

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 6

**INQUIRY INTO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN
NEW SOUTH WALES**

At Lismore on Friday 11 September 2015

The Committee met at 1.45 p.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. P. Green (Chair)

The Hon. L. Amato
The Hon. C. Cusack
The Hon. G. J. Donnelly
The Hon. S. G Farlow
Dr J. Kaye
The Hon. D. Mookhey

CHAIR: Welcome to Lismore, to the second hearing of General Standing Committee No. 6 inquiry into vocational education and training [VET] in New South Wales. The inquiry is examining a number of important issues facing the VET system in this State, including the Government's Smart and Skilled reforms. Before I acknowledge country, I note that the Hon. Thomas George, member for Lismore, is present. It is nice to be in your territory, Thomas. We know that you are well loved up here. Thanks for coming to the inquiry. Before I commence, I would like to acknowledge the people of the Bundjalung nation, who are the traditional custodians of this land, and pay respect to elders past and present. I also extend that respect to other Aboriginal people that are here with us today. We have just been with a class of the Aboriginal Learning Circle, which is a great initiative.

The hearing today is the second of the seven hearings we plan to hold for this inquiry. We will hear today from Lindy Kemp, Director, TAFE Services, North Coast NSW. Ms Kemp, please note that the Committee expresses its condolences to Elizabeth McGregor who obviously could not be here today because of that funeral. Please pass our thoughts, comfort and peace on to her. We will then take evidence from Katherine Nicholson, Post Schools Organiser, NSW Teachers Federation. Also giving evidence today will be Simon Mahoney, who is a current student at Lismore TAFE campus. Finally, we will hear from Simon Stahl and Corey Aleckson from Northern Co-operative Meat Company. Please switch mobile telephones off or to silent for the duration of the hearing.

LINDY KEMP, Director, TAFE Services, North Coast NSW, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Welcome, Ms Kemp. Do you have an opening statement?

Ms KEMP: I do.

CHAIR: Please keep it brief, given that our time is limited. If you have an extensive opening statement, you can table it after some time.

Ms KEMP: You can tell me to be quiet if you think it is too long. I do not think it is very long.

CHAIR: Okay.

Ms KEMP: I would just like to thank you for the opportunity to speak at this hearing. I too would like to acknowledge the Bundjalung people as the traditional custodians of this land. I also want to acknowledge Aboriginal people who might be here with us today at Lismore for this hearing. I want to just state that we strongly welcome the public hearings and we are pleased to have them at our Wollongbar and Lismore campuses. We see these hearings as an opportunity to pay attention to the importance of skills in our region and to discuss how together everyone in the sector can prepare for the future.

As an organisation, North Coast Institute of TAFE services regional communities from Bulahdelah in the southern end of the institute right up to Tweed at the northern border and we deliver our services online across the country as well. We employ over 2,000 people and we meet the needs of over 50,000 students. We are one of the biggest regional providers of education and training in Australia. We had 50,000 enrolments last year, which was up from 45,000 the previous year. From our point of view, while it might be unlikely that any provider including us can continue to grow at this rate year on year, we are still experiencing and meeting strong demand for our services in 2015.

The drivers of user choice are changing. The global economy is changing. So is the economy on the North Coast. The nature of work is changing, as are jobs in our region. So all of us in the skills sector—TAFE, industry, community and other providers—need to keep changing as well. North Coast Institute continues to change and adapt to keep pace with these changes, especially in terms of work and technology. So much has shifted in those spaces, particularly. Student and employer expectations have also changed significantly over the years. Of course all those changes are reflected in changes to government priorities as well. These too have shifted, as they always do and as they will continue to do.

In 2014 North Coast Institute of TAFE won a large Smart and Skilled contract and so far in 2015 we have used this funding to provide subsidised training in foundation skills, apprenticeships and traineeships, and full qualifications up to certificate III. We bid for and win other TAFE NSW broader contestable and commercial funds to provide skill sets and higher level qualifications as well. We also have access, as part of TAFE NSW, to community service obligation funding to provide special support to disadvantaged students. This funding supports our disabilities, counselling and learner support services and activities in particular. In addition we provide significant fee-for-service training opportunities.

We are growing industries in the community—in particular, health, aged care, nursing, community services, civil construction, some transport and primary industries. So North Coast TAFE has introduced a range of programs to respond to those changes over the years in each of those sectors to skill up people in the community for jobs to respond to industry demand and to community needs. Many of these particular programs include partnerships with industry and/or private providers who bring additional capabilities such as the latest equipment, industry current practices or new technologies to the training environment for the learner. They also include partnerships with Aboriginal communities across our region and interstate.

Since the introduction of income contingent loans we have seen many people access higher level qualifications. This is a very important trend as we know people's job prospects improve markedly once they have achieved a level 3 or above. These higher level qualifications also provide strong pathways to university. We have strong and developing relationships with the universities in our footprint—

CHAIR: Ms Kemp, could I ask you to conclude your statement and that we move on to the questions?

Ms KEMP: Okay.

CHAIR: You may table your opening statement.

Ms KEMP: Sure. Providing choice is what is critical to us—meeting our learner expectations and being open to new opportunities and change.

CHAIR: Thank you. We will go to the Opposition to start questions.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: We have limited time, so forgive me if I blurt out a bunch of really basic things we would love to hear about the institution. We would love to find out anything you can tell us about the average course hours in the institution providing Smart and Skilled and now beyond Smart and Skilled. We would love to be able to hear what the average course hours are. We would like any information you can provide about the shift towards online learning and the extent to which online learning is now a favoured approach and whether or not that is at all related to Smart and Skilled. Thirdly, I would love to hear anything you have got about your workforce, the extent of casualisation rates, average tenure rates, anything that gives us an opportunity to assess the skills of your workforce. The reason I am asking all these questions is because we have been hearing a lot about whether or not IPART has correctly modelled the cost of education and whether or not IPART's model that determines Smart and Skilled adequately picks up all the different facets of vocational education.

CHAIR: Do you want to make a comment on any of those?

Ms KEMP: I am very happy to.

CHAIR: Of course, you can take it on notice, in terms of the statistics.

Ms KEMP: Certainly, there is no one answer to the course hours question, absolutely no one answer. Every single qualification has a different notional course hour and even that has gone by the wayside, pretty much completely these days. There is an expectation that some people will be able to complete the qualification solely through recognition, which might take four days, right through to the other end of the spectrum, someone who may need to take one to two years to achieve a qualification that might standardly be delivered in six months. So, in terms of what we deliver course-hours-wise, that is thinking that we really do not use any more because there is so much flexibility in terms of how any one learner might need to or want to engage with the learning experience with us.

In terms of online learning, currently we have about 40 per cent of our students choose to learn either online or in their workplace, as opposed to coming on to a campus. So the way our learners are choosing to engage with their study has shifted enormously over the last, probably 10 to 15 years. In the last two years we have actually developed a business ourselves called TAFEnow where we offer a range of qualifications fully online and there has been quite good take-up there. Fundamentally, we are driven by—and we absolutely have it as our priority—to respond to providing services the way learners want to learn. That is, face-to-face on a campus; fully online, so fully flexible 24-7; in the workplace; and then a range of blended combinations of that as well.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you and thank you for coming this afternoon. With respect to the funding that North Coast TAFE was able to secure, was that funding that you set out to secure and in fact, did secure, was it more than you had hoped for, about what you expected, or did it come in less than what you expected you were going to secure?

Ms KEMP: That was probably what we had hoped for, pretty much what we had hoped for, and we were very happy to actually secure that particular set of caps.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: With respect to the North Coast, what is your sense of the growth and let us take it over the last four or five years of providers establishing themselves on the North Coast and competing with TAFE, in terms of courses? Has it been something that has grown rapidly or has it been a slow burn? How do you perceive that?

Ms KEMP: It is an interesting question. I think fundamentally the thing that has moderated that has been the compliance challenges for all registered training organisations. I would say probably two to three years

ago there was a bit of a proliferation of training organisations and I am sure many of you are aware of the ways in which some of those were pretty quickly shut down because they were not providing compliant training. That is the Australian Skills Quality Authority [ASQA] credentialing requirement.

Dr JOHN KAYE: If I may interrupt. Can you explain for *Hansard* what the acronym "ASQA" stands for?

Ms KEMP: Australian Skills Quality Accreditation—I am making it up. It is something like that.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Can you give us a sense of the trajectory of the enrolment numbers at the institute during Smart and Skilled and after, before Smart and Skilled?

Ms KEMP: Yes. I have an overwhelming desire to finish the answer to that question. I will come to that one.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That is right, you can complete your answer.

Ms KEMP: So there was a proliferation, the numbers of RTOs fell away in say, 2013 and 2014.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: When you say "fell away" you mean, in effect, through compliance checks?

Ms KEMP: Through the compliance environment.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: So that has shrunk?

Ms KEMP: It has shrunk but I think what we have got now is a number of significant players in the marketplace, some of whom we are partnering with or seek to partner with who are providing quite effectively and meeting the compliance environment.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: With respect to those, this will not be my last question I am sure—I will put it in a provocative way. With these providers, would you think that they are, in effect, looking to enter in and pick aspects of vocational training which are relatively easy and relatively straightforward and relatively capital unintensive, to set up and compete against TAFE, as opposed to perhaps the more comprehensive, capital expensive type investments that might be required for some sorts of vocational training?

Ms KEMP: I think that is really variable. So we have got at one end SAE, which is very specialist.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Yes they gave some evidence this morning.

Ms KEMP: Right through to RTOs which provide, say, literacy and numeracy and everything in between. I think there is no one answer to that.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I might ask my question to go on notice.

CHAIR: You want to put it on notice?

Ms KEMP: I can answer your question very quickly and say, we have had a steady increase in enrolments over the last number of years. Last year was the biggest year we have had with 50,000 enrolments. That is, remember, 17 campuses on a long coastal strip, fully online offerings as well, and all of our apprenticeships.

CHAIR: How many online?

Ms KEMP: That would be a question on notice.

CHAIR: Could you take that on notice?

Ms KEMP: Yes.

CHAIR: Doing it online, does that make the course possibilities cheaper and more affordable, the online system?

Ms KEMP: For the customer?

CHAIR: Well, in any shape or form?

Ms KEMP: The costs are the same but I think the convenience meets the needs of a particular group of customers.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The cost for the student is the same?

Ms KEMP: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The cost for you is less.

Ms KEMP: The cost for us is different. So we put a lot more of the revenue, if you like, into ensuring student follow-up, student tracking, student management, and our teaching content is all fully online, downloadable documentation. There are certain qualifications we could not deliver online.

CHAIR: For a person who is going through that system, is it like correspondence? Do they send their documents in to be marked?

Ms KEMP: In an electronic way, yes.

CHAIR: I just wanted to flag, before I hand over to Dr Kay, the excellent initiative of the Point-Of-View assessment goggles. We were at the Beauty part of the TAFE this morning and we put on those goggles. It is innovative and you talk about the changing needs of education and how we present education, can you just give us an insight into how the assessment goggles make education more affordable or streamlined or how they can play a part in the overall education purposes?

Ms KEMP: Yes. So fundamentally, the thing that those goggles provide us, or a range of different kinds of technology provide us, is the capacity to provide the learning and the assessment activity in the workplace or off campus in the location of the particular learner. So that has been a challenge. Ten years ago everybody had to actually come to Lismore. There are a lot of very isolated communities around here. So goggles are one of the ways that we might provide increased capacity for a student to show us what they can do, particularly in a practical way. But there are all sorts of other ways that we are ensuring that those kinds of more isolated people would get access.

It also means, for example, in the workplace that a person might be learning on the job, because that is a preference of the employer and, in doing that, in order to provide us with an assessment, they might either have a process that they are carrying out filmed or use the goggles to stream it over to us, to an assessor who is watching. There are so many ways and we are just going to try to continually keep on top of that. A lot of the Hacktics technology, the touch technology, is very interesting to us. There are costs but there are massive benefits as well.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Ms Kemp, I understand that there are, roughly speaking, 200 administrative positions being spilt and filled at the moment, is that correct?

Ms KEMP: "Spilt and filled" is probably not the language we use. We are closing down a whole bunch of jobs in order to create a whole range of new jobs which are much more effectively going to help us to achieve what we need to achieve.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Full-time equivalent for full-time equivalent, how many before the process began and how many after?

Ms KEMP: Around about 197 I think.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Before?

Ms KEMP: I think I might need to take that on notice but I think there is probably a reduction of three.

Dr JOHN KAYE: A reduction of three full-time equivalents?

Ms KEMP: Yes, but the interesting thing about that is that, in the current situation, there are really significant numbers of people who have been working on very short-term contracts, very part-time. We are creating many more full-time and long-term jobs and we are enabling those people who win jobs who possess permanency with us now, to carry that permanency across to the new jobs.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So you will take that on notice. On notice you will also tell me whether there are any individuals who, after the restructure, will be in lower paid positions than they were in before.

Ms KEMP: I would just give you the answer that that is quite possible, yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: No, that is not the answer to the question. The question is, will you tell me how many will end up in lower paid positions?

Ms KEMP: I will have to take that on notice and we will not know—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: How can she know that when they haven't been filled?

CHAIR: Order!

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Don't you need to fill the positions first?

Dr JOHN KAYE: I asked the question on notice.

CHAIR: Order! Members know the courtesy is that witnesses can give an answer as they see fit. If you do not like the answer, you can ask that it be taken on notice.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I know. I asked the witness to take it on notice and that is fine. I will move on if that is okay.

CHAIR: Yes please, because time is short.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: It is an illogical question.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I will move somewhere else. You might have to take this on notice as well. How many part-time casual hours from teachers were delivered at the North Coast Institute two years ago, how many last year and how many this year? And would you say there has been a decline in the number of part-time casual hours?

Ms KEMP: I would have to take the first part on notice and therefore, I would have to take the second part on notice as well.

Dr JOHN KAYE: And the third part?

Ms KEMP: I have only got two.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The third part is, has there been a decline?

Ms KEMP: That for me was the second. So the first part I think was the number of years.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Has there been a decline? Anecdotally, there is a lot of evidence of part-time casual teachers on the North Coast having massively reduced hours or having no hours at all. In fact, we received evidence through the Teachers Federation's AEU submission of people saying that they were seeing whole sections of part-time casuals losing their jobs. Is that concordant with your understanding of what is happening?

Ms KEMP: I think I would offer a different perspective and that is that there have been areas in delivery which have shrunk due to shrinking demand and there have been other areas in our delivery which have grown in a way that we have been barely able to keep up with.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Can you name two areas where demand has shrunk? Just two areas.

Ms KEMP: I probably would want to be specific and I can take that on notice if you wish.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Okay.

CHAIR: How do you identify what is the regional skills set needed for this area as you prepare your courses?

Ms KEMP: We have a lot of data that comes to us from a range of sources, including TAFE NSW.

CHAIR: What about the business sector, the business chamber and so on?

Ms KEMP: Yes, absolutely, so a lot of the data—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Have you got a copy of the opening statement?

CHAIR: Order! We just make it clear that we will table the initial opening statement, so everyone knows.

Ms KEMP: Now I have forgotten the question.

CHAIR: We will move to the Government. I think you said you have got a lot of data.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I just wanted to refer to the opening statement, that is all.

Ms KEMP: Can I make one more comment about that?

CHAIR: We will proceed to the Government.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The witness asked if she could make one more statement, but with the leave of the Hon. Lou Amato.

CHAIR: Is the Hon. Catherine Cusack asking for a copy of your statement that right?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Yes, I would like to refer to the statement.

CHAIR: Do you have a copy of your statement?

Ms KEMP: I do not have one that I can give, it is my rough, but we can provide much more detailed notes very quickly.

The Hon. LOU AMATO: In your opening statement you said that student and employer expectations have changed. Have you noticed any changes in the trades in the past few years? Are less young people going into trades and for what reason?

Ms KEMP: Yes, that is a really interesting question. For example, we have noticed we deliver school-based traineeships for 16 and 17-year-olds and that has been growing within schools, so that is an interesting thing to note. It is related to industry shift but we have not noticed significant decline at all in apprenticeships and traineeships across the institute. Have I covered the question?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Have student bodies changed?

Ms KEMP: From my perspective fundamentally no.

The Hon. LOU AMATO: What about the expectations of students—

Ms KEMP: Definitely their expectations have changed. The expectations of employers as well have really changed, particularly in relation to any work that we provide for employers as they drive and design with us the sort of delivery. In relation to traineeships and apprenticeships—

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: How has that changed? What was the previous experience? You would dictate it and that would be it? What is the difference between now and then?

Ms KEMP: Yes, I was just going to say in relation to traineeships and apprenticeships fundamentally the training used to be traditionally provided in TAFE either through block release or through one-day-a-week attendance. Now that is very much customised to what the employer wants in terms of their particular trainee or apprentice. Some employers like their apprentices to be on-the-job all the time so we actually go and visit those people and talk to the employer and assess on the job.

The Hon. LOU AMATO: Do you find that in the trades sector as well?

Ms KEMP: It is really variable and it depends on the particular employer and often the size of the employer as well. So that does vary enormously and we do provide the sort of training that the customer, if you like, the employer is seeking. Sometimes that is here on campus, sometimes it is dependent on equipment or facilities that we have got on campus, sometimes the employer says "I absolutely don't want the person to go campus. I want you guys to come to us."

The Hon. LOU AMATO: Is there an increasing number of employers who do not want to send apprentices to campus? Do they want to do more in-house training?

Ms KEMP: There has been quite a significant shift, yes, over the past 10 years, for sure.

The Hon. LOU AMATO: The whole dynamics has been changing over the past 10 years or so?

Ms KEMP: Absolutely, the past 20 years actually.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: In relation to those changes, the Committee heard earlier today about changes to face-to-face teaching. Is that in line with the expectation you are getting from industry now as to what they need on the job or are there other factors that are at play?

Ms KEMP: I think you are asking about what would cause a decline in face-to-face teaching hours?

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Yes.

Ms KEMP: Economies—efficiencies is one of the drivers, what employers want is another, what customers want and how they choose to study, keeping in mind 40 per cent have chosen to study not on campus but through other kind of mechanisms. That is a massive shift if you wanted to look back—

CHAIR: Forty per cent of the 50,000?

Ms KEMP: Correct, yes. Ten years ago all of our enrolments would have attended at campus, yes. Everything has changed really on that score.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: There is a question about the cost for you in terms of providing online services and the cost to students. Have you seen a growth in online student participation, despite there being no differential on the cost? That provides you with a clear indicator that that is what your customers want, is that correct?

Ms KEMP: That is what a certain group of our customers want, absolutely, yes.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: What is the growth in that online demand from customers?

Ms KEMP: That is the piece I will take on notice.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: The Committee has heard evidence from teachers today, without any figures, about an anecdotal view of a decline in people on campus. Do you say that a significant proportion of that decline is because more people are now participating in TAFE? They are still participating in TAFE which your figures show with an enrolment of 50,000 this year compared to 45,000 last year, but those people are now electing to do their TAFE course predominantly online?

Ms KEMP: I think the answer is something like the way learners are learning with us now is infinitely more flexible than it might have been even five years ago so keep in mind for any given offering, let us say a Certificate III in table making, out of a cohort of 30 students we might have seven who seek and gain recognition straight away and achieve that within the first week or two. We might have five who cannot read or write very well so we might need to provide at the other end significant resources in order to support them with their language, literacy or numeracy needs.

We might have people with a disability so we utilise the loading to enable us to provide support. Fundamentally within any give class group you might have some who finish very quickly and others who take a long time, and everything in between. So our teaching is much less teacher-centred and ought to be much less teacher-centred and is much more student-centred. So that means we have got a whole lot more flexible learning materials and a whole lot more flexible learning methodology as well.

CHAIR: That concludes your evidence. If the Committee has more questions you will have 21 days to reply to them or to questions taken on notice. Thank you for opening your TAFE and providing the Committee with a tour. It is fantastic to see what the students are doing, and at the end of the day it is all about providing them with the opportunity to succeed and thrive and have the quality of life that we all enjoy.

(The witness withdrew)

KATHERINE NICHOLSON, Post Schools Organiser, New South Wales Teachers Federation, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: I invite you to make an opening statement but, given the length of the opening statement of the previous witness, I will set the clock for two minutes. After two minutes I will invite you to conclude and table your statement, and we will move on with question time.

Ms NICHOLSON: Thank you very much for allowing me the opportunity to speak to you today. My story will be a little different to some of those that you have just heard because I believe that what we are witnessing is catastrophic vandalism of an absolutely fabulous public institution that provides not just skills for the economy but social cohesion. It keeps the social fabric of Australia—a multicultural society—in place.

Smart and Skilled makes assumptions that all students are the same and that education is a business. It abandons the notion of life-long learning which, in a clever country, surely should be the starting point. The fact is that most people will now have seven, eight or nine careers and will need to re-engage. It abandons the most vulnerable of our students to debt at the beginning of their working lives rather than at the end of their working lives. I listened closely to the previous speaker who referred to on-line learning, and that being such a fabulous thing. But, in fact, every day on social media there are third-party marketers' pop-up advertisements basically coercing people who are not informed consumers into significant debt that they do not understand.

In my experience, students come to TAFE for a range of reasons. Often a critical incident provokes or propels them to take that action—for instance, leaving a situation of domestic violence. Often they have no idea—their parents or Centrelink have sent them—or they are seeking career progression. Those students seeking career progression generally, yes, have informed choice but the majority of students who come to TAFE do not have that capacity. Is that the end of the two minutes?

CHAIR: That is the two minutes. We will go to the Opposition.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Thank you, Ms Nicholson, for taking the time to join us today. Given we have very limited time I am just going to throw out a whole bunch of things. You are welcome to answer the questions you can answer; what you cannot, please take on notice. I would love to hear your views about the quality impacts on teaching at the institutes. I would love to hear your views about workforce issues and the extent to which casualization is a response to Smart and Skilled. I would love to hear any feedback you have in respect of the workforce that you represent about the pressures and how the system has been rolled out and how the change has happened. I would love to hear any views you have about the student interactions and the quality of the student interactions.

In general, I would also love to hear your views about whether the shift towards on-line teaching is in response to efficiency gains on behalf of the institute or in response to student demand. I would also like to have any views you have about the relative quality of online education as compared to education taking place on campus, and the extent to which the on-line format is appropriate to what is now being taught.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Did you get all that down?

Ms NICHOLSON: That is all right; I will speak very quickly. The quality impact of privatisation on TAFE is absolutely abominable. What we are seeing is the future contraction of courses. It will endanger our economy. I had a teleconference with plumbers from this institute the other night, who are severely concerned that the contraction of hours will provide students with insufficient skills to ensure that they have the skills to safeguard our water supplies or pressure plumbing in large shopping centres, for instance. So I am very seriously concerned about the skills that are being produced by this model.

Casualization has been amongst us but TAFE has always had the flexibility of casualization. It is a wonderful thing for people who already have an existing job, but the majority of the people who are teachers in TAFE are women, who rely upon TAFE as their first income. The work being so precarious is problematic for them, for their career development and, obviously, for their superannuation and those sorts of things. The change that has been rolled out across TAFE—Smart and Skilled coupled with EBS—is the perfect storm that has created an absolute disaster for my members. The morale of my members has dropped beyond belief. The workload of my members is beyond belief.

Already we are seeing an inability, under Smart and Skilled, to be able to engage with the most vulnerable students. One of my teachers mentioned to me that education for profit leaves no place for the disenfranchised and that, in fact, there is not the capacity because of the funding starvation for the nurturing. There is no time now for caring or developing people's skills. In the past we did that over a period of time. We gradually built people's confidence; we launched them into becoming taxpayers. In the end it led to those people getting jobs and being taxpayers. It takes time to build skills for people with no literacy and numeracy skills.

Those courses—the certificate I and certificate II courses—are disappearing from the TAFEs. They are being ripped away. They are the stepping stones and they are critical to us being able to deliver those people—probably 20 per cent of the community—who are challenged in relation to literacy and numeracy, into the workforce. I hope that is useful.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Yes, thank you. Can I just return to the point you just made about the certificate I and II courses, and the availability or otherwise of those courses to young people. Is it your evidence that, from your experience, there are fewer students enrolling in such certificate course presently? Is that part of a trend that has been happening over a period of time, or is something that is still not clear—we are waiting to see what happens, over time?

Ms NICHOLSON: There are probably two things happening—Jobactive, from the Federal Government, is propelling people away from certificate I and II courses and into, instead, work for the dole. All the international analysis says that that, in the end does not deliver better engagement with employment. The other thing is that under Smart and Skilled the funding for accessing general education types of courses and outreach courses has diminished to the point where it is really difficult.

Previously, we would have taken people into entry-level literacy and numeracy courses. Once they developed confidence and skills we would have taken their hands and walked them over to a vocational section. We would have worked out what was switching their lights on in relation to employment and what area they might move into that would work for them—because that is what teachers do. They do it over time, and it is about relationships.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Can I ask you a question about the manifestation of competition to TAFE in terms of private providers. Where are these private providers—in terms of vocations—particularly concentrated? In other words, presumably they are—

Ms NICHOLSON: I can answer that. I regularly take photographs of them whenever I see them and put them out there on twitter.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Could you give us an overview, then?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So creepy.

Ms NICHOLSON: You see them in front of Centrelink and in front of Job Network agencies. In fact, here in Lismore they once actually stood in front of the TAFE college. They are putting their feet in doors across Aboriginal communities. They are signing the most vulnerable up to debt. That is a reality.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Sorry to interrupt your flow on that. Is that because of the structure, where payment is given at the start, mid-point and on completion? Is it your contention that they are chasing the start-up?

Ms NICHOLSON: Absolutely. They will chase the start. They will not care about whether there is a completion or not. It is about profit, and it is about maximising profit. I heard the conversation about apprentices. If you reduce the hours for apprentices how can you possibly expect to be able to improve completions for apprentices? I am very familiar with this, because my section supported, for instance, Essential Energy Aboriginal linesmen in my region of New England in literacy and numeracy. I am sad that it was Essential Energy because we are about to lose jobs from them in our region. All the electrical, plumbing and construction trades require a level of numeracy that it is necessary to support. The sorts of students that we get coming to those sorts of courses do not have the back skills to be able to do the trade. They need support to be able to do that. The current model does not deliver that.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You used strong language in your opening statement, and I will quote it back to you and test you on that. You talked about young people being "coerced into debt". Can you elaborate on that and tie it back to the comments you just made about these activities by private providers in targeting young people to endeavour to enrol them into courses. Do you have some specific examples you can give us?

Ms NICHOLSON: I am very familiar with the Australasian College, for instance, in Sydney. They offer a dream to young women around hairdressing and beauty.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Yes. We are familiar with that example, but in terms of the North Coast are there examples that you have?

Ms NICHOLSON: There are examples on the North Coast, but I would have to take that on notice and get some advice from my members.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Sure; okay.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You were talking about the creeping casualization. Can you provide us with a bit of a sense of the changing nature of the workforce—as in how many people are casual? You have said that casualization has always been a feature of the system. Has that gone up since Smart and Skilled or has it gone down? How much, for example, does the entitlement based model allow for things like seniority to be recognised or the higher productivity teachers to be retained? Is any of that being picked up under the current funding model?

Ms NICHOLSON: We have seen catastrophic destruction of our TAFE teacher workforce across New South Wales. We saw, for instance, the removal of the centralised curriculum centres that were really efficient. They delivered industrial expertise and amazing networks with the schools sector and universities. We saw all of those people and that capability deleted. In fact, we have had a huge capability eliminated, and it continues to be eliminated in this institute. As you know, at the previous hearing there were horticulture teachers whose jobs are on the line. They have to apply—compete against each other—next week. In this area there is a skill shortage in horticulture. There is madness in this thing; I cannot explain to you the unintended outcomes, the imperfect outcomes or the wicked policy outcomes that this Smart and Skilled model is delivering.

CHAIR: I have a couple of questions. Do you flatly disagree with private training facilities existing?

Ms NICHOLSON: No, I absolutely do not. In fact, my own brother went to a computer college to gain computer qualifications. I think that if a business is a good business model then it stands on its own merits. It is a good business model if it has something good to offer. However, an edu-business that looks at building its business model—

CHAIR: Can you clarify was edu-business is?

Ms NICHOLSON: There are multi-national businesses that are looking at education as being a great way to generate profits. Edu-businesses base their business model on government funding and—

CHAIR: For their profit.

Ms NICHOLSON: —debt for our students and for young Australians at the beginning of their working lives. I disagree with that model in Australia. I do not believe that we should be ripping Australia down the US pathway.

CHAIR: I note that in your submission—if you are happy to talk about it—that you were over in Inverell.

Ms NICHOLSON: Yes, that is correct. I was head teacher there for a good number of years.

CHAIR: That is right—some years. In 1995 there were about 30 full-time teachers.

Ms NICHOLSON: That is correct.

CHAIR: I think you stated, later on, that there are not even 10 full-time teachers there now.

Ms NICHOLSON: That is right.

CHAIR: Is that the correct number?

Ms NICHOLSON: I will have to check it but it is around that number. I got a phone call this morning that yet another person was to be deleted from that campus—the head teacher of business.

CHAIR: You go on to say that there has been about a 75 per cent drop in enrolment in 2015. I presume that that would be on 2014 statistics. Is that right?

Ms NICHOLSON: It has been 75 per cent since the current New South Wales Government came into power and the funding starvation began.

CHAIR: So, since 2011.

Ms NICHOLSON: Yes.

CHAIR: You said that people cannot afford the fees and teachers are fearful for their jobs and under intense pressure because of the flawed EBS system foisted upon TAFE. Do you have any evidence of the 75 per cent drop in enrolments? Can you take that on notice?

Ms NICHOLSON: I could take that on notice.

CHAIR: I just want to make sure of that figure.

Ms NICHOLSON: I am not prepared to compromise any of my members, however.

CHAIR: I am not asking you to name anyone. I am just talking about statistics. I want to verify that comment.

Ms NICHOLSON: I can probably provide you with some statistics.

CHAIR: I am wondering; given that this portion of people in TAFE training are not normally academic tertiary trained or going for a job, is there any corresponding statistics in Inverell whether unemployment rates are higher because of that drop-out rate. Are there any social capital statistics in terms of impact of those kids not entering in TAFE?

Ms NICHOLSON: I think the most recent *Dropping off the edge* Brotherhood of St Laurence evaluation of unemployment is probably the place that you would find some of that. I know from my experience that the fabulous teachers up there continue to work with people who would not be engaging in employment if it was not for TAFE. I fear for my community if that is ripped away. I fear for the kids at South Inverell. I brought some things. I cannot table nine copies but I will give them to you—my "Baby Dreamers Manual", the cookbook that the baby dreamer students developed, some photographs of some fabulous youth-at-risk kids. Helping young-people-at-risk funding was hugely helpful in walking that group, who would otherwise have disengaged, into a future. We do not even have the capacity to do partnerships with schools, because Smart and Skilled will not let us enrol people who are at school. We learned, from 10 years of helping young people at risk, that the best way to work with schools and with people who are in danger of attrition from school, was to co-enrol them, and we do not have that capacity.

CHAIR: This is what I am saying. Surely, that would be reflected in local statistics in the demographics of Inverell, with unemployment, disengagement—

Ms NICHOLSON: Potentially, but I have been on the road of six years, doing job so I do not know if I can provide them.

CHAIR: —and other social impacts. That is my point. I wanted to note that you made a very valuable final point: if we are going to have decentralisation in the cities certainly they would go to places where there are air services, education services and other services in the town.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Electricity services.

Ms NICHOLSON: I would like to say that my town is expanding with Bindaree Beef, the bio-digester and the fabulous green technology that it has employed. We have engineering companies that have also gone completely green. We are expanding. My town is concerned that we will not have housing sufficient to house all the people we need to work there. We lost our airline based on a market model that failed; we are not prepared to lose TAFE.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I want to turn briefly to the New England Institute. I understand that you put the figure of 75 per cent decline into the public domain and challenged the management of New England Institute to tell you, if that was not true, what the decline was. Was there ever any answer from the institute management?

Ms NICHOLSON: No, there was not any answer from the institute management.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Thank you for that. I will go to a statement made by the previous witness, M Kemp. Ms Kemp said that 40 per cent of students chose—she used the word "chose" on three occasions—to learn not face-to-face in a classroom but either online or in the work place. Can you cite some examples for this committee where there was not a choice given to students—they were moved into online learning, whether they wanted it or not?

Ms NICHOLSON: I know from my teacher members reporting to me that management compelled them to move some courses. I would have to get back to you on the specific courses on the job. Very little consultation was involved in moving some courses into TAFEnow.

Dr JOHN KAYE: TAFEnow would be online?

Ms NICHOLSON: TAFE now is online, and I would like to say about online: What annoys me is that people think that online has just been invented, but in Inverell in 2001 we ran a tertiary preparation certificate online and we developed a model for calculus because you do not get too many kids in Inverell at TAFE needing calculus. We developed a model to work across the region, using a platform called Janison Toolbox, which was quite expensive at the time. But because of the funding starvation from TAFE, we were forced into Freeware, a thing called Moodle. It was really inadequate and educationally nowhere near as engaging or exciting for students.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Can I just bring you back briefly to online? You think it is fair to say—correct me if I am wrong—that a number of students are being forced into online learning, for whom there is not adequate preparation, or adequate learning experience or adequate basic skills?

Ms NICHOLSON: Absolutely. Absolutely not sufficient literacy and numeracy skills and what I would really like to hear somebody ask is: Why is no-one asking about the completions for online? I know that completions for online, whether it is O-10—I do not know what TAFEnow's completions are like. You probably know yourself. The last time I did something for which even part of it was online, from the University of Sydney, for example—and it was a high-quality course—it takes a significant amount of personal persistence to succeed at online.

Dr JOHN KAYE: This will be my last question about online, I promise. You talk about certificate I and certificate II being ripped away because of various factors. Can you say what is the impact of the destruction or the ripping-away of certificates I and II on the courses and on the capacity of students to subsequently take up online learning?

Ms NICHOLSON: Certificates I and II courses are the stepping stones. If people can do cert I and cert II courses and develop the employability skills, the literacy skills and the industry-specific skills around the area that they are heading towards, certainly they would have a greater capacity to be able to undertake some of their learning online. However, we are moving into the digital generation. I mean, my grandchild, who is three, is on the iPad regularly. That potential exists. However, it does not exist if you have not delivered the digital literacy that is necessary and the capacity. You have got to realise some of the communities we deliver to. We talked about poverty this morning and I thought about all the breakfasts we have made for TAFE students—TAFE students whose parents had mental illnesses; TAFE students whose parents were problem gamblers, alcoholics and/or drug addicts; and students who couch-surfed around the community. They do not actually have the IT infrastructure to be able to engage with that stuff.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Can I ask you one other quick question? You referred before to workload and morale.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Has the bell gone? Chair, are you giving him leave?

CHAIR: No.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Is it fair to say there is also a reasonable amount of intimidation? Because of job insecurity, teachers—

CHAIR: Order! The Government members have drawn attention to the fact that the bell has gone. To be fair, it has. The Government members' time starts now.

The Hon. LOU AMATO: I will pass my time to the Hon. Catherine Cusack.

CHAIR: The question can be placed on notice.

Dr JOHN KAYE: It will be.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Did you say Freeware?

Ms NICHOLSON: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: That is where the funding starvation started?

Ms NICHOLSON: No, no. That is not what I said at all. I said that previously, when there was resourcing of TAFE and education was a focus rather than simply profit, we had the ability to develop fabulous online interactive learning. But once the funding starvation started—and I am not blaming your Government; it came from the previous Government too—in fact TAFE was forced into walking away from those platforms and moving into Freeware, which is information technology [IT]—how do I explain Freeware? It is platforms that are available free. Does that make sense?

CHAIR: Yes.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Yes, it does.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: The TAFE course requires resources from TAFE.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Moodle is a generic platform.

Ms NICHOLSON: Yes, but Moodle still requires a TAFE teacher to create some documents to put on Moodle, but the capacity of Moodle is very poor in comparison to the range of online platforms that exist.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Okay. You are saying that the platform itself is free. Obviously, the work that has gone into doing the course is not free. That has been paid for by TAFE.

Ms NICHOLSON: Yes, that is correct.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What year are you talking about?

Ms NICHOLSON: Probably the move to Moodle was 2007-08, around that time.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You talk about catastrophic vandalism with for-profit companies coming into training, signing up the most vulnerable to debt.

Ms NICHOLSON: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Are you referring to the fees for the courses?

Ms NICHOLSON: I am talking about things like VET FEE-HELP. One of the unintended outcomes of VET FEE-HELP is that a large number of private providers immediately rushed into that market, putting a whole range of courses at diploma level that they are busily signing people up to because, once again, it is the funding model. You would be familiar with the language, literacy and numeracy program that is now called Teacher, Skills for Education and Employment [SEE].

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: The bit I am interested in is the most vulnerable in the sense that I had understood that there were scholarships being offered for the most vulnerable under Smart and Skilled and the fees were being waived for students with disability. I am not quite sure I am understanding your statement.

Ms NICHOLSON: Okay. Certainly scholarships—but once upon a time, of course, you never needed a scholarship to go to TAFE. I hope that we see that time return. However, yes, there are scholarships available at TAFE. But think about taking your kids to the checkout. Think about all the lollies that are on display and think about the fact that your children do not have agency to make a decision.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I am so sorry, but time is limited.

Ms NICHOLSON: This is the case that our students have.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Point of order.

CHAIR: Order!

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I am actually not asking about TAFE. I am asking about the private providers signing up the most vulnerable.

Ms NICHOLSON: And I am trying to answer that question by saying to you that the vulnerable students are vulnerable because they are not informed, they do not have agency, and they are vulnerable to marketing techniques.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Right. But they are not financially vulnerable.

Ms NICHOLSON: Yes, they are financially vulnerable.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: The most financially vulnerable people, would you agree, are getting the scholarships?

Ms NICHOLSON: No, I would not agree with that. I would say that there are some scholarships available for people living in public housing, et cetera, and that is a wonderful thing. However, there are also predatory private providers knocking on doors in places like Moree, signing people up for debt—people who do not necessarily have an understanding of what it is they are signing up to.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Have you got evidence that that is occurring in Lismore?

Ms NICHOLSON: I will take that on notice and refer to my members and see what I can deliver to you.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: It is just that we have come up to Lismore to get some evidence.

Ms NICHOLSON: One of my members did mention [EVIDENCE OMITTED BY RESOLUTION OF THE COMMITTEE 11 SEPTEMBER 2015], who I believe are in partnership with TAFE up here on the North Coast—that they had a particularly nasty salesperson for [EVIDENCE OMITTED BY RESOLUTION OF THE COMMITTEE 11 SEPTEMBER 2015] out selling courses, who actually put their foot in the door.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I am sorry, what was the name of the company?

Ms NICHOLSON: [EVIDENCE OMITTED BY RESOLUTION OF THE COMMITTEE 11 SEPTEMBER 2015]

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Where are they based?

Ms NICHOLSON: They are a [EVIDENCE OMITTED BY RESOLUTION OF THE COMMITTEE 11 SEPTEMBER 2015] Edu business, but they are in partnership with North Coast TAFE.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Okay. You would be aware that there are a lot of local education and training organisations in our community who provide excellent service and a great deal of employment. I mean, I am just wondering how far this smear against the private sector extends. Are you saying all of them?

Dr JOHN KAYE: She answered that question before.

Ms NICHOLSON: I have worked in partnership with a number of people in my own community because I believe that having a competitive approach in the bush is fundamentally—

CHAIR: Order! I remind the witness to be very mindful about adverse mention. While it is protected under parliamentary privilege here, it will not be outside.

Ms NICHOLSON: Yes. I am answering the question.

CHAIR: Just be mindful.

Ms NICHOLSON: I am answering the question.

CHAIR: Yes. That is okay. I am just watching your back.

Ms NICHOLSON: I believe that competition in education is fundamentally wrong. I am certainly not opposed to collaboration.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I am not going to repeat the name of that organisation. Chair, I thank you for your guidance on that. But when you say they put their foot across the door, what do you mean by that?

Ms NICHOLSON: Oh, well, it is *Death of a Salesman*, you know. You put your foot in the door if you want to sell something and you do not want them to slam the door in your face.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I am trying to understand what you are accusing them of.

Ms NICHOLSON: I am accusing them of having extremely aggressive sales tactics.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can you be more specific than that?

Ms NICHOLSON: This was reported to me by one of my members.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Right.

Ms NICHOLSON: Okay—that there was a very aggressive—and some of the sales that are happening, especially around courses that attract VET FEE-HELP are actually by third party brokers.

CHAIR: Order! Can I just make it very clear this is very sensitive.

Ms NICHOLSON: I understand that.

CHAIR: If you are putting that on record, you may need to have evidence to support that.

Ms NICHOLSON: Well, I am reporting what a member reported to me.

CHAIR: Your member may have to be named and identified. I am just making you aware of that.

Dr JOHN KAYE: For the guidance of the Committee, the witness is doing her job.

CHAIR: That is fine.

Dr JOHN KAYE: She is providing feedback to the Committee.

CHAIR: I merely suggest to the witness that she needs to have a name and evidence.

Dr JOHN KAYE: That is not necessarily clear.

CHAIR: No, it may not be, but I am just needed.

The Hon. LOU AMATO: With all due respect, the Chair is trying to protect the witness.

CHAIR: I am just trying to make you very aware that if we go down this line, it could go further and you need to have evidence to support your comment. That is all.

Ms NICHOLSON: I make the point that a member reported it to me and that private providers are using third party brokers to sell their courses.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Okay. You do not have any direct evidence of that yourself.

Ms NICHOLSON: No, I do not.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Thank you.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: I read through your statement, and thank you very much for providing it to the Committee. I note you stated:

As a teacher I have witnessed young people with narrow racist views, sharing a classroom in a multicultural context and I have seen those young people learn about each other and form bonds, rather than continue with negative stereotypical attitudes.

That is nice to read. I also have heard you talking about a multicultural society during your evidence today. I wonder how this aligns with a recent tweet of yours, which said: "TAFE cuts equal FTA invasion of Chinese workers. That simple."

Ms NICHOLSON: No, that is not one of my tweets.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Well, that tweet comes from @tafeorganiser, King Kathy, which I believe is one registered with you. I wanted to see with this sort of commitment to multiculturalism—

Ms NICHOLSON: You would have to show me the tweet, Scott.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: —how you actually come up with something like this.

Ms NICHOLSON: You would have to show me that tweet, and you would be aware that under the China Free Trade Agreement that there is some dispute around allowing in unregulated people in some particular trades.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: How has this got anything to do with TAFE at all, or any sort of commitment to multiculturalism?

Ms NICHOLSON: Because my members, especially electricians, are particularly concerned about potentially unqualified workers taking the work of Australians, I suppose.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Are they racist?

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Point of order. Time has expired.

CHAIR: Order! Time has expired.

Ms NICHOLSON: Are they racist?

CHAIR: Order!

Ms NICHOLSON: That would be for you to decide.

CHAIR: Order! Speak through the Chair, thank you. Thank you for your evidence, as wide and diverse as it was. We appreciate your attending, but there may be some further questions that members may wish to put to you in 24 hours, which need to be answered within 21 days as well as the questions taken on notice. The secretariat will be happy to help you, if you need their assistance. Thank you for presenting today here in Lismore.

Ms NICHOLSON: Thank you very much. Thanks for having me. I really appreciated it.

(The witness withdrew)

SIMON MAHONEY, Student, TAFE NSW North Coast institute, sworn and examined [through interpreters David Barnes and Glenda Roberts]:

DAVID BARNES, Auslan Interpreter, TAFE NSW North Coast institute, and

GLENDA ROBERTS, Auslan Interpreter, TAFE NSW north West Coast institute, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Simon, do you wish to make an opening statement?

Mr MAHONEY: I was a bit uncertain but I will say yes. My name is Simon. I feel very privileged to be here, a representative at this meeting, and for the vocational education and training [VET] in New South Wales. I have had a lot of success in my life because of TAFE. I am married with three children—three lovely boys. I was born profoundly deaf. My parents were also deaf. My first language is Auslan, Australian Sign Language. It is different to English. I grew up going to many, different schools and I was involved in many different communities throughout New South Wales. There were variations of communications in those schools, some signing, some total communication, but I felt disenfranchised from school. I left high school in year 9 and there was a huge education gap for me. As I said, I ended up getting married. I moved to Lismore in around about 1994. I decided to come to Lismore TAFE. My first son was born and I did my year 10 because my numeracy in the past was not so good.

Then I enrolled in some carpentry courses. I thought that would be good. I did that for a year through study at TAFE and they provided interpreters for me. It was excellent. I felt that it was quite equitable. I got my first year carpentry qualification and that led me to an apprenticeship, which was really good. I started doing some building work for a while. The fit did not quite work with my family and other commitments, so I decided on a different course of study, a different path and different opportunities. I started studying welding at TAFE in Lismore. I was provided with interpreters. There was good information and I could understand what was going on; I could follow it all. I did that for a year, got my qualification and started working in a business. I did that for a while but welding was not quite my thing. I did not find the right growth and as I was maturing it did not feel like the right fit. Then I decided I wanted to become a teacher. I thought I would become an Auslan teacher at TAFE. It is a valuable language; it is my native language. I thought maybe it is possible. I know they teach it here. I could study to become a teacher and I did some teacher training. Are you alright, David?

Mr BARNES: Yes.

Mr MAHONEY: I was still studying here, doing my literacy and improving myself, doing both. I started to become more confident and assertive and learning how to teach professionally. Then I started teaching Auslan here in 2004 after my second child was born. I have taught Auslan ever since—for the past 11 years. I have been involved in a great deal of sport over the years. I have been a representative for deaf sports at the State, national and international levels, which has been in many different sporting arenas. I have set up deaf support associations because of TAFE and their belief in me, and assisting me and guiding me to acquire the knowledge to cover the gap I had in my education. TAFE has been an amazing place for me. My wife went to uni. She became qualified and then I thought I can go to uni too. I thought what can I do? First, I needed to prepare, so I did the Prepare for Success course at university. I studied that for a year. That was good and the foundation from TAFE helped me to be able to do that and to grow.

I enrolled in a bachelor of human movement and secondary education, and then my third son was born. Then I became chief executive officer for Australian Deaf Rugby Union. That led to plenty of opportunities and many more skills for me, including life skills. I have been to New Zealand twice supporting Deaf Rugby Australia, and on other scholarships I have been to Fiji to set up deaf rugby teams and to link in with deaf schools to help share knowledge and experience in those other countries. I also established the first Australian deaf rugby teams in this country. It was an amazing experience. I feel very proud.

Anyway, I have learned at TAFE at Lismore and Coffs Harbour. Also, I had to update my training and assessment skills a while ago with TAFE. I had to follow the process and become qualified, which was really good. After that, I worked my way through university and I got my double degree. I really cannot believe the goals I have achieved from when I was so young. I always look at TAFE and the environment and I think how amazing it is and how vital the pathways are to be able to succeed in education, not just to move to tertiary education, but for everyone to look at their different situations and circumstances, their backgrounds and their different levels of education. In a country region, it is really important to be able to access those opportunities.

Looking historically, TAFE has been the foundation for the education system, certainly in regional areas and many other places. It really is valuable to keep that foundation and to look at the changes. We really need it. If we look at TAFE Australia-wide, they are very rich in our community and important for our education. You are always meeting other people and feel equitable in the organisation. They find a perfect fit for your skill levels and what you need. I look at TAFE today—I understand some of the situations—but the stuff that TAFE has provided is really important and very high value.

Again, for me, I really cannot believe the journey that I have been on and the opportunities that TAFE has given me. It has been a number one opportunity, a marvellous opportunity. The provision of interpreters and note-takers, the equity that has been provided to be able to access the services has been a massive support for me to receive the education that I have. It is important for everyone to understand 100 per cent that that access and equity needs to be provided by TAFE—interpreters, note-takers, tutorials, foundation level support, et cetera. I have been motivated to study at TAFE because of the encouragement, the provision of services, and, as I said, the blend and family-like environment—the community environment—that is provided. The adult education support that enables people to be educated for the future to earn incomes and to be able to contribute to our community and society by paying taxes is important. Education has been a very important bridge for people who are disadvantaged who have that educational gap.

I know the choices of courses depend on the person and sometimes there is a limit to what can be provided, and TAFE Lismore has been a good provider—they listen. I have heard the other people speak today. I know there have been some limits, but the situation has also changed with interpreter availability, note-taker availability, being able to provide support to those deaf people through Auslan. I believe that education is very important. We need more encouragement to focus on that so that deaf people are able to gain employment and to earn money and to contribute to the community. It needs to be improved. Deaf people do not want to be disadvantaged. We feel we are equal and should be treated as such. I look at other areas. I look at how those bridges need to be provided, not just for TAFE. I mean improving working in Coffs Harbour a bit more and improving that access, but looking at how it all links together and focusing on the improvement for deaf people to access those services, and for deaf people to get that employment, which varies greatly—and looking at barriers. Interpreters are needed because Auslan is different to English. It is important to have that access, not just for deaf people, but other people with disabilities as well should have access. It is important to have note-takers to bridge the gap in education. The literacy support I received through my time was wonderful.

I have been thinking back about the education levels and how they vary and looking at the different registered training organisations. I have heard different things over time that some of them are all right and some of them are not, but with Auslan—some organisations are starting to—it is important to have the interpreter support here as well at TAFE. We have 20 students that we are teaching. It might vary and they will be successful and work in the schools with disadvantaged kids. I think it is really important to have that link and to be able to work together to educate people. We teach Auslan to some hearing people who will work in the communities as well. Funding cuts could reduce the availability of Auslan. Also in the mainstream education system for schoolchildren who are deaf. So how can a teacher go in and provide that teaching and work with the students? You have to go to different places and look at the numbers, which has been skewed. That is a risk the kids have in the community as well. Look at the mainstream education and try to get those numbers together. You cannot afford to lose them and disadvantage them even further and increase the gap in their education. I really do not want to see that happen.

We need to think about the economy and encourage deaf people to work. As I said, having more deaf people who can teach Auslan will give them employment. It keeps them going and also keeps the community cohesive. When I look at TAFE and how wonderful it has been to me and how it has helped me improve and given me opportunities in life and better life skills, I believe it has been a great opportunity, and for other people as well. I see other people in the community who do not have employment and I want to include them. The fees and costs really impacts on them. For the past 11 years I have seen fewer students. This year has been the worst, which makes me feel—actually, it breaks my heart, because Auslan is so important. It is a rich language. It is an Australian language. It is not just deaf people's language; it is everybody's language. We need to think about that. It is really big and important.

Recently Drisana Levitzke-Gray won the Australian of the Year. It is wonderful seeing her and watching the language on the national stage and looking at the positives of Auslan. That was wonderful. Also, looking at literacy and numeracy, and, as I said, bridging the gap if you leave year 9 and want to get your education levels up and having that level of skills available for all people. It was a big impact. Now we have to pay for courses. Students who are deaf, how can they do it? They want to get involved in different courses and

they cannot access some of them because of money. It makes my community and my culture feel hurt. I think that is wrong. We need to take a few steps back, pull on the handbrake and look at more support, not less. The support from interpreters is huge. I honestly believe that is great. If the future impacts on access, then what happens? We are looking at the quality of the education as well, quality of life for the people and employment within the community and social cohesion. That funding support is vital.

I know times change, but still. I know it is not related to us, but in Victoria it has been a terrible situation in the last few years. There have been heaps of funding cuts at TAFE, even for the Auslan courses. That has been a huge impact. I know here it is a different State but in the country regions it is quite difficult. The lobbying has to happen. It was gone for a year but they got it back and now they are looking at the future and available interpreters and mainstreaming education. Melbourne has been improved. Victoria has improved that. They have changed that a lot. I know Sydney has been in the process in the southern areas of losing people. But here we are so far so good, and I want to keep it continuing.

CHAIR: Thank you for appearing today. Your testimony is so important. It goes without saying that we gave you extra time because we wanted to hear what was in your heart and learn about your experience. We thank you for that.

Mr MAHONEY: My pleasure.

CHAIR: We will go to questions, but because that was comprehensive there may be fewer questions. That is not because we do not want to ask any questions but because it was a very comprehensive opening statement.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you for coming today and giving us a firsthand insight into the importance of TAFE for you and I am sure many others you know who may be experiencing disadvantage or difficulty. On the issue of interpreter support when you were at TAFE, did you have to pay for that? Was it a cost that you had to bear or was it provided to you without charge?

Mr MAHONEY: TAFE provided the interpreters fully at no cost to me. I would not have been able to. It would be impossible and it would not make sense if an individual had to pay the costs. TAFE itself, the institute, paid for the costing. If that is the funding that gets cut or the funding that gets cut covers the cost of interpreters how would an individual ever have the ability to financially pay for that? We have looked at experiences of many years of success in having that support and it is evident that it is important. My concern for the future is that that maintains and stays.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Is it your understanding that interpreter support is made available to people who are deaf around the TAFE network in New South Wales?

Mr MAHONEY: Yes, it is available across the State but I think it is limited. Maybe a number of interpreters are not available in a regional area. I guess that is why the Auslan course is now becoming more important. The need for interpreters is rising, so the Auslan course itself is becoming essential in delivering the training to get those interpreters. But, yes, the network is there.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Just to clarify, is the Auslan course taught at TAFE or elsewhere?

Mr MAHONEY: It is here at TAFE. It has been here in this region for 25 or 22 years—a long time. I have been here for a long time as well. In Sydney and Brisbane I am not sure. It is off and on in other places. There are other registered training organisations [RTOs] that deliver it and that is variable but, generally, TAFE has had the stronghold in Auslan. TAFE has been number one for Auslan. It has been amazing at that and that is what we want to keep, because that is our strong name that is keeping the course branding and keeping it available.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Would it be a fair comment to make that deaf people have an appreciation that TAFE does provide interpreter support, which in itself opens opportunities for them to continue with their studies or enter study if they have not been a student in the past?

Mr MAHONEY: Yes, I agree. To have an interpreter you have an opportunity to engage in that education. As your education increases, so do your opportunities for the future. Again, here you have got certificate II and certificate III. Maybe in the future we are trying to encourage the number of the cohort—

I guess that is a bit off the track of what you were saying. But later in the future if you have access to an interpreter, you have got interpreters for international people, court, all of those types of things, and conferencing.

The other issue with interpreting is that if students are mainstreamed how are they going to have access to interpreters? The city has larger resources, like deaf schools and things like that. But in a regional area what will I do if I want to be engaged in the community as a sports teacher? I have been living here for 17 years and I do not want to move. People retire and come here. We have got children with disabilities who live in a country area. Northern Rivers is very strong. You have people with disabilities and it is very calm. The city is very hectic. But we have an issue with access here. Our interpreters bridge that gap and it gives us the resources that people in the city automatically have. I hope that all of those boxes get ticked.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Thank you coming along. Given your extensive knowledge of the Northern Rivers network and the Northern Rivers deaf community, are you aware of any private provider that provides a comparable or similar level of service with Auslan translation? Even if it not of an equivalent standard, can you give us an overview of the level of support available in the private sector for people with the needs that you have?

Mr MAHONEY: No, no. It is a very difficult situation. It is very frustrating. Some RTOs are good but they do not provide interpreters or full-time interpreters, or they will charge the cost on top. That is a huge disadvantage. TAFE here is fantastic. It is good. It is supportive. It is wonderful. Do other RTOs provide Auslan? Not around here, no.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Do you know of anywhere?

Mr MAHONEY: The Deaf Society provides Auslan courses. The Deaf Society of New South Wales here can teach introductory Auslan courses. We have that, yes. But they are very short and introductory courses. Does that answer your question?

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Yes, thank you very much.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Mr Mahoney, can you describe for this Committee the role that your teacher consultants played in getting you through the various TAFE qualifications you described?

Mr MAHONEY: I think that support provided from the consultants is specific to what you are studying or what course you are enrolled in. For example, if that is an interpreter they can negotiate what the interpreter needs or who interprets for me. I have been around 17 years and I can see, I am very happy with the experience. Sometimes in a country area there is a lack of interpreters but I guess it has been pretty good. Really they help with note takers. The consultant will help with note takers and providing hours to make sure that things are okay or help with negotiating any changes. I think that is essential and we need to keep that. We cannot lose that at all. No, it is very important.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Mr Mahoney, when you did your first TAFE course, which I think was in carpentry, were you assigned to a teacher consultant? Can you describe the role that the teacher consultant played in your completion of the work in that first course?

Mr MAHONEY: Yes, they provided interpreters. They organised that. That was the number one priority for me. They organised if I needed any extra support in terms of tutorials—if there was a teacher who was around that was available and who we felt comfortable with in terms of note taking or regular catch ups or interpreting. I felt really good. I was really supported. The learning setting was perfect for me.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You would be aware that under the Baird Government's Smart and Skilled program the money available as an additional amount to help students with a disability adjust to courses is only 15 per cent of the entire course cost. In the case of a deaf student studying a trade course, for example, as you have done, can you comment on whether that is an adequate amount?

Mr MAHONEY: No. No, I am shocked. No, I am sure we need more.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: How much?

Mr MAHONEY: I would guess the full amount of whatever the cost was.

Dr JOHN KAYE: It would be correct to say that you would need an interpreter for all contact hours at TAFE and you would need a teacher consultant to organise the additional adjustments. Is that correct?

Mr MAHONEY: Absolutely fantastic. The note takers help with literacy support because if you are lecturing I am watching the interpreter; I cannot take notes. I will miss out on that. If I make the notes I cannot watch the interpreter. I am missing out on one or the other. That is a big thing. I need the note taker. When the lecture is finished I can read the notes and that is when my learning happens. I need that. That is an equity issue.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Do you think that there is an inherent incompatibility between a profit-making enterprise and the provision of education to people with special needs?

Mr MAHONEY: Spot on. It is a little bit of a risk. If we are doing a course for one year that takes a few days a week or something like that and you have got an interpreter provided for full-time and you pay \$3,000 for the course—I also have to then pay the cost of an interpreter for three days a week for the year. That is impossible. It means I will never be able to complete the course. I will not be able to contribute to the community. I will not go on to be successful. I will not be able to meet my outcome criteria.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Mr Mahoney, by my counting you went through four separate TAFE qualifications: carpentry, welding, Auslan and then you did some business qualifications. Is that correct?

Mr MAHONEY: No, it was the TAE.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Can you explain what TAE stands for?

Mr MAHONEY: That is the teacher assessment training, the training and assessment course.

Dr JOHN KAYE: As you went through those courses you learnt a lot about yourself and what you wanted to do?

Mr MAHONEY: Yes, that is right. I found out what my inspiration was. That I love sport, I wanted to go to university, I wanted to be an advocate, I wanted to teach. All of these things, and how could I match them together. It was more a dream.

Dr JOHN KAYE: If you had to pay more for subsequent qualifications would that have made it more difficult for you?

Mr MAHONEY: It would never happen.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You would not have been able to do those qualifications?

Mr MAHONEY: No, because I would not be able to afford to do it. That would be an access issue and that road would be blocked.

Dr JOHN KAYE: A key access issue is that students can have an opportunity to explore courses and change courses subsequently?

Mr MAHONEY: Yes. Yes, I do. On the other hand, I have got a degree and I cannot find work. In the city I can. That is the problem with being in a regional area. I did try to apply for a home and community care course to prepare for the National Disability Insurance Scheme [NDIS] and looking at what education requirements I would need for that and looking at the disability services. But I could not access that course because my double degree was a barrier for me to get in. So I started feeling depressed and I did not continue. Then I thought, "That's terrible." So then I thought I will focus on being an Auslan teacher. But having my double degree impacted on my access to a lower grade education.

CHAIR: Given your experience what part can technology play in the future for someone that is coming up in a similar situation to you through TAFE and university? Is there a part that we can play through increasing the role of technology to address some of the issues that you would have faced as a deaf student, and what would they be?

Mr MAHONEY: For example, for teaching or for me as a learner studying a course? For me as a teacher or for me as a learner?

CHAIR: Both actually. Either as a receiver of learning or a teacher through teleconferencing where he could teach far more people across New South Wales. Those sorts of initiatives.

Mr MAHONEY: As a student I learned with interpreters face to face. You can use videoconferencing and skypeing but the technology can fail. It is not always perfect and you need a back-up plan. So looking at interpreters with face to face and as part of the deaf community in our culture and looking at other technological assistance like Dragon speak, that technology, it can put the words up on the screen so I can read it. So that is speech detection. That is a possibility but that is not perfect either and it is not a perfect match. Maybe in the future the technology will improve. That is those things. But then looking also as a teacher, yes, I have used skype at different campuses; we have linked them together. But then looking at funding and how you can access those other campuses and have those set up, yes, Auslan can be taught that way through technology and videoconferencing. It helps increase the number of students and also connects people to the institute, and that is important too. But it is better to be able to come together as well or me go out occasionally to visit students as well.

CHAIR: Is funding an issue here in this particular matter?

Mr MAHONEY: Yes. The number of students also and lack of funds. I was working six hours a week and now it has been cut down more, and I am thinking "What's wrong?" The education is fine but it is like a cutting of hours to teach the students the information and get the appropriate Auslan qualifications before the time frame was a full year's longer hours and it has been cut, reduced. That needs to be addressed as well.

CHAIR: We will look into that.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: That you very much, Mr Mahoney, for your evidence today and for your story. It is much appreciated. I am interested, with all your experience across education, how support for people with a disability and particularly deaf people differs between TAFE NSW and you were at university, I heard you say, or another tertiary institution and how you found the experience at both of those institutions?

Mr MAHONEY: Okay. At university and TAFE it was almost the same. It was a very similar experience. University provided full-time interpreters, full-time note takers. It was really good. It gave me great access to become qualified. Similar to what TAFE had, and I believe if cuts happen in the future it will not work. I have heard that all universities are not like Southern Cross University but the university here, Southern Cross University at Lismore, provided me with full access and it was amazing. Griffith university over the border, they modify things and change stuff around, change interpreters and it does not always match. Trying to match the interpreter to the deaf person to have that vibe, it has been good here. They will match interpreters with me and encourage those things to happen.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: In terms of that matching up of interpreters, throughout your courses did you have the same interpreter throughout the course when you were at TAFE here in Lismore?

Mr MAHONEY: Yes. Some of them, yes. It depended on if they were available as well. Not the same ones all the time, but half of the time, yes. It is a small community up here. I would imagine if it was in a much bigger place it would be a bit different. Also, if other deaf people were studying also and sometimes you do not get that option of preference, but it is good to be able to provide a range of options for the deaf person to have their preference satisfied.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Under the National Disability Insurance Scheme [NDIS] there will be a shift in funding from the service to the individual person with a disability so that they will be able to go on—

Mr MAHONEY: Yes, I am aware of that.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Do you support that change?

Mr MAHONEY: Yes. I am very pleased about it. I think this time the changes need to happen in all forms of education, yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: That could mean, for example, in education and training they get the funding themselves and they can then have a choice as to who they wish to provide that service.

Mr MAHONEY: Yes. I mean, it has not happened here yet.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What if they do not choose TAFE? What do you think about that? What if they chose SAE in Byron, for example?

Mr MAHONEY: There is more competition, I understand that, yes. TAFE in Lismore has been important and the North Coast institute has a great reputation for the past 25 years—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I understand. And we are part of that.

Mr MAHONEY: —and getting more people to come here.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I do not mean competition; I mean choice, if you see the difference. The person will now be able to choose where they do that course. Is that a good thing?

Mr MAHONEY: Yes, it is great for that person, that is fine. They have those choices. They could choose the Deaf Society in future or TAFE or other service providers looking at that access. Hopefully, they pick here because of the reputation, but without that access and equity you would not pick here.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can you see that by giving them the resources to make those choices and the funding goes with their choice, maybe more training providers will be able to provide those services for deaf people than is the case at the moment?

Mr MAHONEY: Yes. I hope that changes will occur and there will be a growth in numbers and we will look at more students and even more classes here, and more interpreters becoming available as well. We will see what happens when the NDIS rolls out up here. It is an important point to have that support.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I have a sense that there will be an enormous increase in access to education under NDIS. I feel very optimistic about that.

Mr MAHONEY: Yes, I am feeling a bit confident about it but I want to wait to see it occur to see what it is like first.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Fair enough.

CHAIR: That concludes our question time. Just for your knowledge, I have six children, four boys, but they did not all come with an education degree or diploma.

Mr MAHONEY: Everyone is a bit different.

CHAIR: I still have a long way to go with education. Thank you for your evidence.

Mr MAHONEY: Thank you for the opportunity to be here. It has been my pleasure.

CHAIR: There have been no questions taken on notice. That does not mean that members may not provide a question for the witness to answer. The Committee staff will be there to help if that is the case. Finally, on behalf of the Committee, it has been an incredible opportunity for us to hear someone who is in extraordinary circumstances thriving. The testimony you have given on behalf of TAFE has been great, and I am sure the staff appreciate that. Obviously you will continue to be a great ambassador and mentor not just for the deaf community but the whole community. Thank you.

(The witness and interpreters withdrew)

COREY ALECKSON, HR Manager, Northern Co-Operative Meat Company, and

SIMON STAHL, Chief Executive Officer, Northern Co-Operative Meat Company, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Would either of you like to make an opening statement?

Mr STAHL: Yes, I would. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today. Obviously TAFE is very important to our organisation. We are a farmer-owned cooperative based here in the northern rivers. We have over 1,000 employees. We are a leading exporter. We own and operate two abattoirs and a hide processing facility. We export to over 26 countries. Vocational training is obviously critical to our success. Our industry typically relies on subclass 457 visa workers. We are proud of the fact that less than 1 per cent of our workers are subclass 457 visa workers. Vocational training has played a big part in that. TAFE has been our preferred choice, and in some cases our only choice of education provider. That has resulted in a very good relationship built over a number of years. We see that continuing well into the future.

Yes, some of the recent changes, in particular costs, have impacted on our training. However, these are not insurmountable problems from my point of view. I think sometimes businesses do get too focused on what we can get out of government rather than what we can put back in. I think one of the things we really want to do, going forward, is to see how much more we can contribute to TAFE as well, because there are a lot of synergies. We have a significant project at the moment we are looking at where we are trying to do extension services into our farm community and actually have some sort of recognition of their learning and skills in terms of formal qualifications. We see TAFE as being the logical extension to that rather than contributing to the pressures on local land services and other State bodies.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Thank you for your opening statement and congratulations on the success of your company and your commitment to training Australian citizens and local residents. Are you able to explain to us precisely the scope of the program you run in conjunction with TAFE. How many people are in it? Is it an apprenticeship program?

Mr ALECKSON: We do traineeships and apprenticeships through TAFE—so certificates II and III for our general employees to skill them up. We run apprenticeships in metals, electrical, plumbing and those types of things. Last year I think we had about 200 trainees going through TAFE.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: How long have you been doing that for?

Mr STAHL: It would be a number of years. I have been with the company for 3½ years and it has been running for at least that time.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Is this a response to a skills shortage?

Mr STAHL: It is twofold. We have a very well-recognised set of training from the meat industry. It was developed through the National Meat Industry Training Advisory Council Limited [MINTRAC]. A lot of those core deliverables are passed onto a registered training organisation [RTO] such as TAFE to deliver. It is well recognised by both national and international auditors who come to the plant. They are very familiar with the set of modules developed under MINTRAC. They are also very familiar with the brand that is TAFE and the deliverable. It is quite a transient industry, or it has been traditionally. We do have a fair turnover of workers in the industry so there is a continual need for training. More than just having the tick and flick to satisfy the auditors, I think it is the quality of what we can deliver that gives us a bit of a productivity advantage in terms of getting the training right.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Does the cooperative have to absorb any costs associated with the traineeships and apprenticeships?

Mr STAHL: Yes, absolutely. The placement through TAFE for a certificate II course, which is probably our most common, costs around \$1,300 per employee. So you can quickly do the maths on the cost of that of that for 200 employees year. It is the off-the-job training that is quite a significant cost for us as well.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Can you tell us about that.

Mr STAHL: We estimate that the on-the-job training costs—that this, buddy systems, assessment within the workplace, et cetera—could be as high as \$5,000 per person on average.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: This is a really basic question, but what is the average duration of your traineeships and your apprenticeships?

Mr STAHL: The certificate II on average would take two or three semesters. Obviously apprenticeships take three or four years. A certificate III would take at least 12 months. A certificate IV would take a bit longer.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: In your opening statement you made some reference to an adjustment of costs but you then pointed out that it was not insurmountable. I wonder if you could take us through both aspects of that evidence—as in, what cost increases have happened, when did they go up, and what plans are in place for the cooperative to address those? Before I hand over to my colleague, the other question I would ask is: Does any of that impact on the number of places you will be able to offer? Is the business contemplating either increasing or decreasing the number of places as a result of this change in costs?

Mr STAHL: Yes, on the costs I was referring to, the original fee structure for the certificate II course was about \$275 per semester, as I understand it. Typically it takes two or three semesters to put a student through that course so that would give a total of \$800 to \$900. The new cost is \$1,300 per certificate. So it is a \$500 increase.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: So it five times what it was before?

Mr STAHL: No, not quite. It was \$275 per semester and it would take an employee two to three semesters. So the old amount was \$800 and the new amount is \$1,300. So it is about an extra \$500 per student, which is not insignificant if we put 100 or 200 employees through the course—we could be talking about \$50,000 or \$100,000 per year. I would rather focus on talking with TAFE and saying, "Okay, how do we actually make this more efficient for everyone?" I think there is an opportunity to leverage off what we do in our business in terms of saying, "How do we make sure that we have the best bang for our buck and we are managing the business with TAFE?"

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you both for coming along this afternoon and providing us with an opportunity to ask you some questions. Are there any private training providers that operate in the area where your business is that provided an option for you to consider using compared to taking the TAFE option? Or is TAFE the provider you went with because it was essentially the only provider available?

Mr ALECKSON: I think there are other training organisations out there. I guess it is certainly convenient for us to have TAFE in our local area. Otherwise our employees would have to travel to Brisbane or places like that, and transport and accommodation costs would then start to add up in the overall costs.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: So in effect TAFE self-selected because it is here in your immediate vicinity and could meet your needs. I presume you do have meetings with TAFE and did have at the commencement of your involvement with them to talk about how they could meet your needs and how these courses could best be delivered. Is that the sort of engagement you have on an ongoing basis? Could you explain that so we can see how the relationship between TAFE the provider and you as the employer works?

Mr STAHL: Certainly. Many companies in our industry have preferred to go to a registered training organisation [RTO] themselves and deliver their own in-house training. We had a look at that but we did not think we were best placed to actually deliver the training. We focus on processing meat. We leave the training to the training facilities that can deliver it. So we certainly went along to make sure that TAFE were picking up the modules we needed. All the material was prepared by the meat industry, and understood by the meat industry. We have had other projects. We recently took up an issue. We have a focus on some of the disadvantaged youth in our region.

TAFE came up with a pre-employment program only a number of months ago. We had 18 young Indigenous students start the pre-employment program. They stuck it out for eight or 10 weeks and we offered 14 of them full-time work, and they are still with us today. So that was extremely pleasing. We funded a lot of that ourselves. There was no issue with that, because we win in the end so it is a good investment. So to go to your point, yes, we do sit down with TAFE and work with them.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: My final question is: Do you find TAFE open to engaging with you and to understanding your business—and ultimately to cutting the cloth, so to speak, to fit in with your needs?

Mr STAHL: Yes, certainly.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Just to pick up on Mr Donnelly's questions, so you have found TAFE to be very flexible in its response to your needs. Has that always been so? How long has your organisation had a relationship with TAFE?

Mr STAHL: Certainly longer than the 3½ years I have been with the company.

Dr JOHN KAYE: When you first got there, was TAFE flexible and responsive to your needs?

Mr STAHL: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: And so that has not changed over the last 3½ years you have been there?

Mr STAHL: No, not that has been brought to my attention.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Mr Aleckson, how long have you been with the meat cooperative?

Mr ALECKSON: In the capacity I am in now just over two years.

Dr JOHN KAYE: And what about in other capacities?

Mr ALECKSON: About 15 years.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Were you aware of the interaction between the cooperative and TAFE 15 years ago?

Mr ALECKSON: Not that long back, but for at least 10 years.

Dr JOHN KAYE: And would you say that it has always been a responsive and engaged organisation that met your needs?

Mr ALECKSON: Yes, that is correct.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I have another question. We have heard a lot today about course contact hours at TAFE being reduced. Have you observed any impacts of that on the students coming to you?

Mr ALECKSON: No, not from our perspective.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So that is not something you have visibility of. What about in terms of online learning? Are the students who come to you given an online learning option?

Mr ALECKSON: I guess we are a bit unique in that ours is more on-the-job training, and the classroom stuff is very specific.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Okay, so you offer more on-the-job training. Would it be fair to say that when the employees who go through this program with you begin they do not have particularly good literacy, numeracy and study skills?

Mr ALECKSON: Yes, that would be fair.

Dr JOHN KAYE: And would it be fair to say also that TAFE provides improvements in their communication, literacy and numeracy skills?

Mr ALECKSON: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Would you say that those improvements are part of the training package or are they things that TAFE just does?

Mr ALECKSON: TAFE is certainly good at it. It is part of the training. The people who come to our site are very committed.

Dr JOHN KAYE: In terms of the training package itself, does it specify literacy and numeracy outcomes?

Mr STAHL: No, not in the modules they have to do under the MINTRAC training.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Nonetheless TAFE does provide those. So even though they are not part of the training package outcomes under the MINTRAC training TAFE provides those specific learning outcomes? I am getting at the collateral benefit of going to TAFE, if you like.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Dr Kaye is trying to lead the witnesses.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I am leading the witnesses but fortunately this is not a court of law and I am allowed to do that. Witnesses can at any stage reject my leading questions, and many people do.

Mr STAHL: I just think it is logical that if you go to a learning institution then you are going to improve.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I guess my question is: If you had another provider, other than TAFE, who had less of a commitment to the students, would you get the same outcomes in language and literacy?

Mr STAHL: If we did not, we would go to another provider.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Okay, so you would shop around. Fair enough. That is a good answer. Are the people who go through the MINTRAC training already employees of the cooperative? Or do they come in as trainees?

Mr STAHL: They can be in either of two phases: They can be a new employee or they can be an existing employee graduating onto a certificate III or IV.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Do you have a sense that either those who are already employees or those who come in on the training track, as it were, developed an interest in the meat industry because of a TAFE delivered vocational education and training [TVET] course or because of other things? What is bringing people in to your industry?

Mr STAHL: Money.

Dr JOHN KAYE: It is a shame that Hon. Dr Peter Phelps is not here as he would love to give me a hard time about that answer.

Mr STAHL: Most abattoirs are in rural communities. They actually fit very well with a lot of farmers and people who have a hobby farm et cetera. Some employees enter this sector because the hours are good—you can have a night shift or a day shift; your wife can work one shift and you can work the other. Typically a lot of people come for the money because it does pay well.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You also mentioned in your introductory statement, Mr Stahl, that you were attempting to reach out to the farmer community and improve skills in the farmer community. Are you doing that through TAFE? How are you doing that?

Mr STAHL: No, we are about to embark on that. We are not trying to improve the farming skills—

Dr JOHN KAYE: Sorry, I did verbal you there.

Mr STAHL: I think there is a fantastic opportunity here. There is a thing called grazing best management practice. It was actually developed in Queensland along the Eastern seaboard with a view to

improving farm practices because of their impact on the Great Barrier Reef. A lot of that applies to the coastal region we are in here. It is a fantastic program. So we are going to put on six or so seminars over the next 12 months. What typically happens with on-farm education is that you can do the field days, so to speak, but then there is no extension work after that. We started to think about what was the logical extension vehicle, and we think TAFE is going to play a fairly big role. I have started to talk to a couple of people within TAFE about pulling this together with the local land services, the Federal Government and the MLA—

Dr JOHN KAYE: MLA is Meat and Livestock Australia?

Mr STAHL: Yes. Going on from that, the farmers have some wonderful skills but there is no formal recognition of those skills and I think it would be good having a certificate II, III and IV in farming because we might have lost a few of the older generation but for the younger generation it helps with finance and accreditation of properties for export access. TAFE would be a wonderful vehicle for it.

CHAIR: You mentioned the 457 visas. Do you have them because you are looking for certain skills?

Mr STAHL: There was a boom in 457 workers in the meat industry in Australia during the mining boom. Most of the regional towns could not find employees in the mid-2000s in particular. I managed a plant in Mackay where we had 25 or 30 per cent of the workforce from Brazil and they came in with boning skills. At Casino there was a big Brazilian population up to five or six years ago, for the same reason—the mining boom. Now that the mining boom has come off, there was a fairly committed effort by the local people to get the young people skilled up. It has been very successful.

CHAIR: You talked about additional efficiencies with TAFE. Where do you see additional efficiencies in that relationship?

Mr STAHL: I have no specific example, but if you look at the modules we deliver, not knowing some of the other vocational training that they offer, there are some modules that maybe could be delivered, if they are not already. As I understand, under the new system they are looking for placements—100 here or 200 there. How do we get other trades across the region into the modules we do? How do we get across our needs and find out what else is being done? Maybe they are already doing that—I am not sure—but by moving at my level more often we may find synergies.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: I am interested in your partnership with TAFE. What has been the impact on your business of working with TAFE?

Mr STAHL: It has been a very positive one. The training focus for us is to have qualified people and to prove to external auditors that we have a formal training process. To do it completely in-house would require skills and be expensive and I am not sure that we are the best people to deliver that. Also, it gives employees a certain pride—10 years ago when there was no certificate II or III meatworkers were just meatworkers. They are skilled technicians and they are highly valued, as they should be. Getting a certificate is a credit to them.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: I have a bit of an affinity with meatworkers as my wife's grandfather was a butcher in the Northern Rivers region, with butcheries in Casino, Lismore and Byron Bay. Her brother is also a butcher so I have a lot of respect for meatworkers. How responsive has TAFE been to your changing needs? No doubt to remain competitive you are changing your processes. Is TAFE intuitive, keen to work with you and flexible in providing training?

Mr ALECKSON: Yes, for sure.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Do you have any examples of that?

Mr ALECKSON: One is the humane handling of livestock, which seems to be a big one and it is ever evolving in our industry. They make adaptations and help us along with the way with changes we need to make, especially with importing country requirements.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: How quick is TAFE to change its practices to meet your needs?

Mr ALECKSON: That is a bit hard to answer.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Is it instantaneous?

Mr ALECKSON: Within practical reason.

Mr STAHL: If we have an importing country requirement change, for example, a lot of the material would be done by industry first, through either MLA or the Australian Meat Processor Corporation [AMPC], so the package is already there. It is then about the delivery of the package and managing the delivery and that is where TAFE responds.

The Hon. LOU AMATO: Do you get many apprentices through the schools or being recommended by school career advisers or do you mainly get them through the farming community?

Mr STAHL: Typically, they have an uncle, a brother or an aunty who works at the meatworks and they get an application. We do a lot of positive work with Casino High School and other local high schools. Our first contact is usually through the agricultural departments within the schools.

The Hon. LOU AMATO: So you have contact with them?

Mr STAHL: Yes.

The Hon. LOU AMATO: That is excellent.

Mr STAHL: We help them when they show cattle, even in some instances purchasing cattle for them to lead around.

The Hon. LOU AMATO: That is a good idea. I have not heard mentioned before how other industries go to schools and give kids a rundown of their industry. I commend you for that; it is excellent.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: It is a pretty important part of Casino.

Mr STAHL: The local preschool—we donated the land.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I think you are the biggest, second-biggest or the third-biggest employer in Casino.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I grew up on a beef farm, and as Thomas would tell you, my dad was involved in the beef industry many in Casino many years ago. You spoke about the 457 visa workers from Brazil. Was that due to a labour shortage rather than a skills shortage?

Mr STAHL: It was definitely both. I experienced it when I was in Mackay when for the first time ever our 20- or 30-year employees had an opportunity to drive a forklift at a mine.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: At five times the money.

Mr STAHL: At many times the money, so it was actually a choice between closing the business and getting overseas workers. We had about 100 Brazilians but in my view it was always going to be unsustainable because there is a bit of resentment when there are young people in the area who are unemployed. When I came to Casino after leaving my previous employer, Nippon, the challenge to the guys was I was not going to go back to Brazil but to the Philippines where more English was spoken. But again the local people had seen the 457 visa holders and said, "Give us a crack at getting back into teaching the young fellas and holding on to the younger people." That has been really successful and the accreditation for certificate II and III, the vocational training, has definitely added to the pride that they are not just a butcher. Our mantra is that they should finish the certificate II or III and then they can travel anywhere and get a job.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: In relation to the visas, you said the Brazilians were qualified in boning. Did they have a certificate that you recognised?

Mr STAHL: No.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: How did you know they were qualified?

Mr STAHL: We had to send over a registered training officer [RTO] to Brazil to inspect the workers as part of the 457 application process. We had prior recognised learning because they did not have any such qualification but they certainly could bone.

CHAIR: Thank you. Unfortunately that concludes the hearing. I note the Hon. Catherine Cusack spoke about labour and skills shortages—some things do not change as that is still happening in the upper House.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: If we are the labour shortage, they are definitely the skills shortage.

CHAIR: Thank you for your very helpful evidence today. If you have taken any questions on notice you have 21 days to answer them. The secretariat would be glad to help with any queries. Some members may want to place additional questions on notice. Thank you for doing what you do. If you ever want to come south and work there, you would be welcome to join us on the beautiful Shoalhaven plains.

(The witnesses withdrew)

The Committee adjourned at 4.11 p.m.