There may also be opportunities to leverage recent upgrades to internet access at state schools, delivered by the Department of Education, to reduce digital barriers to VET in regional, rural and remote areas.

### 7.1 Digital barriers to VET in regional, rural and remote areas

Recent national reports and reviews have made very similar findings relating to the role of the ‘digital divide’ in limiting access to VET in regional, rural and remote areas. Many of them identify a lack of access to ICT as one of the most important barriers faced by people living in these areas, especially a lack of affordable and reliable high-speed internet.

For example, in its report, *Education in Remote and Complex Environments*, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Training stated:

While Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has the potential to enhance learning for students, bridge gaps in access and increase opportunities for teacher training, there remains a ‘digital divide’ between Australians who have access to the internet, computers and other devices, and those who do not. This gap in access is particularly acute for Australians on low incomes and those living in geographically isolated locations.<sup>175</sup>

The Standing Committee noted that the lack of affordable reliable broadband in remote areas is particularly challenging, and limits the ability of people living there to access education remotely.

### 7.2 Issues raised by stakeholders

The committee was unable to meet with the Federal Government during the inquiry process with regard to the digital barriers faced in delivering VET in regional, rural and remote areas of Queensland. Many submitters discussed the digital barriers that face communities in regional, rural and remote areas. They highlighted a broad range of issues, including:

- the lack of affordable and reliable high-speed internet in many regional, rural and remote locations
- limited access to digital devices among regional, rural and remote communities, which experience higher rates of socio-economic disadvantage
- the poor digital literacy skills of some students, who struggle to navigate online teaching portals and complete online learning activities without support.<sup>176</sup>

CUC Maranoa elaborated on some of these issues:

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<sup>175</sup> House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, *Education in remote and complex environments*, Report, November 2020, p 32.

<sup>176</sup> Including submissions 5, 10, 11, 13, 16, 17, 18, 20, 24, 25, 26 and 28.

It has also been our experience that, more often than not, the learning platforms of the VET courses are quite challenging to navigate. Many students would not have continued their studies without one-to-one personal support. Furthermore, as the digital delivery of courses requires a competent level of technological skills, which many of the mature-age students do not possess, this is another significant barrier to their ongoing attrition and success in their study journey.<sup>177</sup>

Golden West Apprenticeships, an RTO based in Roma, noted that studying online requires a higher level of numeracy and literacy, which is problematic in itself with a lot of courses being delivered online.<sup>178</sup>

Several other submitters suggested that regional study hubs could provide a practical strategy for reducing some of the digital barriers addressed above.<sup>179</sup>

### **7.3 Responses from departments**

In response to written submissions, the Department Employment, Small Business and Training (DESBT) acknowledged ‘that regional internet access is still commonly a barrier to virtual/online workplace learning in remote communities.’<sup>180</sup>

The Department of Education also advised the committee that recent consultations with leaders of state schools in regional, rural and remote areas had identified challenges with internet access and speed as one barrier to the delivery of VET in their schools.<sup>181</sup>

### **7.4 Strategies for reducing digital barriers to VET**

There are a variety of ways in which digital barriers to VET in regional, rural and remote Queensland could be addressed. This section discusses two of them:

- regional study hubs (which are also discussed in section 6.4.2)
- leveraging opportunities created by recent upgrades to Internet bandwidth at state schools
- advocating strongly to the Federal Government to support improved digital access for regional, rural and remote communities in Queensland.

#### **7.4.1 Role of regional study hubs in reducing digital barriers**

Regional study hubs, which are discussed in more depth in section 6.4.2, can help to reduce digital barriers to VET in several ways. Typically, such centres offer students access to high-speed internet and ICT facilities, including computers and webcams. They also help students to strengthen their digital literacy skills, and offer assistance in navigating the online portals used by training providers. Such assistance can be very valuable, particularly for students who have not previously engaged in higher education.<sup>182</sup>

While helpful, regional study hubs are limited, in that they are only able to support students in a select number of communities. Even if the number of regional study hubs in Queensland increased, it is likely there will be some areas where they are not viable. As such, regional study hubs do not offer a universal solution to overcoming digital barriers to VET in regional, rural, and remote Queensland.

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<sup>177</sup> CUC Maranoa, submission 11, p 1.

<sup>178</sup> Roma community forum, 27 October 2023, p 4.

<sup>179</sup> Including submissions 5, 11, 20, 24.

<sup>180</sup> DESBT, briefing paper, 24 March 2023, p 4.

<sup>181</sup> Department of Education, briefing paper, 11 January 2023, p 5.

<sup>182</sup> See submissions 11, 20 and 24.

## 7.4.2 Improving internet bandwidth at state schools

In recent years, the Department of Education has delivered significant upgrades to internet bandwidth at all 1,262 Queensland's state schools, including those in regional, rural, and remote areas. In December 2021, the department signed a \$187 million, five-year agreement with Telstra to deliver the schools new and/or upgrade broadband connections. The faster internet speeds will be 'on average 40 times greater than the previous bandwidth allocation standard in 2023, and 200 times faster in 2026'.<sup>183</sup> as a result of these upgrades, teachers and students from even the most remote parts of Queensland will have access to the latest digital technologies and tools, utilising virtual learning to connect students and teachers in new and innovative ways, and improving school connectivity.<sup>184</sup>

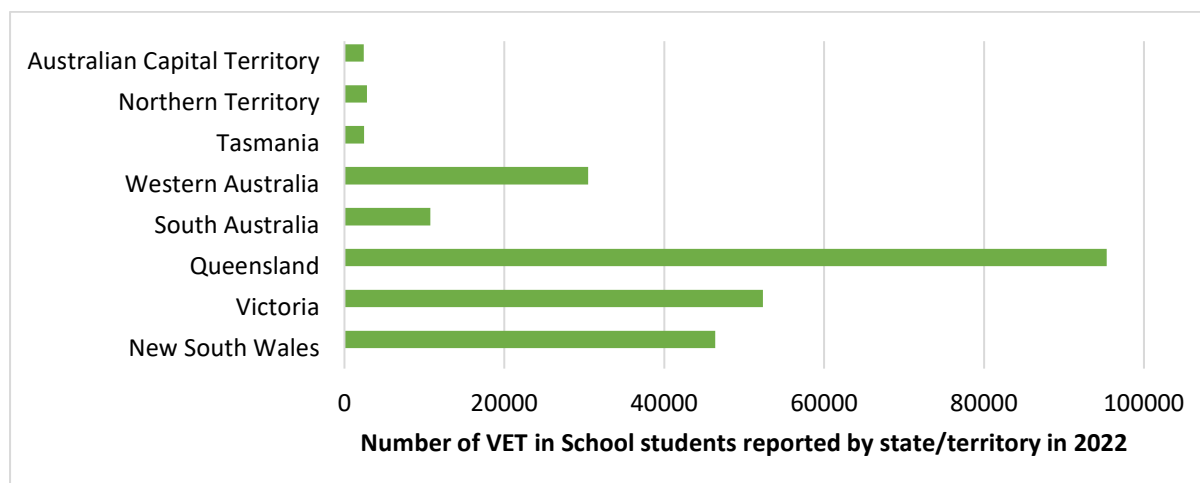
In some cases, these upgrades may have already helped to reduce digital barriers to VET given the large number of students who participate in VET in schools in Queensland. In others, upgrades to internet access at state schools in regional, rural and remote areas may create opportunities which could be leveraged to reduce digital barriers to VET participation.

### 7.4.2.1 *Queensland's schools play a central role in VET delivery*

Queensland's schools play a central role in the delivery of VET. During community forums held by the committee in Cairns and Thursday Island, leaders at several local schools highlighted the importance of the VET programs offered by their schools. They noted the role that these programs play in keeping students engaged, and their particular value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students.<sup>185</sup>

As shown in Figure 6, in 2022, there were more than 95,000 VET in School students in Queensland, almost twice as many as in any other state.<sup>186</sup> Given that Queensland has a smaller population than both NSW and Victoria, this means that the proportion of school students who participate in VET is significantly higher in Queensland than other jurisdictions.

**Figure 6 – Queensland has significantly more VET in School students than other jurisdictions**



Source: NCVER, *VET in Schools 2022*, Statistical report, 27 July 2023.

<sup>183</sup> Hon Grace Grace MP, Minister for Education, Minister for Industrial Relations and Minister for Racing, Response to 2023 Estimates Pre-Hearing Question on Notice No 5.

<sup>184</sup> Hon Grace Grace MP, Minister for Education, Minister for Industrial Relations and Minister for Racing, Response to 2023 Estimates Pre-Hearing Question on Notice No 5.

<sup>185</sup> Bentley Park College, community forum transcript, Cairns, 10 July 2023, pp 1-8; Tagai State College, community forum transcript, 11 July 2023, pp 5-12.

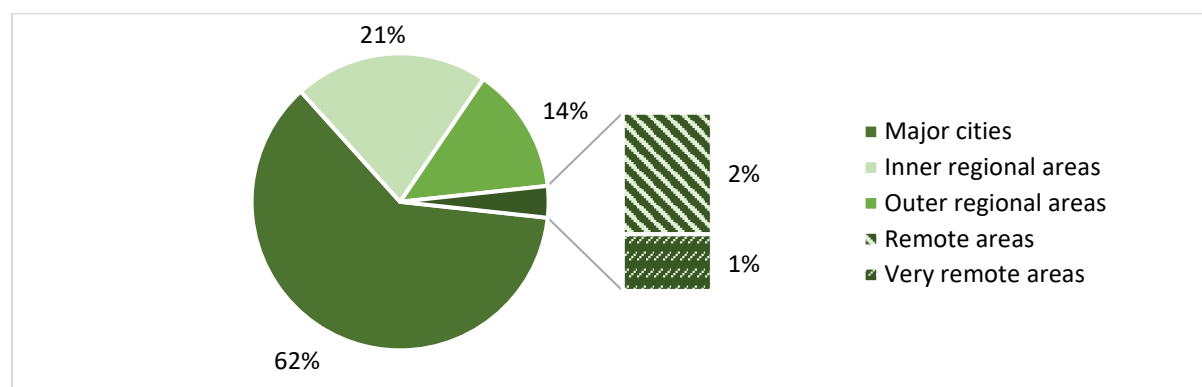
<sup>186</sup> NCVER, *VET in Schools 2022*, Statistical report, 27 July 2023. <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/vet-in-schools-2022>.

Typically, the majority of VET in Schools students in Queensland are enrolled at a state school. In 2022, almost 59 per cent of Queensland's VET in Schools students were enrolled at a state school.<sup>187</sup>

The availability of VET in Schools is particularly important in regional, rural and remote areas. As illustrated in Figure 7, in Queensland, just over one third of VET in School students live outside of major cities. For many of these students, their schools are their VET provider.

Queensland also has more schools that are registered training providers (RTOs) than any other jurisdiction. Indeed, in 2021, there were 403 schools with RTO status in Australia. Of these, 295 were located in Queensland, including 198 state schools.<sup>188</sup> This means that Queensland's state schools constitute roughly half of all schools with RTO status nationwide.

**Figure 7 – Where Queensland's VET in School students lived in 2022**



*Note:* The very small number of offshore students, and students for whom the remoteness areas were not known, have been omitted.

*Source:* NCVER, *VET in Schools 2022*, Data builder. <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/data/databuilder#vis-students>

In some regional, rural and remote parts of Queensland, state schools are the only RTO with a registered headquarters within several hundred kilometres. For example, according to the Queensland Skills Gateway,<sup>189</sup> a central registry of RTOs in Queensland:

- Charleville State High School and Miles State High School are the only RTOs with registered headquarters within 250km of Roma
- of the two RTOs with registered headquarters in Longreach, one is Longreach State High School.

The fact that state schools play such a central role in the delivery of VET means that upgrades to their internet bandwidth has the potential to lower digital barriers to VET, especially in regional, rural and remote Queensland.

<sup>187</sup> NCVER, *VET in Schools 2022*, Statistical report, 27 July 2023, pp 13-14. <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/vet-in-schools-2022>.

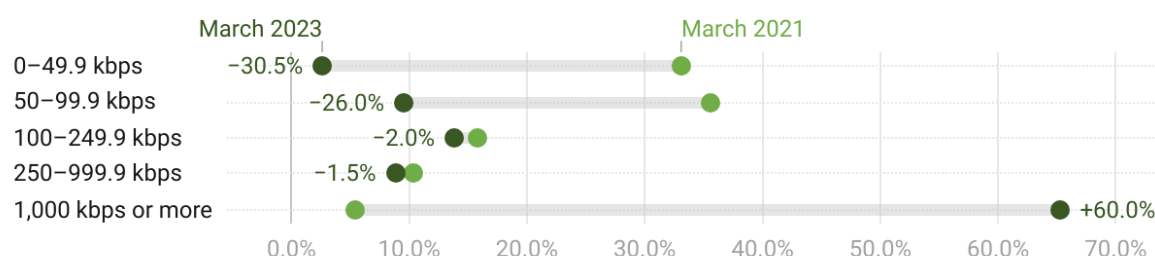
<sup>188</sup> J Misko, M Lees and E Chew, *VET for secondary school students: insights and outcomes*, NCVER Research Report, 2021. <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/vet-for-secondary-school-students-insights-and-outcomes>.

<sup>189</sup> The Queensland Skills Gateway can be found at: <https://www.skillsgateway.training.qld.gov.au/>.

#### 7.4.2.2 *Recent upgrades to internet bandwidth at state schools*

The Department of Education has made substantial progress in improving internet bandwidth at state schools. As illustrated in Figure 8, in March 2023, two-thirds of state schools (65.3 per cent) had access to internet speeds of 1000 kilobits per second (KBPS) compared to just 5.3 percent in March 2021.<sup>190</sup>

**Figure 8 – Internet speeds at most state schools have improved significantly**



*This figure shows the change in the percentage of state schools at which the internet speed per full-time equivalent student fell within each category.*

Source: Auditor-General, *Education 2022*, Report 16: 2022-23, p 19.

Note: Figure created using Datawrapper.

According to the Department of Education there have been further improvements since March 2023. As of 30 June 2023, 1,002 state schools (more than three-quarters of all state schools) had received upgrades to their internet bandwidth. This means that 92.5 per cent of students now have access to internet speeds of at least 1,000 KBPS.<sup>191</sup>

This represents a significant improvement compared to 2021, when the Auditor-General found that the benchmark internet speed for schools in Queensland (25 KBPS) was too low to facilitate effective online learning.<sup>192</sup>

#### 7.4.2.3 *Opportunities to leverage improved internet access at schools to reduce digital barriers*

Notably, upgrades to internet access at state schools has flow-on benefits for the wider community when it involves upgrades to exchanges. The Department of Education explains:

Through the exchange upgrades, entire communities will also benefit through improved access to quality, high speed connectivity – helping with everything from online business to telehealth services.<sup>193</sup>

This means that, where exchanges are upgraded, upgrades to internet speeds at state schools can reduce digital barriers to VET across a wider area, not just within the local school.

There may be additional ways in which improved internet access at state schools could be leveraged to reduce digital barriers to VET. However, it is beyond the scope of this report to identify the ways in which this might happen.

<sup>190</sup> Auditor-General, *Education 2022*, Report 16: 2022-23, p 19.

<sup>191</sup> Department of Education, *Annual Report 2022-23*, p 53.

<sup>192</sup> Auditor-General, *Enabling digital learning*, Report 1: 2021-22.

<sup>193</sup> Department of Education, 'School bandwidth upgrade', <https://education.qld.gov.au/initiatives-and-strategies/initiatives/bandwidth-upgrade-program>.

### **Committee comment**

The committee applauds the Department of Education for the significant improvements in internet bandwidth at state schools that it has delivered in the last few years. However, the committee also notes that as of March 2023, around 12 percent of state schools still had internet speeds of less than 100kbps, while 220 state schools did not yet have fibre-optic connections.

Given that many of these schools are likely to be located in regional, rural and remote areas, and the particular importance of VET in schools in such areas, the committee recommends that the Department of Education maintains appropriate strategies to ensure state schools in regional, rural and remote areas have access to internet speeds sufficient to facilitate students' participation in VET in Schools.

The committee also recommends that departments work with the Federal Government to identify additional ways in which improved internet access, particularly at states schools could be leveraged to reduce digital barriers to VET in regional, rural and remote Queensland.

### **Recommendation 9**

The committee recommends that the Department of Education maintain appropriate strategies to ensure state schools in regional, rural and remote areas have access to internet speeds sufficient to facilitate students' participation in VET in Schools.

**Minister responsible: Minister for Education and Minister for Youth Justice**

### **Recommendation 10**

The committee recommends that the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training and the Department of Education work with the Federal Government to identify additional ways in which improved internet access could be leveraged to reduce digital barriers to VET in regional, rural and remote Queensland.

**Ministers responsible: Minister for Employment and Small Business and Minister for Training and Skills Development; Minister for Education and Minister for Youth Justice**

## Appendix A – Submitters

Sub #	Submitter
001	Narbil Training
002	Todd Comrie
003	Robert Heron
004	Dale Last MP, Member for Burdekin
005	Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association Qld Inc
006	Golden West Apprenticeships
007	Bowen Gumlu Growers Association
008	Professor Stephen Billet, Griffith University
009	Queensland Alliance for Mental Health
010	Queensland Teachers’ Union
011	Country Universities Centre Maranoa
012	Cairns Regional Council
013	AgForce Queensland
014	Queensland Catholic Education Commission
015	Caravanning Queensland
016	Queensland Nurses and Midwives’ Union
017	Digital Media Research Centre
018	Independent Schools Queensland
019	Racing Queensland
020	Country Universities Centre
021	Pharmacy Guild of Australia Queensland Branch
022	Livingstone Shire Council
023	Queensland Water Directorate (qldwater)
024	Country Universities Centre Balonne
025	Central Highlands Regional Council
026	Rural Jobs and Skills Alliance
027	Mackay Regional Council
028	Local Government Association of Queensland
029	Gilmour Space
030	Queensland Secondary Principals’ Association
031	Rural Medical Education Australia
032	Dr Don Zoellner

## **Appendix B – Officials at public briefing**

The committee held a public briefing in Brisbane on 14 July 2023.

### **Department of Youth Justice, Employment, Small Business and Training**

- Mr Steve Koch, A/Associate Director-General
- Mr Marc Levy, Executive Director, Infrastructure Investment
- Mr Dave Lucas, Executive Director, Service Delivery
- Ms Alexandra Winter, A/Executive Director, VET Strategy

### **TAFE Queensland**

- Mr John Tucker, A/Chief Executive Officer
- Mr Simon Pritchard, Chief Financial Officer

## Appendix C – Witnesses at public hearings and community forums

The community forums in Cairns and Thursday Island, and the public hearing in Brisbane, also formed part of the committee's Inquiry into the Cairns TAFE Upgrade Project.

### Community forum – Cairns – 10 June 2023

- Mr Bruce Houghton, Principal, Bentley Park College
- Ms Sharne Roby
- Mr Andrew Hayes, Enterprise Development Manager, Norsta Maritime Pty Ltd

### Community forum – Thursday Island – 11 June 2023

- Mr Moses Nelliman, Principal Project Officer, Acting Manager Thursday Island, Department of Treaty, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, Communities and the Arts
- Ms Amara Horgan, Deputy Principal—Senior Schooling, Secondary, Waybeni Buway Ngurpay Mudh, Tagai State College
- Mr Matt Tully, Head of Campus, Thursday Island Secondary, Tagai State College
- Mr Gavin Dicoski, Managing Director, Occupational Skills Centre Australia
- Ms Flora Warrior, Board Member, Torres Strait Islanders Regional Education Council

### Public hearing – Brisbane – 14 June 2023

#### *Apprentice Employment Network, Queensland and NT*

- Mr Paul Hillberg, Chair
- Mr Craig Westwood, Executive Officer

#### *Queensland Alliance for Mental Health*

- Ms Jennifer Black, Chief Executive Officer
- Ms Sarah Childs, Director, Sector Engagement and Development

#### *Agforce Queensland*

- Ms Ruth Thompson, Policy Director

#### *Queensland Farmers' Federation*

- Mr Rod Morris, Industry Skills Advisor - Primary Industries

#### *Isolated Children's Parents' Association*

- Mrs Kate Bradshaw, Vice President

#### *Rural Medical Education Australia*

- A/Professor Megan O'Shannessy, Chief Executive Officer

#### *Country Universities Centre*

- Mr Duncan Taylor, Founder

*Queensland Water Directorate*

- Dr Georgina Davis, Chief Executive Officer
- Mr Neil Holmes, Skills Partnership Manager

*Queensland Resources Council*

- Ms Katrina-Lee Jones, Policy Director, Skills & Diversity

*Queensland Nurses and Midwives' Union*

- Mr Allen (Jamie) Shepherd, Professional Officer, Team Leader
- Mr Daniel Prentice, Professional Research Officer
- Dr Helen Klieve, Research and Policy Officer

**Community forum – Roma – 27 October 2023**

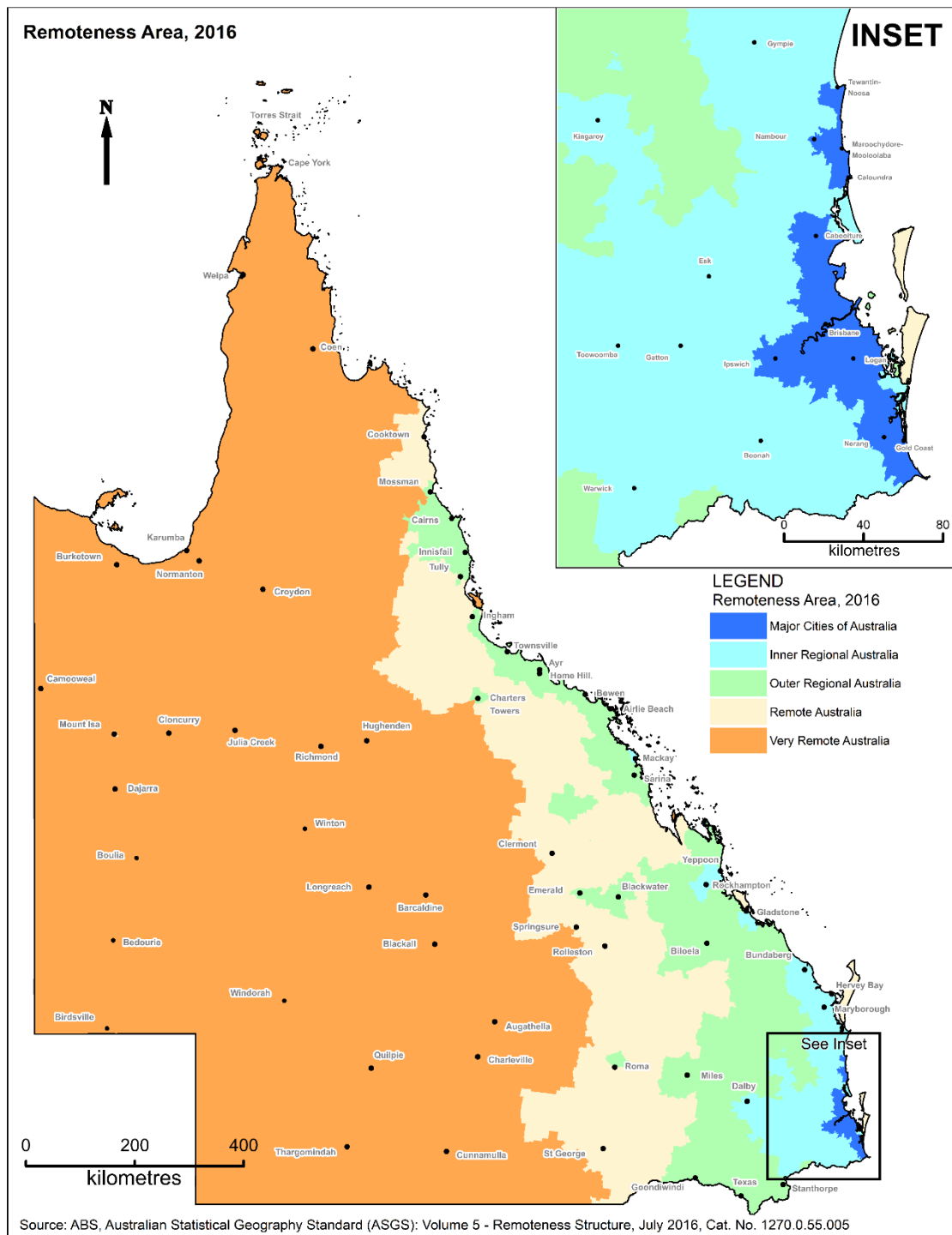
- Mrs Camille Johnson, Chief Executive Officer, Golden West Apprenticeships
- Mrs Anneli Day, Councillor, Portfolio Leader – Tertiary Trade and Training, Isolated Children's Parents' Association Queensland
- Mr Daniel Wales, Community Engagement Officer, Headspace Roma
- Mrs Camille Johnson, Director, Country Universities Centre Maranoa
- Mr Cameron O'Neill, Chair, Board of Directors, Country Universities Centre Maranoa
- Ms Jessica Wild, Centre Manager, Country Universities Centre Maranoa
- Mr Jonathan Burrell, Director, Country Universities Centre Balonne
- Ms Elspeth Hurse, Centre Manager, Country Universities Centre Balonne
- Ms Liz Otto, Consultant, Country Universities Centre Balonne

## Appendix D – Map of Queensland by Remoteness Area



QUEENSLAND TREASURY

Queensland Government Statistician's Office



<http://www.qgso.qld.gov.au>

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## Appendix E – Abbreviations and acronyms

Abbreviations/acronyms	Definition
ACPA	Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts
ARIA	Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
EETC/the committee	Education, Employment and Training Committee
CQU/CQUniversity	Central Queensland University
CUC	Country Universities Centre
Department/DESBT	Department of Employment, Small Business and Training (formerly the Department of Youth Justice, Employment, Small Business and Training)
GPO	General Post Office
Joyce Report	Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, <i>Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System</i> , 2019.
KBPS	kilobits per second
Naphthine Review	Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, <i>National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy</i> , Final Report, 2019
NCVER	National Council for Vocational Education Research
NSW	New South Wales
RJC	Regional Jobs Committee
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
Shergold Report	Council of Australian Governments Education Council, <i>Looking to the Future</i> , Report of the Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training, June 2020
SKW	Skilling Queenslanders for Work
SAS	Skills Assure Supplier
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VETIS	Vocational Education and Training in Schools