

**REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE**

**GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 5**

**INQUIRY INTO THE MURRUMBIDGEE COLLEGE OF  
AGRICULTURE**

---

**At Sydney on Monday 5 July 2004**

---

**The Committee met at 10.00 a.m.**

---

**PRESENT**

Mr I. Cohen (Chair)

The Hon. R. H. Colless  
The Hon. A. Catanzariti  
Ms S. P. Hale  
The Hon. C. J. S. Lynn  
The Hon. H. S. Tsang  
The Hon. I. W. West

**CHAIR:** I welcome everyone to today's hearing, the second of General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5 Inquiry into the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture. The first hearing was held at the college in Yanco on 21 June, the transcript of that is available on the Committee's web site. This inquiry is examining the closure of residential training at the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture. Today we will hear from a number of people representing the Department of Agriculture and will continue hearing evidence from individuals and community groups affected by the decision.

A transcript of today's evidence will be placed on the Committee's web site for public and media access so anyone who misses something that is said today will be able to read the transcript on the web site. It is anticipated that the transcript will be available by Thursday 8 July. As with all parliamentary hearings, I need to remind any members of the media present that the usual broadcasting guidelines apply. Copies of that are available at the table, as are copies of the terms of reference for this inquiry. It is important that the media have regard to the provision of not filming the public gallery during the hearing. I wish to emphasise that although this is a public hearing, it is not an open forum for comments from the floor. While the Committee welcomes members of the public here today, the purpose of the hearing is to have the Committee hear evidence on oath from those people appearing as witnesses.

Members of the public are asked to give the Committee's selected witnesses the opportunity to present their evidence without interruption. Only the questions from the Committee and the evidence of the witnesses are recorded on the transcript. Members of the public cannot directly approach the Committee members or witnesses during the hearing, but a note may be passed via the officers at the table. Evidence given to the Committee today by witnesses is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that witnesses are given broad protection from any action arising as a result of what they say, and that Parliament has the power to protect them from any action that disadvantages them on account of the evidence given before the Committee.

I also remind witnesses that the giving of false or misleading evidence to the Committee may constitute contempt of the Parliament. The Committee prefers to conduct its hearings in public. However, the Committee can decide to hear certain evidence in private if there is a need to do so. If such a case arises, I will ask the public and the media to leave the room for a short period. Finally, I ask all people in the room to turn off their mobile phones as they interfere with the equipment used to record the evidence. I now welcome the first witnesses, representatives from NSW Agriculture.

**ELLEN HOWARD**, Program Manager, Education and Training, Department of Primary Industries, 161 Kite Street, Orange, and

**ALAN CLABBURN GLEESON**, Executive Director Corporate Services, Department of Primary Industries, 161 Kite Street, Orange, sworn and examined,

**RICHARD FREDERICK SHELDRAKE**, Deputy Director-General of Agriculture and Fisheries, Department of Primary Industries, 161 Kite Street, Orange, and

**HELEN SCOTT-ORR**, Executive Director Research Advisory and Education, Department of Primary Industries, Locked Bag 21, Orange, affirmed and examined:

**CHAIR:** Do you appear in that capacity before the Committee?

**ALL WITNESSES:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

**ALL WITNESSES:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** If any of you should consider at any stage that certain evidence you wish to give or documents you may wish to tender should be heard or seen only by the Committee, please indicate that fact and the Committee will consider your request. Would any of you like to make a short statement before questioning commences?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** Mr Chairman, I would like to read a short statement that outlines our position. The decision to cease residential courses at the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture [MCA] at Yanco was a properly constituted and carefully considered process. The issue dates back to 2000 when a comprehensive study was conducted by NSW Agriculture to review the services and costs of agricultural colleges within the department. Consultation was undertaken in 2000 with college management, staff, full-time residential students, departmental managers, college advisory councils and TAFE NSW. The review conducted staff meetings and interviews, structured group meetings and received written submissions. The final report was written in 2000 and given to staff.

The report recommended that consideration be given to the consolidation of services if full-time student numbers continued to decline. Unfortunately, they did. Efforts to reverse that trend, including intensive promotion campaigns and statewide school visits, were to no avail. Despite that, four additional full-time staff were appointed to the college and teaching vacancies were kept filled with competent staff, even when student numbers were very low. The college's consolidated revenue budget was increased by 20 per cent after the review.

In 2003 a review of vocational education and training in agriculture was commissioned by Cabinet. The review considered the activity and roles of the providers with particular focus on areas of inefficiency or duplication. NSW Agriculture, TAFE NSW, the Cabinet Office and NSW Treasury were represented on the review. The review canvassed the option of transferring NSW Agriculture's vocational education training activities to the Department of Education and Training, TAFE. It was noted that there was duplication between the traineeships offered by the Murrumbidgee college and the Riverina Institute of TAFE, and it was decided that the college should withdraw from that activity. TAFE delivery is non-residential and the Department of Education and Training did not want to acquire NSW Agriculture's physical facilities at MCA.

The impact of that decision on rural communities was assessed prior to the Government finalising its position. A rural communities impact statement was completed and released to the public. The assessment found that the overall income and employment effects on rural New South Wales were likely to be neutral. It is pertinent to note that while the NSW Department of Primary Industries currently has two agricultural colleges, at one stage there were five in New South Wales; with other colleges being at Orange, Hawkesbury and Wagga Wagga. They were all managed by the department at that time. The focus of agricultural training has shifted over time, consistent with international trends. Where the main demand used to be for traditional full-time courses, it has now

largely shifted to either professional university training or more vocationally oriented short courses that provide practical forms of continuing education.

The Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture will focus on its strength in short course development and delivery in the future. However, there is still sufficient demand for residential style agricultural courses to maintain one college focused on delivering that service. Hence residential education will continue at Tocal Agricultural College, which has been favoured by students for that purpose for many years. The full-time courses that would have previously been offered at the Murrumbidgee college have been offered at Tocal. Similarly, all on-farm skills training has been conducted at Tocal in an identical fashion to how it was run at the Murrumbidgee college. Suggestions that students from the Western Division may be particularly disadvantaged by the decision are wrong. Student records clearly demonstrate that the Murrumbidgee college attracted students predominantly from southern and central areas of the State and from Victoria. The Tocal college attracted students from a much wider area, including the Western Division.

In 2003 there were five students from the Western Division enrolled at Tocal and none at the Murrumbidgee college. However, 10 new scholarships have been provided to assist students from the Riverina and Western Division potentially disadvantaged by the consolidation of residential courses at Tocal. Over the past 10 years the Tocal college has consistently attracted more residential students and educated them at substantially lower cost than the Murrumbidgee college. Regardless of how it is measured, whether by enrolments or student contact hours, college records demonstrate unequivocally that for an equivalent investment of public resources, the Tocal college has regularly serviced up to three times as many students as the Murrumbidgee college. Thus, since 2000 full-time students at the Murrumbidgee college have cost at least twice as much per head as they cost at Tocal.

That difference was unsustainable and it would have been irresponsible of the department to not take action on what was clearly an inefficient use of public resources. Furthermore, contrary to the misleading statements frequently appearing in the media, Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture [MCA] has not been closed but rather remains an important and growing centre for continuing education. More than a dozen new short courses and distance learning courses are being introduced to Murrumbidgee College this year, and, as the Minister announced recently, a strong push is being made to expand it into irrigation training in co-operation with Charles Sturt University.

Planning is also under way for a suite of programs in natural resource management to be available to support the newly formed catchment management authorities. These courses are part of the plan to strengthen the college's nationally recognised continuing education efforts and improve access to lifelong learning for farmers and farming professionals. In addition, the successful indigenous rural training program at the college is continuing to expand with course programs for areas like Warren, Narrandera, Monnus Correctional Centre, Shepherds Park and the Yorta Yorta group. The college is joined in a memorandum of understanding with Charles Sturt University to look into collaborative development of educational activities. This has already led to the irrigation training concept announced by the Minister.

Meetings have been held with the then Mayor and staff of Leeton Shire Council to examine the future options for the residential buildings and kitchens at the college. A meeting with the Department of Education and Training [DET] involving both TAFE and schools education has also examined future options for the use of redundant kitchens and assets on-site. An independent hospitality and catering consultant has now been commissioned to assess the future use of these facilities, and a report is pending.

**CHAIR:** Could you tell me, Dr Sheldrake, why this year the New South Wales Minister for Education and Training, Dr Refshauge, withdrew the annual allocation of Commonwealth education and training funds from NSW Agriculture?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** That decision, which is still being examined and still being worked on by the department and the Department of Education and Training, was as a result of the Commonwealth reducing its allocation to the State of New South Wales as a whole and that then had subsequent impacts upon the Department of Primary Industries which receives its funding from VET.

**CHAIR:** Is there any evidence or understanding, as far as you know, that there is a diversion of Commonwealth VET funds for other purposes such as providing extension advisory services to farmers, for example?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** No, that is not the case. The funds that are used and have been used and provided in the past by VET to NSW Agriculture have been used in accordance with the way those funds were intended to be used.

**CHAIR:** No other constructions or roads in Tocal or any other purchases other than targeting the specific area, that you are aware of?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** I might invite one of my colleagues to answer that, who might be able to specifically comment.

**Ms HOWARD:** The source of funds that we obtained each year from the Commonwealth were recurrent and capital. The idea of having those funds was to further the vocational education and training efforts of the department. The efforts that we have with the vocational education and training are not just centred on those two colleges, they are all over the State. So in that regard there have been sometimes, mostly capital funds, spent on other sites. We have got facilities at Wagga, near CSU, we have got facilities at Tamworth—

**CHAIR:** In terms of Wagga I understand that there may have been funds put into a car park or something like that. Do you recollect that at all?

**Ms HOWARD:** I think council has a requirement that if you put up a building, which we did, it was a training centre, there is a requirement to have car parks.

**CHAIR:** So VET funds could have gone into that sort of construction?

**Ms HOWARD:** Yes, because that is a council requirement.

**CHAIR:** And construction of roads in Tocal?

**Ms HOWARD:** I am not aware of those funds being spent on roads at Tocal.

**CHAIR:** Perhaps you could take that on notice and inform the Committee if there is any issue that we should know about. Dr Sheldrake, is the Minister for Education and Training concerned that the department of agriculture is now abandoning and mothballing a large number of buildings at MCA that were constructed with Commonwealth education and training funds?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** I think in my opening statement I commented on the potential and alternative uses that have been considered for the site. The discussions that I referred to are in terms of the committee working with Charles Sturt University and the council and they are going to look at those buildings and those resources with exactly that in mind, to make sure those facilities are used adequately. In reference to the proposed irrigation courses, which may articulate into degree programs at Charles Sturt University, and that is being worked on, and with the Leeton Shire Council, we are looking at options for utilising those facilities with potentially commercial providers in Leeton.

**CHAIR:** We did take a tour of the site and saw quite a number of buildings that we understand were not in use and were not expected to be in use in the foreseeable future; I must say quite an impressive number of buildings and a lot of facilities and equipment and suchlike. Are you saying, Dr Sheldrake, that those buildings will be utilised in the near future? Could you enlighten the committee as to what is the likelihood of them being used?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** I am not in a position to say which buildings are going to be used and exactly the date that they might be, but the purpose of that working group that has been established is to look at the opportunities to use the facilities, and they will come back with proposals along those lines.

**CHAIR:** Could you comment to the inquiry whether the Department of Primary Industries uses audited figures in the reporting of VET outcomes and also in the department's calculation of alleged costs of training? Does the department use the national benchmark that every other government training agency does?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** I might ask Ms Howard to comment on that.

**Ms HOWARD:** The answer to both questions is yes, we do.

**CHAIR:** Some confusion has been presented to me that in 2002 audited enrolments at Tocal of 2,609 became 16,728 students in the department's annual report, a massive increase. Are you aware of that at all?

**Ms HOWARD:** That was in the short-course area?

**CHAIR:** I think so, yes.

**Ms HOWARD:** Was that short courses or student contact hours? What are those figures? There is a whole range of ways you could measure things: it is bodies, backsides on seats—

**CHAIR:** It was the number of students.

**Ms HOWARD:** It would not surprise me if that was the case because, once again, you are looking at the activity, not just at Tocal but across the whole State in that short-course area. Only a small percentage of the short-courses were conducted on-site at either Murrumbidgee or Tocal, but were reported nevertheless.

**CHAIR:** I understand in 2002 the audited statement of student curriculum hours at Tocal was something like 244,851 and they became 556,319 in the department's annual report. Are you aware of any discrepancy there?

**Ms HOWARD:** It is a discrepancy, yes. One set of figures is the audited figures, which meet certain standards but are not truly representative of our total activity, so we report it another way in our own annual reports, as did Murrumbidgee.

**CHAIR:** For example, is this because at Tocal they actually count book sales and attendees at field days as enrolled students in curriculum hours?

**Ms HOWARD:** I am not aware of that.

**CHAIR:** I am wondering if they did the same at MCA. Perhaps you could take that question on notice and get back to the committee. I would be very interested to see the assessments of both institutions in that manner.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Dr Sheldrake, in your opening statement you mentioned that there had been a number of statewide school visits undertaken trying to advertise the benefits of attending MCA or Tocal or both, could you clarify that?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** Yes. There were a number of visits done to increase the numbers. Again I might ask Ms Howard to comment in terms of the specifics.

**Ms HOWARD:** That is a normal routine activity for both colleges, to have staff during the school term visit schools, largely all over the State. Some of the head office staff used to visit the schools in Sydney. I know for a fact that Murrumbidgee had a concerted effort in the last two or three years in sending more of their staff to more schools to try to promote the full-time enrolments.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Who would those staff have been? Is it a role you undertook yourself?

**Ms HOWARD:** No. It was staff at either college. So in the case of Murrumbidgee it was the deputy principal, it was education officers, at times the principal.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Have you got any figures as to how many of those visits occurred and what schools were visited?

**Ms HOWARD:** No, I have not.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Where are they reported? How do we get those figures?

**Ms HOWARD:** That would be reported in monthly reports that the colleges provide to head office. I know they are at Broken Hill, they are at Orange, they are at Canowindra, at Griffith.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Dr Sheldrake, further in your opening remarks you mentioned that there was a degree of duplication between the courses at Tocal and Murrumbidgee, which precipitated this review. Who made the assessment that there was duplication occurring?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** I think the reference to duplication was with reference to traineeships in the Riverina area between the Riverina Institute of TAFE and Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture. So the duplication was with the two vocational providers, effectively, both State Government providers competing with each other in the same marketplace.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** So in terms of duplication between Murrumbidgee and Tocal that was not the case?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** The duplication between Tocal and Murrumbidgee was not considered. Yes, some of the courses they provided were the same, but that was not seen as an issue.

**Ms SCOTT-ORR:** If I could add to that. Both colleges provided Certificate III and Certificate IV courses in agriculture, so in that sense there was an almost complete duplication, but that had been a longstanding practice. Originally it was provided at five colleges.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** I am very well aware of that, I am a graduate of one of them.

**Ms SCOTT-ORR:** And of course it was the numbers that meant that it only became feasible to provide it at one.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** In terms of the duplication that was occurring, was that discussed with the advisory councils of either Murrumbidgee or Tocal?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** At the time of the review there was discussion, as I think I said, with the staff, and in terms of the advisory council the matter was discussed on several occasions and in fact it was minuted in the advisory council minutes in June and December. I have them here where I could actually read from the minutes of the meeting and just indicate to you that it certainly was considered.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** What year was that, 2000?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** It was certainly discussed at the December meeting of the advisory council in 2000 and then again at the June and December meetings of 2001. The minutes of the Wednesday 13 June 2001 meeting of the advisory council, which was held at 9.30 a.m. at the Amaroo conference centre, say, "The council was very concerned about the summary of recommendations point re full-time students to be at one facility". That refers to recommendation H in the review.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** When we spoke to the chairman of the advisory council he expressed concern that the advisory council was not shown a full set of recommendations, including recommendation H, at that meeting. Is that correct?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** I am not sure. I cannot say whether they received a copy of the report. Clearly, it seems to me that the actual minutes of the meeting indicate that they discussed the item in detail. Certainly the principal of the college, who was a member of the advisory council, received a

copy of the report. I must admit that I assumed that they had certainly discussed all the issues. The minutes certainly indicate that they discussed that issue.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Let me enlighten you as to what Mr Geltch told us during the hearing at the college. I will quote from the *Hansard*. He talked about a meeting that he had with Ms Howard and said:

She informally told me in late March on certificate day that the review had been completed. We said we would love to see it. We were disappointed that we had not been involved in the process and we wanted to see the report. She met with us on 13 June.

That is the meeting you have in the minutes. He continued:

Consequently she cherry-picked some of the recommendations in the review and talked them through with us. Of course, they were positive recommendations. The review document was not tabled at that meeting.

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** Ms Howard will answer that question.

**Ms HOWARD:** Like Richard, I am surprised that they never received a copy of that recommendation. We have minutes of meetings where we went through the recommendations in some detail. In fact, at one meeting we spent the best part of an afternoon discussing the outcomes of that. Both principals had a copy of the report. I know that the advisory council people from Tocal made comments and we had to assume that the same was available to those people on the advisory council at Murrumbidgee. I spoke to the council—they were consulted—about the review. There are minutes of another meeting in December 2000 when the advisory council had an input into that review process.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** After that discussion with Mr Geltch, the Chair asked him whether he questioned the fact that the document had not been tabled and he replied:

Yes. We requested that in a subsequent letter to the director general, Dr Kevin Sheridan. I wrote to him on 30 June 2001.

He then tabled the letter that he wrote to you dated 2 April. He received a letter back from the director-general from which he quoted, saying,

... recent action resulting from the College review demonstrates the Department's commitment to maintaining the quality of service provided by MCA ... and every effort will be made to appoint suitably qualified and experienced staff to the positions identified ...

That comment was made in response to the letter that Mr Geltch wrote about the fact that senior lecturers positions had not been refilled. He was very concerned about that. The bottom line was that students did not enrol in those courses because there were no lecturers. Did that factor contribute to the closure of the college by stealth—if I may use that expression?

**Ms HOWARD:** I do not think "by stealth" is the right expression to use. I was aware that the advisory council was more than concerned about the inability to attract staff to Murrumbidgee college, being at Yanco, for extended periods. That same tabled letter indicates that the director general at the times said that at least six or seven positions were filled. There is also evidence from the advisory council minutes over a period of only six or seven months, which documents the positions that have been filled at Murrumbidgee. So I cannot understand why those comments were made. We have lists of staff positions at Murrumbidgee that were filled. In the event that we could not do it straightaway, because you advertise, there are interviews, applicants may not be suitable and so you go again—it could take months—we arranged for our extension staff to fill in where appropriate to make sure that students had that coverage.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** I am aware of that. You had trouble filling the position of lecturer in pastoral science. Is that the course?

**Ms HOWARD:** Yes.



**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** That is the one that really interested us during the hearing down there because it related to training students from the Western Division. That was the course that would have attracted those students. You said that last year there were no students at the college from the Western Division. Is that because there was no suitable lecturer to take up the position?

**Ms HOWARD:** Once again I can respond by saying that in the minutes of the advisory council meeting held in the Amaroo conference room on Monday 6 November 2000 it was reported that the position of education officer, sheep and range lands—which is the pastoral property course—had been filled by Mr Chris Johnson. Mr Chris Johnson was still there doing that job when that side of the college closed in January this year.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Who is Mr Chris Johnson?

**Ms HOWARD:** He was education officer, sheep and range lands, who provided pastoral property management training for those two or three students enrolled in the course.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** What is his background? Where did he come from?

**Ms HOWARD:** He is a professional officer so he has a teaching degree and an agricultural degree. Once again, I cannot see how those comments are justified when their own minutes say that the position was filled.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** When the decision was made to close the residential facilities why were the students and parents not advised of that?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** The students were advised and the parents were also advised in a letter from me. Ms Howard visited the college and met with the students and spoke to them.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** What date was that?

**Ms HOWARD:** That was 3 September at about 1.30 in the afternoon. It was the same day as the announcement. I was advised on the day that all students were at the meeting when I spoke to them but I understand since then that two or three students were at Trangie doing prac work.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Two people who were students at the time told us that they were not told and the first they heard of it was in the media.

**Ms HOWARD:** They were the two students at Trangie.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** No, they were not at Trangie.

**Ms HOWARD:** That is what I read in the transcript.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** One of them, Daniel Slennett, said that he was at Cooper station at Darlington Point—which is not at Trangie—doing prac work with another student, Bradley Arnold. Claire Butler might have been at Trangie; it does not say. They told us that they did not know anything about it. I asked them:

Did you find it surprising that there was no consultation either with you as students or with your parents or with the community generally prior to the announcement being made?

**Ms BUTLER:** Yes. There was just nothing.

**Mr SLENNETT:** It just came out of the blue.

**Ms BUTLER:** Yes, and it was a big shock.

That does not sound to me like those students were advised. In addition, one of the parents, Jeanette Rodham, also told the Committee that she had no prior knowledge of the closure before hearing it on the media. Do you not think it would have been more appropriate to discuss those issues with the students involved—we are talking about kids' careers and lives—rather than trying to contact them on the day of the announcement? Obviously you would not be able to get in touch with everybody on the

same day. On the day the announcement was made these kids heard about it on the news. That is hardly satisfactory.

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** The intention was to advise all the students on the day so that they did not find out over the radio. Ms Howard went to the college with that intention: to speak to all the students there. It is unfortunate that, as it turned out, a small number of students were not at the college.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** From my recollection of the evidence given to the Committee at Murrumbidgee none of the students at the hearing had any knowledge of any other students being advised prior to hearing the public announcement.

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** Ms Howard might comment also, but my understanding is that a large number of students were present when she spoke to them.

**Ms HOWARD:** That is correct. You are right: it was an extremely anxious time for those kids. I was trying to outline to them what impact the closure had on them. There were about 30 students in the room. I knew that only 33 or 34 students remained at Murrumbidgee at that stage but I counted 30 in the room on that afternoon. I went through some of the options that would be available to them in terms of scholarships or going to Tocal. The biggest concerns came from the Victorians—there were six or seven Victorian students at the time—who were worried that scholarships would not be made available to them. There was a meeting, which went for about two hours, on the afternoon of 3 September 2003.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** What was the general feeling amongst the students to whom you spoke? How did they react?

**Ms HOWARD:** As you would expect them to.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Were they angry?

**Ms HOWARD:** No, they were too polite to be angry. They were shocked.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** I imagine they would have been. I think 39 students were enrolled at MCA when the announcement was made. What has happened to them? Do you know where they have gone and what they are doing now?

**Ms HOWARD:** No, not exactly. We have learned through the transcript at Yanco that some of them might have gone to Dalby. But let me correct you on one point. There were 39 enrolments at Murrumbidgee last year but, as you would expect, kids drop out. So towards the end of this year there were only 33 students left at Murrumbidgee. Six of those were in year 2 and they graduated this year with a certificate IV. That leaves you with 28 students. I think 28 students graduated from Murrumbidgee with a certificate III this year. One has since gone to Tocal. I learned from the transcript that a few students have gone to Dalby. After that I cannot comment on what those kids might have done.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** How successful has amalgamating the residential courses in Tocal and Murrumbidgee been if only one student has gone to Tocal? Is it relevant?

**Ms HOWARD:** That is only one student from year 1 last year. There are also four or five students from an area that Murrumbidgee traditionally would have drawn from who have gone to Tocal.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** But those students went to Tocal by choice—they probably wanted to do beef cattle management or something like that. That is not the issue. The issue is the students who were at Murrumbidgee last year and who have ended up at Tocal. Only one student went to Tocal.

**Ms HOWARD:** And six or seven, according to the kids, went to Dalby.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** But Dalby is not in New South Wales; it is in Queensland.

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** It is worth noting that in any first year only about half of the students usually flow into the second year. You have to put this in context a little. Where students come from to attend Tocal is worth looking at. If you look at Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture's area from where it drew, the number of students who were coming from those western areas, the Western Division in particular, was very small. A significant number of students were coming from Victoria, so consequently the New South Wales Government was subsidising those Victorian students significantly, whereas Tocal has continued and has drawn historically from quite a broad area, including the Western Division.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** It is claimed that closing the residential courses at Yanco has reduced the availability of training in irrigation management, which is particularly relevant to many farming industries in the south of the State. What is your understanding of the difference between the irrigation training that was previously provided by Yanco and what it provides now?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** The irrigation courses that are provided there now, particularly through the short course development that is going on, will be probably greater in terms of their breadth and depth than was provided previously. I have referenced the negotiations that are going on with Charles Sturt University. If we can achieve that development, that will be a fantastic achievement for Murrumbidgee college and Charles Sturt University, and the focus will be very much on irrigation management, water use efficiency, irrigation systems. The cost of water is going up. Farmers in the irrigation area must get on top of that as an issue so we are making a very big play and a considerable focus on irrigation management at Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** What are the chances of that coming off?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** Perhaps Ms Scott-Orr might comment. She has been on that steering committee involving Charles Sturt and Leeton shire council.

**Ms SCOTT-ORR:** Charles Sturt are very interested in upgrading the level of irrigation training. Some of the training that was done at Murrumbidgee college was of a very basic nature, as you would expect for people coming straight from school and doing their certificate III and IV. They are looking to get high-level courses and they are also looking at potentially being able to market an international masters in irrigation management. With that in mind we have also spoken to the Co-operative Research Centre for Irrigation Futures, which is a national co-operative research centre, with a view to working with that national centre to make Murrumbidgee college a centre for the most modern and up-to-date irrigation technology training. I think that because of the increasing complexity of irrigation equipment and the irrigation scheduling that is required, it is so much more sophisticated that a higher level of training is needed. So we are actively looking for co-operation both with Charles Sturt, its professor of irrigation management, who used to be one of our staff and now works at Wagga Wagga and who is very familiar with what the college can provide but also getting it on to the agenda of the co-operative research centre will be a positive activity.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** I am still a little concerned, and I know we have touched quite a lot on the consultative issue. I find it a little difficult to understand what the advisory councils tried to do, once they knew that the courses would be closed, to get other students to come into the college. Do you think that they went to the length and breadth that an advisory council should have done to try to attract more students?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** The college council tried, in conjunction with the department, to look at ways of increasing the number of students at Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture. Ms Howard might give you the details, but we put in place a fairly significant advertising program on television. If you lived in the central west and watched the cricket over the summer and the Olympics there was a pretty strong and solid advertising campaign promoting Murrumbidgee college during the summer period.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** What year was that?

**Ms HOWARD:** The Olympics were in 2000 and Murrumbidgee college featured in the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** I find it astounding that it was so important to put it in the opening of the Olympic Games but now it has been removed and students no longer have the opportunity to go there on a residential basis for training.

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** And it was included in an advertising campaign. I suppose my answer is basically that the college and the department, with the support of the advisory council, tried to make an effort. The honourable member has raised the issue of visits to high schools. It was a concerted effort by all parties to try to see if we could get those numbers back to the levels that were there in the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s and even the early 1990s.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Why do you think it was not as successful as it should have been? Did you have a view on that?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** I cannot answer that question, and there is probably not one direct answer. I think there has been a general swing away from the form of education, this face-to-face college-type education, and that has been an international trend. So probably those sorts of issues have all resulted in a downward trend in students numbers.

**CHAIR:** That swing away, I suppose, is more hands on, on-site and such like. That in itself does not point to the closure of residential. Indeed, one would think that it would actually mean that the residential factor would be all the more important, allowing people to come, study and go to specific work sites, demonstration farms and the like. Would that not be part and parcel of the less the day school, more the overall concept?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** Certainly the focus that we are trying to do is to deliver that approach through the short course program. That is definitely the approach of the future short course program but without the residential component.

**Ms SCOTT-ORR:** If I could add to that, I think there has been a great pressure on kids and schools to retain schoolchildren through to doing their HSC. The colleges catered for a lot of people who left school after their School Certificate. There is a smaller pool of those people now and the emphasis is on kids getting higher qualifications right across the system. I think that has had an impact. It has certainly had a lot more of an impact at Yanco and at MCA than it has at Tocal.

**The Hon. IAN WEST:** I think you have already answered this but for the sake of clarity I understand you to be saying that the customer base is dictating that there is a push internationally and in terms of the college at Leeton towards university and vocational short-term courses, and a lot of what is happening has been a consumer based request over a period of time. After the advertising that took place in 2000 and the responses to that advertising, you are looking at remodelling the courses available. Am I hearing correctly that what appears to be happening is that in terms of the push away from residential towards the shorter courses you are also encompassing a concentration on irrigation management? Did I hear also that the Yorta Yorta group, there is a push into that particular area and into the use of the kitchens for possibly the hospitality and other types of courses? Am I hearing you correctly?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** That is correct, and in addition we have also identified a number of new courses this year. So in addition to all those points you have highlighted, we have identified and increased the number of short courses significantly this year. We have had 520 students this year and that is through the delivery of 50 short courses that have been developed. A large number of those new courses have been developed this year. You are right in emphasising that indigenous training will stay in place, irrigation will increase and the focus will be on identifying new short courses to meet the demand from farmers in that community.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** Ms Scott-Orr, can you tell the Committee when the advisory council was first advised of the closure of the residential facilities?

**Ms SCOTT-ORR:** Yes, I rang Jim Geltch on the same morning that the Minister was announcing it and the staff and the students were being advised so it was more or less simultaneous.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Why was he not advised earlier?

**Ms SCOTT-ORR:** I think there was an intention to advise everybody simultaneously.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** A veil of secrecy, did not want the word getting out before the Minister made the announcement.

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** I think it is always appropriate to try to co-ordinate these occasions so that everybody gets notified at one time so that no one person feels that they have been advantaged or disadvantaged, which is what we tried to do in this situation.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** But it was a fairly dramatic decision that obviously had major implications. The people it had implications for were obviously the employees. Ms Howard, can you tell me whether the report of the review of the agricultural colleges was made available to the unions affected?

**Ms HOWARD:** This is back in the middle of June 2001 and I know there were letters going to them. The Public Service Association was consulted and even visited the college.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** Were they given a copy?

**Ms HOWARD:** They were given a copy of the report.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** It is my understanding, and I think evidence was presented to the Committee, that in fact the only way they obtained a copy was through a freedom of information application and they had to pay for one. We seem to be receiving evidence consistently that people have not been kept in the loop, as it were, as though they were being excluded from the information that was available.

**Ms HOWARD:** A copy of the report was made available to staff at both colleges in March 2001 and they had the opportunity to respond to that report, which they did. They are the facts.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** I understand a regional communities impact study was completed. Was that completed prior to the decision to close the residential facilities being made?

**Dr GLEESON:** Every decision that goes to Cabinet requires a community impact statement, so that was part of the committee Cabinet submission. Because of the likely impact of this we undertook to do a more detailed community impact statement for the clients, or the people affected, and that was distributed about a week or so after that. That was in preparation, but it was not concluded before that.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** It would be able to make available to the Committee the impact study that went to Cabinet, and also the one that was released subsequently?

**Dr GLEESON:** The one that was released subsequently was distributed far and wide, so that was readily available. Obviously, the Cabinet submission is covered by Cabinet confidentiality.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** But you can provide a copy of the public one?

**Dr GLEESON:** Yes, and it has been.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** Could someone explain what options are now available to young people in rural New South Wales to gain a qualification in broadacre dry land farming now that those courses are no longer offered at the Murrumbidgee Agricultural College?

**Ms HOWARD:** You are asking about the options that are available?

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** Yes, what options are available in New South Wales?

**Ms HOWARD:** In the VET sector the options are still at Tocal. You have to remember that it is not just the learning they do at the college, it is the learning that goes on when they go out and do practical farm visits and spend time on farms.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** Are you suggesting that the short courses—?

**Ms HOWARD:** No, full-time residential, if that is what you are referring to.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** You are saying that people can now undertake them at Murrumbidgee or at Tocal?

**Ms HOWARD:** At Tocal, the broadacre farming. I am assuming you mean for younger kids?

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** Yes.

**Ms HOWARD:** Yes, they can still do that at Tocal because they are learning out there on those broadacre farms.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** How much time do they spend on the broad acre farms?

**Ms HOWARD:** I am having a bit of I guess, but six to eight weeks a year, if they choose to go down that path. If they have no intention of working in the broadacre area they would not go to those sorts of farms, they would go somewhere else.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** I am confused as to how somebody can go from Condobolin and learn how to grow wheat at Tocal or how to grow rice at Tocal.

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** I think that is what Ms Howard is saying, that while the theory can be taught at Tocal and the practical for some of those courses along the lines you are talking about, broadacre farming can be taught at properties in those western areas. West of the Newell wheat growing there are collaborating and co-operating farmers who participate, and the students are placed at those locations.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Is that on a vocation work-type basis, or is it part of the semester course work?

**Ms HOWARD:** It is part of the curriculum at both colleges. You made a comment about rice courses, but rice courses were never conducted at Murrumbidgee so there does not seem to be an obligation, if you like, to offer those sorts of things at Tocal. But, nevertheless, if students in the rice area wanted to learn more from rice they would be placed on a farm that could assist them.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** They did not grow rice at Murrumbidgee college?

**Ms HOWARD:** I am saying that the students were not taught about the art of rice production at Murrumbidgee college.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** They were?

**Ms HOWARD:** I am saying they are not; they were not.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** They do not grow any rice at Murrumbidgee college?

**Ms HOWARD:** They do grow rice, but the students—

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** I thought they did.

**Ms HOWARD:** —were not taught that.

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** Interestingly, the soils at the Murrumbidgee, the site of the Murrumbidgee institute, are not really suited to rice growing; they are actually very leaky soils. A lot of the rice growing and a lot of the research that goes on associated with rice growing are on a Leeton field station. Although, all the laboratory work for rice and research is done at the institute.

**CHAIR:** Ms Howard, could you comment on the concept that the department's two most senior and qualified educators, the college principals, discredited the report? Could you comment on that?

**Ms HOWARD:** That is the review report of 2000?

**CHAIR:** Yes.

**Ms HOWARD:** Yes, I could comment on that. I can distinctly see the pages that are offered, and there was some critical assessment of that report, which you would expect, but there were also pages of what they agreed with in that report, particularly at Murrumbidgee when they actually gained extra staff resources as a result of that report. There were some positives and some negatives associated with that report from both college principals.

**CHAIR:** But eventually they discredited the report; they had some serious complaints about the report?

**Ms HOWARD:** They had some complaints about the report.

**CHAIR:** They were not serious?

**Dr SHELDRAKE:** I think perhaps one of their concerns, which was taken on notice by the then director-general, was the number of registered training organisations that the department should have and, at that stage, my recollection is that the report recommended that the department have only one registered training organisation and there was certainly strong criticism, if that is the word, certainly a suggestion from the principals that we should leave it at two. The then director-general agreed with that recommendation. They were constructive criticisms about the report.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** Could you provide the Committee with the details for the basis of the formula used to calculate the cost per student of providing full-time residential courses at Murrumbidgee, and was exactly the same formula used to calculate costs at Tocal?

**Ms HOWARD:** The costing was done in association with the college management and, in particular, the college registrars. It was an inclusive sort of process. Briefly, it was resources in terms of staff time that would go towards full-time, part-time, short courses. That is how it was costed.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** I am anxious to establish whether it was comparing apples with apples and whether the same formula was used at both sites?

**Ms HOWARD:** Yes, it was.

**CHAIR:** We are making the date of return answers two weeks from the receipt of the transcript. If there are any questions on notice you will get the opportunity to answer them. There may be some other questions on notice coming from the Committee. We have not had time to cover all of them this morning. The secretariat will refer them to you, with a similar amount of time for you and your department to reply.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**DIANA MADELEINE HELEN GIBBS**, Economist and Wool Producer, and Chair of the Regional Communities Consultative Council, Alroon, Junee Reefs, sworn and examined:

**CHAIR:** In what capacity are you appearing before the Committee?

**Ms GIBBS:** As Chair of the Regional Communities Consultative Committee.

**CHAIR:** Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

**Ms GIBBS:** I am.

**CHAIR:** If, at any stage, you should consider that certain evidence you may wish to give or documents you may wish to tender should be heard or seen only by the Committee, please indicate that fact and the Committee will consider your request.

**Ms GIBBS:** Thank you.

**CHAIR:** Before questions from the Committee, would you like to commence with a statement or are there some issues you would like to raise?

**Ms GIBBS:** I would like to start with a few comments. We have put in a submission to you, which, I guess, you are familiar with. It was just a short letter.

**CHAIR:** Yes, thank you.

**Ms GIBBS:** If I could perhaps tell the Committee a few things about the council. The New South Wales Regional Communities Consultative Council is an advisory Council set up by the Premier to report to the Premier and to the Minister for Rural Affairs, Tony Kelly. Our charter is fourfold. Firstly, we advise on the impact of Government policy and programs. Secondly, we advise on gaps in those programs and policies. Thirdly, we advise on issues to do with access to Government programs and policies. Fourthly, we are allowed to advocate for changes as they affect rural communities. We are, we believe, the only advisory council that takes the total triple bottom line approach to anything that affect rural communities. We are not a single-issue group. Anything that affects regional communities is our issue. Having said that I am not, therefore, going to go into any specific details about the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture. I am sure that other individuals and organisations will give you a lot of detail about staff, capital investment, wages and that sort of thing. Really, I want to concentrate on the big picture story.

From our point of view the closure of the residential component of the Murrumbidgee college really represents a loss of infrastructure for regional communities. I mean infrastructure not in the physical sense but in the human capacity sense. Education is essential for regional development. A facility like the college is a very important part of the building blocks for a region like the Riverina and, indeed, Western New South Wales to develop. As the gurus say: change is compulsory but, unfortunately, responding to change is still optional. The agricultural community and, indeed, the whole regional community is having change thrust upon them at such a fast rate that they need every help they can get, particularly when it comes to training land managers and our farmers for the future. Agriculture everywhere, as well as in the Riverina, is undergoing a very rapid change: the pressures of globalisation and the fact that we now compete in a world market. I should add that my professional training is as an economist. My Masters degree is in environmental studies. Therefore issues to do with resource development tend to be very close to my heart.

The whole question of natural resource management is becoming of increasing importance to our land managers. The new farmer has to be informed. He has had to have access to continuing information. He has had to know about markets. He has had to know about technology and management. He has to grapple with whole new systems of agriculture. Existing systems were based on science that is, perhaps, Northern Hemisphere centric. I think we are still grappling with how to manage our unique Australian ecosystems. All this change means that the ability to access latest technology, latest information is absolutely crucial to our farming community. That whole question of the loss of infrastructure and the human capacity infrastructure is really the crucial platform of our



concerns. Secondly, we are very concerned about issues to do with access and equity as they affect rural communities. Where do our regional farmers go to get information? The distances are huge.

Going to Tocal, which is a wonderful institution—apologies to Cameron who, I know, is sitting here—is quite irrelevant for the farmers from Western New South Wales. It is too far away. It does not address issues to do with broad acre farming, range land management and irrigation management, which are issues that concern farmers in the southwest of New South Wales. I am concerned that the distances involved are not appreciated. While, yes, short courses are still to be offered at Murrumbidgee a farmer cannot, realistically, drive 200 kilometres for a three-hour course and then go home again. The residential ability was a very important part of that. The future of agriculture is very different to what it was in the past. The new systems of agriculture that I mentioned are going to be absolutely essential. How do we upgrade the skills of our farmers? I guess my husband is, perhaps, typical of the average farmer. He is 57 years old. Yes, he has a degree. But he is still upgrading his skills all the time. Yes, we can access the Internet, but to physically go and exchange opinion with your peer group as well as hear from lecturers and other experts is an essential part of farm management these days. Day trips are just not going to meet that need.

The whole question of the next generation, what about the next generation of farmers? How do we make sure that they are supplied with the skills they need? Residential facilities really are required to access even the shortest of courses. Just to have an overnight stay would make it far more accessible to farmers. Leeton, I know, in its own strategic plan has set itself to be a centre of education in all sorts, from secondary through to tertiary. Murrumbidgee college was a very important part of that total mix of skills.

Those are our primary concerns, the infrastructure and the access and equity issues. Perhaps a few secondary ones I might just touch on include the question of consultation, which is very close to the heart of the RCCC. We have developed guidelines for effective Government consultation because in our meetings with communities it became apparent that was a major deficit in the way Government programs are delivered and even introduced to communities. A copy of our guidelines would be available from the Office of Rural Affairs in Orange if this Committee is interested in seeing them. We presented the guidelines to the Premier and I understand, through Dr Gellatly, that our guidelines have been recommended to Government agencies. There is a 10-point checklist, which is very easy to follow. We are concerned that this checklist certainly has not been followed in the instance of the Murrumbidgee college. It is a bad example to set.

**CHAIR:** When was this discussion of guidelines and when were they presented?

**Ms GIBBS:** In December 2002. Secondly, I refer to rural impact statements. The Office of Rural Affairs, which is the secretariat supporting the RCCC based in Orange, has the task of assessing rural impact statements. It is a very big demand on our secretariat's time. We are concerned that if rural impact statements are not used effectively in Government decision making then why should we bother to do all this if the results are ignored? Our staff put a lot of time into making very careful assessments, and we are concerned that they are not taken on board. At best rural impact statements could be considered a rubber stamp. At worst we are concerned that a review by the Office of Rural Affairs could be seen as being tacit approval by rural communities when, in fact, we might have very strong concerns about that. Thirdly, the Government does express very strong support for regional communities in various policy statements, but where is the support here? Is this a change of government policy or is the Government just making statements which are not fundamentally part of its intention to deliver programs. There is a continuing erosion of services and facilities available to regional communities.

In conclusion, the council sees the current events with the Murrumbidgee college as just another impediment placed upon regional communities to develop their own ability to grapple with change, their ability to attain economic viability and wellbeing, using their own resources and with local ownership. The only successful development is development that comes from within. It cannot be imposed from outside. It has to grow, and the Murrumbidgee college was part of the tools to nurture that ability to grow from within. We are very concerned that this is another aspect of the plan for decline philosophy. Statements have been made from a number of agencies that they should plan for decline in regional communities. We would most strongly oppose any such philosophy. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you plan for decline and take services away, of course there will be

decline. Do not turn around and say we told you so. Planning for decline is something the RCCC will be speaking on, in a very negative way, at great length in the months to come.

Some people have said that individual farms are too small, they are not viable, that with globalisation we need corporate agriculture coming in and running these farms properly. I would suggest from an economic rationalist's point of view that might make eminent sense but if all the management and skills are brought in from outside, that would be the death of rural communities. We need those skills grown from within. We need people out there. Who is going to look after our land and our water if there are not viable communities out there? We need all the help we can get, and a facility like the Murrumbidgee college is just one example of that help.

I accept that much of what I have said might be considered not totally relevant or not central to the issues in front of this Committee. But, as I have said, the Murrumbidgee college is part of the essential infrastructure that all communities, and in this case the community of the Riverina and western New South Wales, require to achieve their preferred future, that is a future they want, not a probable future that is imposed on them from outside. I think that is all I wanted to say, but I am happy to discuss any issue raised.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Gibbs. We appreciate your perspective and also the degree of understanding you have of the issues. I wonder if there was a rural impact statement for this process? Are you aware of that? Can you describe to the Committee what you are aware of was that undertaken in terms of any consultation process with the department prior to the decision to close the residential facilities at the college?

**Ms GIBBS:** From my own personal perspective, and all I can speak of from firsthand knowledge was that the Regional Communities Consultative Council was not involved at all. We were never asked for any view during the review process or afterwards. I understand a rural impact statement—

**CHAIR:** Or regional communities impact statement as well, I suppose? I am not sure if we have two different things there.

**Ms GIBBS:** We refer to them as rural impact statements, but I am prepared to accept they are the same thing. I never saw one, as chair of the council. Our secretariat never mentioned that one had come in front of it. So, I cannot really comment on exactly what happened other than to say I was never aware of one being prepared.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** So, for such a statement to be made public after the decision to close had been made, it would appear to be an attempt to justify the decision rather than to take the findings of any statement into account when making that decision?

**Ms GIBBS:** As I said earlier, we were very concerned about the apparent lack of any effective consultation. I use the word "effective" because quite often people say, "We did consult," but effective consultation means a true dialogue of taking on board the opinions of local people who might have a different perspective and those who do not live in the region.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** When did you become aware of it?

**Ms GIBBS:** I became aware of it when the announcement was made public, when the press statements came out. At the time I was very involved with the lifelong learning proposals, which again the council had spoken very strongly against. This was the new administrative arrangement for secondary education and particularly TAFE. I was trying to get all the information I could together to put a view that the proposed changes to the TAFE regional boundaries were not a good idea and would not be helpful for regional communities. It was in the course of those discussions that this announcement came out. I had no prior knowledge of it at all.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Ms Gibbs, although I can see where you are coming from and I appreciate your sympathy towards the concerns you have, and I think we would all agree with most of what you are saying, are you aware a working party has been set up between Charles

Sturt University, the Department of Agriculture and also representatives of the Leeton Shire Council to try to attract other courses to the college that may be more viable in those areas?

**Ms GIBBS:** I have no detailed understanding. I have heard that such a body has been set up but the exact purpose of that committee, whether it is just to look at better ways to utilise the physical facilities there or whether it is indeed looking at educational courses, no, I have not been involved at all.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** The residential courses are the ones that are closed. The other services that were there are still going concerns. You are aware of that?

**Ms GIBBS:** Yes, I am.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** I understand the basic reason for not continuing the residential courses is that the numbers declined to a point where the numbers of students and teachers were that close to one another that it was getting to a point that they were not viable. What is your view on that?

**Ms GIBBS:** Again, I have no firsthand knowledge of that, not having been involved with the college, but having spoken to some members of the advisory council, having spoken to the ex-principal of the college and various other interested parties, my understanding is—perhaps it comes back to my self-fulfilling prophecy statement—that firstly we have been going through the worst drought in history, as I am sure you are aware, Mr Catanzariti. So, there has not been much spare cash to do any courses. I would expect a downturn in any activity because of the drought. Secondly, I have been made aware that a number of staff were not replaced, having reached retirement age. Obviously if there are no staff there, it is not possible to offer courses, so you would expect students not to be applying because there is no course. All I can really say is that I am aware there was a lot of difference of opinion about the exact nature of this decline in numbers, what it meant, why it was caused, but I cannot give you a firsthand opinion on it.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** What if I said to you that in 1993 there were some 86 students at the college and in 2003 there were 39? Given that the drought has had an impact, and there is no doubt about that, the numbers have been falling from 1993 to 2003. They come down to a low in 2002 of 28, and in 2003 to 39. I wondered what your thoughts were on that, that they have gradually come down?

**Ms GIBBS:** I do not want to get into an argument about statistics. I am an economist so I know how you can manipulate statistics to demonstrate anything you might like, with respect. I do not mean to say you are doing that. I do not want to comment on the details of that. I am not close to the college. I came here today to talk about the big picture, regional implications and from a statewide perspective. I would rather not comment on particular numbers because I am not familiar with the background of that.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Another point that is worth bringing to your attention if you do not already know, is that even though the numbers have been dropping, one year the funding to the college increased. Are you aware of that?

**Ms GIBBS:** I was aware of some funding being provided for the construction of some built infrastructure. I am not aware of any other. As I said before, I am not here to talk about details relating to the college, because, while I speak with some passion about regional communities, I am not in any way associated with the college.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** I do not think anyone disagrees with the passion and also your commitment to try to keep country areas viable. I am just pointing out that the facts facing this inquiry are these statistics as well.

**Ms GIBBS:** And I am sure the Committee will be grappling with those with expert comment from a number of other individuals.

**The Hon. HENRY TSANG:** Chair, I seek your indulgence to ask the witness to clarify something. Ms Gibbs believes that the staff were not replaced, and this morning the director-general, Dr Richard Sheldrake, told us that the staff were replaced. Maybe we should find out some real facts. How true is the statement from the director-general, because there is a contradiction.

**CHAIR:** There is some contradictory information. Do you have any specific questions of Ms Gibbs on this matter?

**The Hon. HENRY TSANG:** No. I think we all appreciate what Ms Gibbs said, but I have no more to ask.

**CHAIR:** Perhaps we could take that as a question on notice for the department to clarify, to verify those statements, so we can clarify that.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** Ms Gibbs, we have heard evidence this morning that neither staff, students or parents were informed or had any notion really that the decision to close the residential facilities was about to be made. What impact do you believe that sort of decision-making process has on rural communities?

**Ms GIBBS:** It is not good. It is part of this having things done to you by other people. Rural communities are always portrayed as being very anti-change and conservative and resistant to change. I disagree with that totally. They are resistant to being changed by others. The fact is that no-one was involved. While I understand a review had been announced and Ellen Howard had gone down to see this review happening, apparently undertakings had been given that there would be a deal of consultation that apparently never happened. But in answer to your question, it does not look good in a rural community that it is those people the other side of the sandstone curtain again who are making decisions affecting rural communities, without those communities being involved. There are a number of examples of that that the RCCC has been involved with in recent years, ranging from delivery of health services to questions about the Pilliga, the development of the cypress pine industry, and the way the Murrumbidgee college closure was handled to us seems just another example of very poor or absent consultation.

**The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN:** In your submission you advise that:

Yanco also delivered a range of indigenous training programs, at a location readily accessible to the indigenous communities of ... NSW—we are not certain that these courses, which are an essential component of attempts by indigenous communities to achieve economic self-reliance, are to be delivered in any other relevant location.

I would think one of the important things for indigenous communities is that if programs are conducted in their area, they are more likely to attend. What do you say about the fact that they could have the same program located elsewhere but it may not get sufficient attendance?

**Ms GIBBS:** For my own opinion I had always regarded the delivery of courses for Indigenous communities as one of the great strengths of the Murrumbidgee college. I think it has even been given some awards to recognise that ability. Bear in mind that a number of the individuals within the Indigenous communities who are trying to get businesses up and running like the grape growing at Murran Bridge, for example, do not have ready access to transport. They cannot just jump in their four-wheel drive and go somewhere. They just do not operate that way. To move great distances is not always culturally easy for them. They have a great attachment to their land. Murrumbidgee college was somewhere they were familiar with. The staff there had gone to great lengths to go out to the communities and talk to them. They understood what was happening at Murrumbidgee college. I would be concerned that if they were suddenly told that, yes, they could access the same courses but they would have to go somewhere completely different, might just get too hard.

**The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN:** I commend you for your very good presentation this morning.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** I also found your presentation extremely interesting and I want to explore some of the bigger issues about which you spoke. In particular, in relation to the whole concept of rural training, as you are probably aware there were colleges at Hawkesbury, Wagga Wagga and Orange which are now part of university campuses so there is still plenty of training for those students who wish to pursue an academic career in agriculture. A lot of those people obviously

do go back to the farm. I believe what is missing now is that educational facility that provided a mix of academia and skills-based training as was provided by Orange Agricultural College years ago and by the TAFE system. What is the future of that middle level agricultural training that can now essentially only be done at Tocal? How will we get through that?

**Ms GIBBS:** That was central to some of our concerns. Yes, the new farmer would have some tertiary qualification, and that's terrific, and they can still access that but it is this continual up-skilling. Again the average farmer is a man—not so many women—in his 50s. He does not know about the Internet. He does not know about the latest developments in natural resource management. He does not know about the importance of re-charge areas for salinity control further downstream. He needs to access specific courses. Legislation is continually changing with more regulations being thrust on farmers to do with hazardous materials handling, occupational health and safety, redesign of shearing sheds, new ways to move materials and new licences required for all sorts of things. They need to access that sort of change. So, yes, it is fine to do the first three years academic qualification somewhere else, but where do they go to do more than just, forgive me, two hours of basket weaving? That intermediate level is very difficult.

With the pressures placed on farmers now, very few farmers employ a man, they just cannot afford it, and to justify time away they want to do something substantial. It is not just a two-hour first aid course. They need to go and spend a weekend mixing with their peers, talking about issues. A lot of farmers say to me they learn more from field days—being able to talk with others involved—than necessarily going and doing a course. So we need to be able to provide somewhere where farmers can have that interaction, where they can go and access latest available information, learn about new technologies in a very familiar environment in their district. Most farmers are not comfortable with heading off to the city and doing a long-term course.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Why is the short-course model that is being further developed at Murrumbidgee not going to fill that role?

**Ms GIBBS:** Where do they stay overnight?

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Exactly.

**Ms GIBBS:** I know, for example, if there were first aid courses offered on a Saturday morning they might send their wives along but very few farmers are going to drive several hundred kilometres just to do that course and go away again. Are the short courses really relevant to the needs of the farmers in that district? From the brochure I saw on short courses there was nothing to do with wool. We regard the Riverina as the home of the merino. One of the great advantages of acting as chair of this particular council is that I can be totally independent. I am close to government but nothing to do with government and I am allowed to speak my mind which is a danger to everybody else but a great honour for me.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** With the degrading of rural infrastructure to which you referred in your address, what is happening with the Murrumbidgee college is but one minute part of that. There are all sorts of other things that cumulatively impact on communities, such as the closure of the Temora research station and all those sorts of things. What will be long-term impact of all those cumulative effects on your industry?

**Ms GIBBS:** It is not just agriculture, it is rural communities generally. We are very concerned about that cumulative effect. It comes back to this planning for decline. If the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources, in its wisdom, decides that population is going to drop then it starts planning for fewer teachers, take away some policemen, not provide resources for a medical centre and all sorts of little things. It is the death of 1,000 cuts. Rural communities need, and I believe have a right, to access an equivalent level of service to anybody else in the State. Rural communities should not be considered to be second-class citizens. Yes, it is difficult. Yes, we do live a long way out. Yes, we are scattered. But I cannot believe that in the twenty-first century we cannot find a better way to deliver services. It is not good enough to simply take them away and say "Rural communities are in decline, so we will not plan to provide services to them." We are 20 per cent of the population of the State, that is, one in five people live in regional communities. We have a right to expect the same sort of future and the same ability to determine our own futures as anybody else.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** If we are to maintain agriculture-specific residential colleges, such as Tocal is now and MCA was, should it be operated by the TAFE system or by the Department of Primary Industries?

**Ms GIBBS:** Let me go back a step. I do not believe they have to be agriculture-specific. I think agriculturally related courses should be offered but how they get offered is part of the flexible innovative solutions that I expect us all to find. It does not have to be agriculture. It could very easily be the Department of Education and Training that is involved in delivery through TAFE, for example. Any vocational educational training that can be delivered is what rural communities need. I am not arguing for the Murrumbidgee college itself: I am arguing for that service to be delivered. It was well located and accessible to a large number of people further west and south. There needs to be some other way to deliver an equivalent service.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Are you making the point that it must be residential?

**Ms GIBBS:** Yes, it must be residential so that people have the option to go there, write out a week in their diary in the same way they might say this week is shearing, this week is my tax return, this week is my training week. I am going to learn how to turn on a computer.

**The Hon. IAN WEST:** As an economist I am sure you would appreciate that a lot of those flexible innovative solutions are driven by economics. Would the economics of 12 domestic staff providing meals and accommodation for 28 full-time students dictate that there was a need for a drive for some flexible innovative solution?

**Ms GIBBS:** I will answer that in a slightly different way. If I were a farmer and had my fixed costs very high, yes, one solution might be to cut those fixed costs. The other solution would be to try to spread them over more production. Yes, if you have 12 domestic staff, find a way to get more students in for the courses: make the business run better.

**The Hon. IAN WEST:** Is there a dictate for more flexible and innovative ways, if over four years there was a lack of attendance of customers, in terms of distance learning, university courses and other short-term but not residential courses?

**Ms GIBBS:** I do not think I can comment on that. I am not an educator but all I would say is that there is a huge need for anything that can be done to help raise the ability of the community to grapple with the future, to plan their own future, to develop their own economies, individually and as a region. I really do not want to comment on particular specifics to that college. My point is really that we must find all sorts of ways to not take services away but make sure they are available.

**The Hon. IAN WEST:** As chair of the Regional Communities Consultative Council and as a economist, and as we are living in a global economy, as you mentioned in your opening statement, there is a definite push towards more flexible courses, university courses, and non-residential courses?

**Ms GIBBS:** It is part of the whole package that must be provided. That is why I said I am not arguing particularly for the college to be reinstated the way it was: that is not my point. My point is we need to take every possible step that we can to make sure that particular needs of regional communities are met. I am not sure that anyone really understands the needs of not just the next generation of farmers but the current farmers to keep up to date with everything that has happened. The whole question of water management, for example, has—I was going to say—blown most people out of the water but that is an unfortunate pun. It is so fundamental and so revolutionary to most people in the country who have said "But that's my water. I've always done it that way". They are probably the most expensive words in business: I've always done it that way.

They have got to learn how to change. It is very different. The whole Murrumbidgee irrigation area and the whole community of 50,000 people were based on science that we now know to be flawed but 50-75 years ago it was the best available science. Decisions were made to establish an irrigation infrastructure, to establish a community out there. Now we know that science was flawed. Now we know we have got to do things but we cannot just say "Oops, we made a mistake. Forget it guys, you are not going to be in business any more". You cannot do that to communities. There is a

social fabric that has been set up that does require time, firstly, to make the transition and all the help it can get in terms of the science and technology to make that transition.

**CHAIR:** That is probably the subject of another inquiry.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** I want to reassure Ms Gibbs that the Department of Primary Industries, the Charles Sturt University and also the Leeton council have a working group to look at the irrigation system and what can be done to get irrigation courses. The extension courses that were at the Murrumbidgee college are still happening today. Do you know that the 50-year old farmers to whom you referred still have those extension services in a short course or on-farm today?

**Ms GIBBS:** I am aware of the continual cutbacks from the Department of Agriculture pursuant to that, but I am sure that is a matter for another inquiry as well. The extension services are being cut back, we do not have the Department of Agriculture officers that we used to have.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** I am talking about at the Murrumbidgee college.

**Ms GIBBS:** As I said, I am not here to speak on behalf of the Murrumbidgee college.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Unfortunately, we are.

**Ms GIBBS:** I am speaking on behalf of regional communities and their needs. I would be delighted to see any suggestion from the Government as to how those extension services, ongoing training, can be delivered to the regional communities who so desperately need them.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** I wish to reassure you that those courses have not been cut, they are still available.

**Ms GIBBS:** I would be delighted to know that they are, but it is a question as to whether people can access them in such a ready form.

**(The witness withdrew)**

**RAYMOND CHARLES PLUIS**, General Manager, Leeton Shire Council, 91 Maiden Avenue, Leeton, sworn and examined:

**CHAIR:** Are you appearing as an individual or as a representative of an organisation?

**Mr PLUIS:** As General Manager of Leeton Shire Council.

**CHAIR:** Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

**Mr PLUIS:** I am.

**CHAIR:** If you should consider at any stage that certain evidence you may wish to give or documents you may wish to tender should be heard or seen only by the Committee members please indicate that and the Committee will consider your request. Before questioning commences would you like to make a short statement?

**Mr PLUIS:** Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today. Unfortunately when the Committee met at Yanco we were interviewing for the important position of director of engineering technical services and I could not be there. I have elected to meet you in Sydney today. On 3 September last year I was very dismayed to receive a call from a staff member at Murrumbidgee college suggesting that the mayor and I should, as soon as possible, get ourselves to Murrumbidgee college as an announcement was imminent about what was called the "closure" of college. I immediately went to the mayor's property and dragged him off his ride-on lawnmower and we arrived at the college within 15 minutes to hear an announcement that the college was not closing but was closing down its full-time and part-time courses and relocating them to Tocal.

The impact of that was to be the loss of 44 jobs in Leeton, 31 of which were involved directly with the running of the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture and 13 of which were administrative positions within the Department of Agriculture, which were to be transferred to Orange. Subsequently a number of activities were undertaken, including written representations to the Government and various Ministers and local members, discussions with representatives from the college board, a well-represented local community rally in opposition to what was deemed to be the virtual closure of the college, and meetings by me and the mayor with the Minister and the director-general of the department and with Country Labor in Sydney.

We believe that as a result of the meetings, discussions and representations a decision was taken that the 13 Department of Agriculture administrative positions would remain at Yanco for the term of the current incumbents' period of employment. Our understanding is that when those incumbents leave their positions, for whatever reason, those positions will be lost to Yanco and relocated elsewhere or evaporate entirely. But we are here mainly to talk about the 31 positions from the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture. As I said, on 3 September we were dismayed to be invited to attend a meeting at the Murrumbidgee college, especially as far as we were aware, and remain aware, of the view that there had been no public consultation whatsoever about the announcement that was about to be made.

A rural communities impact statement, which I understand is the name of the document, is supposed to be carried out under the direction of the Premier, Mr Carr, which was issued a couple of years ago. That was not carried out beforehand, but was completed a couple of weeks after the announcement. At best it was a very superficial investigation of the impact of the closure on Yanco and Leeton communities and included figures regarding population and economy of cities including Griffith. Griffith is located approximately 60 kilometres from Yanco and while that area would be impacted on, as would any other extended regional area by the closure of the full -time and part-time courses, we were really looking for the impact on Yanco and Leeton, which was not addressed in any substantial way by the study.

The study itself was carried out without any public consultation. I believe it was just a desk-top exercise to comply with the requirements of the Premier's directions. I understand further that the guidelines for the issue of the regional communities impact statements were developed by the Department of Agriculture, so it is hard to see how it overlooked the need to carry out one. Ongoing



discussions took place with various Ministers and the directors-general of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Education and Training. From that we got to the stage where we accepted that the full-time and part-time courses had been discontinued and we were looking to see where we could go from there.

We identified two main issues: first, the gaps would be left in Aboriginal and agricultural training in the western and south-western New South Wales by the removal of the full-time and part-time courses; and, second, the future use of the very good high-quality infrastructure at the college. I am pleased to have read that the Committee had the opportunity to look around the college and see the extent of the infrastructure that is available for use. We are hopeful, but not confident, that from a number of the ongoing works currently underway that we are aware of, that there may be some quality of outcomes. Mr Catanzariti mentioned the working group, which consists of representatives from Charles Sturt University, the Murrumbidgee College of Agricultural and the former Mayor of Leeton Shire Council, Councillor Joe Burns, who work together to examine opportunities for some relationship to develop between the university and the college.

**CHAIR:** Is that the working party that is looking at future use?

**Mr PLUIS:** It is.

**CHAIR:** You said the former mayor is a member, but is the Leeton council a participating member of the working party?

**Mr PLUIS:** Former Mayor Burns was appointed as a representative of council on that working party. After the most recent local government elections at which Councillor Burns was returned as a councillor but did not stand for the position of mayor, discussions took place between council and the department at which it was agreed that because Councillor Burns, due to his past involvement, would continue to represent council on that committee.

**CHAIR:** What options are considered by the working party?

**Mr PLUIS:** I am not fully conversant with that, because reports have not come back yet but I understand from talking to Councillor Burns that it is looking at options. The options being considered that I am aware of are the opportunity to provide courses in natural resource management, irrigation-related agricultural activities and to bring in overseas students to study in agriculture or natural resource management. That is the limit of my knowledge, and it is only from hearsay with Councillor Burns. The Deputy Director-General of the Department of Education and Training, Mr Robin Shreeve, has worked with a number of interest groups involved with the college including the college council and staff. He met with representatives of the parents of students and they put together a small working party which includes the Regional Director of the Department of Education and Training and the Regional Director of TAFE to see what gaps they can identify in training in the west and south-west of the State and to come back with a report on options that they might be able to identify to fill some of the gaps.

Another avenue of further investigation that I am aware of is that the Director-General of the then Department of Agriculture commissioned a consultant, whose name I do not have with me, to look into the future use of the accommodation and catering facilities at the college to see whether some future use could be identified for those assets. While we are hopeful that there may be some positive outcomes we are by no means confident at this stage that there will be. While there is some action, we continue to be hopeful.

**CHAIR:** You mentioned overseas students. That would automatically necessitate accommodation facilities.

**Mr PLUIS:** It would indeed. As you would have seen there are excellent accommodation facilities of varying standards, from bunkhouse to motel type.

**CHAIR:** We are well aware of that. Are there overseas students studying at the college?

**Mr PLUIS:** Not that I am aware of, I believe not.

**The Hon. HENRY TSANG:** Or at any agricultural college in New South Wales?

**Mr PLUIS:** I cannot answer that. I know there are a number of overseas students attending various universities, but I do not know whether that extends to colleges of the nature of the Murrumbidgee college.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** In your submission you state that council has little knowledge regarding the process by which the decision was made. Has the department discussed these issues with you any further? Has it given you any justification about how it all happened? Have you had ongoing dialogue with the department?

**Mr PLUIS:** We have had some discussions with the department and the Minister. The justification was basically the falling full-time student numbers, which is factual I believe. The other factor that they recounted to us as justifying the decision was the comparative cost between providing the courses per student at Murrumbidgee college and at Tocal. Having talked to previous senior staff members at Murrumbidgee College, they have indicated that they have some concerns about those figures relating to the overall student figures. They have suggested to me, and I do not know the veracity of it or otherwise, that while they have looked at full-time student numbers they have not taken into account the growth that was going on at the same time of part-time student numbers, which gets back to Mr Catanzariti's comments earlier about the falling numbers in full-time students.

We are not sure that they did take into account the growth in part-time students, which is a reflection, I guess, of the community's interest in a variety of means of acquiring their further education. We have also been alerted by the board, and particularly Mr Jim Geltch, the chairman of the board, that there may be some doubt about the authenticity of the comparison of the per student cost at Tocal compared to Murrumbidgee, and we are not in a position to be able to verify those types of figures, but I would hope that this Committee would be able to in due course.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** We certainly did take some evidence from Mr Geltch along those lines a couple of weeks ago.

**Mr PLUIS:** Our further concern there would be that with the reduced number of full-time students, from our observations, in hindsight, it appears that there was not a lot of promotion going on around rural New South Wales about the availability of full-time courses at Murrumbidgee college. So it may be that there was not a lot of enthusiasm for encouraging students to be attending Murrumbidgee college in at least some sectors of the department of agriculture. We think that could have been much better promoted and if we had been alerted by public consultation earlier in the piece rather than after it was accomplished Leeton Shire Council may have been in a position to help promote the courses, as we do with a number of other businesses in our area.

On that point, if I could just expand a little bit, if there had been public consultation at the time, those making the decision may have been aware of the long-term impacts of other closures in our region of businesses and the loss of jobs and the compound impact of those in our community, which could have been carried on into the rural community's impact statements.

**CHAIR:** Just on that point, were you not, as a councillor, aware of declining numbers? Not to be aware that there was going to be some imminent closure necessarily, but would there not have been an opportunity for council, as a major employer in the area, to actually look at ways of encouraging greater participation in that institution, given that it is smack in the middle of your—

**Mr PLUIS:** In retrospect we should have been making inquiries of our own to ensure that everything was fine at the college, but no, we had not been aware of it and we had not made inquiries.

**CHAIR:** Were you aware of decline generally of active usage?

**Mr PLUIS:** Probably the only indication that we had was a couple of years earlier when we were approached by representatives of the student body who were concerned at that time, and we made representations on their behalf at that time, without success, about what they saw as inappropriate replacement of qualified educators who had left, either through retirement or gone on to

other jobs, and had not been replaced by people with educational training. One position that comes to mind, I think it was called a wool and livestock training course, which had previously had a qualified educator presenting the course to the students; that person left and was replaced by a qualified person in the field of sheep and livestock, or wool and livestock, whatever the particular term was, but had no educational training, and that was acting as a disincentive from the perspective of the students or people to be coming to Yanco to take on those courses. At that time we made representations, but we were advised in writing that the people who replaced the previous educator were appropriate and adequate for the presentation of the courses. But at the time that was not the view that the students had.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** What has been the view of the local business community, employers and the community generally in Leeton and the surrounding area about the closure?

**Mr PLUIS:** The Leeton business community, and in particular the Leeton Chamber of Commerce, was actively involved in the organisation of the public rally that we had in Leeton, and in doing that they were recognising the financial impact that the closure—when I refer to the closure I realise it is not a full closure, they are still presenting and will continue to—

**CHAIR:** It is the residential component that we are interested in.

**Mr PLUIS:** It is the residential component. They were very concerned about the impact, and especially given the closure about two months before of a company called Greens General Foods who closed down their cereal operations in Leeton and lost 40 or 50 jobs; another 40-odd jobs being lost from the department of agriculture, and Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture would see us losing about 80 jobs over a two or three month period. So they were concerned about the flow-on impact, the lack of educational opportunities for the rural community and so on.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Could you just go through the impact, from council's perspective, that those 44 jobs, I think you said in your submission, is going to have on the local community, in particular financially?

**Mr PLUIS:** Particularly on the financial side of it, whenever we work with the Department of Regional Development to bring in some more jobs into the area they always talk about a multiplier impact of 3, 3.5 or somewhere of that nature as generating additional jobs every time you bring a new job in. So if you look at the 40-odd jobs, you are talking about in the vicinity of \$2 million in direct wages out of the area; you could be looking at another, without exaggerating, probably couple of hundred thousand dollars worth of materials purchased in the region because they did not necessarily directly purchase their supplies or equipment in the region, but there would be at least a few hundred thousand dollars there. So you might be getting up around \$2.5 million in wages and materials, multiply that by three and you are up around \$7.5 million out of our local economy, out of a population of 12,000 people. So it is a very significant impact on our immediate region and it would decline, I guess, a little bit as you get further out into the region. But it is still ongoing out further into the region.

**CHAIR:** How does that compare just in terms of the number of public sector jobs in your local council area overall?

**Mr PLUIS:** I have not actually looked at those figures, but we have a substantial number of people employed in Leeton. I will probably get the name of the department wrong but it used to be the Department of Land and Water Resources, now it is DIPNR, I think—a significant number of people from that organisation are employed in our area. I have not done the figures but it is a significant proportion of the overall State Government employment in the area.

**CHAIR:** Perhaps you could take that on notice. The Committee would be happy to receive that information.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Getting away from the financial impact on your community, what is the loss of those educational facilities going to mean for people in that area?

**Mr PLUIS:** Just before I get onto that, going back to your first question and away from that economic impact, it also has a significant social impact on our area. The people who were employed at the college were across a broad range, from caterers and cleaners up to much more highly paid positions. A lot of those people were engaged outside of work hours in things like the scouting movement, pony club, sporting coaches and trainers and so on. So you lose those people, you also lose a lot of those other voluntary-type works that those people put into their community. But getting back to—

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** The loss of the educational facilities specifically.

**Mr PLUIS:** We have not been able to measure it or quantify it but it is significant. I guess the hope arising from the relocation of the courses or the concentration of those courses at Tocal was that the students and at least some of the teaching staff would take up positions at Tocal. As I understand it, only one of the students have, and I am not aware that any of the staff have, but you guys would be more aware of that than I am. But I understand that is the situation. So given that nobody has relocated either as a student or as a teacher, the gut feeling—or stronger than gut feeling—the perception is that there is a big hole being left there for the type of education, particularly, I think, for the young, rural students who have perhaps left school at 16, do not want to go on to university and do academic type studies but want to do some hands-on further study and get themselves into a position where they can manage either the family farm or another farm or whatever. I think there has been a big hole left there in that type of training for the southern and south-western part of the State. I understand some of those students have gone as far afield as Queensland, some have gone down to Victoria to do the courses, and others, I guess unfortunately, have dropped out and are now doing other things.

For the farmers who wish to do short courses, whether it be in chemical training or whatever, I think the opportunities still exist there through the short courses, providing the short courses are well targeted at what the region requires. I heard Diana Gibbs say this morning how there is nothing there to do with wool or sheep—she mentioned one or the other—and that is certainly a gap that she has identified. The courses, as I have seen them from the brochures, reasonably represent at least some of the needs of our area in horticulture, and particularly wine and rice and those sorts of areas, but that is just taking a fairly narrow view. I think a lot of work needs to be done to guarantee that it does cover all the needs of our area.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Just getting back to the residential facilities that are there, when the residential part of the college was opened were those facilities used by the community generally?

**Mr PLUIS:** At least some of them were.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** What sorts of events, what sorts of things happened there that the general public might have used the residential facilities for?

**Mr PLUIS:** Some that I am aware of would be local sporting groups who would use facilities such as the swimming pool and tennis courts for weekend barbecues and gatherings. There is also a group, I think, called Top Deck Tours, which operates internationally and was started years ago by a guy from Leeton; they have regular reunions, one of which was to have been held, I think, in January this year but which was not held because of the nature of the changes.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** How many people would that have brought into Leeton?

**Mr PLUIS:** I think they were talking about something like 170, 180 people with their families.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** For how many days?

**Mr PLUIS:** For four or five days.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** So they would have spent a lot of money there in that time, would they not?

**Mr PLUIS:** They would have spent a lot of money there in that time, absolutely.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** So that is a loss to the community?

**Mr PLUIS:** It is a loss to the community. I know that Rotary International in that district operate what they call RYLA, Rotary Youth Leadership Awards, and they had the previous year used that site for their RYLA camp, which goes for a week. Prior to that I think they had used a site at Bathurst but they decided that they would move it between the west and east of the area on some sort of a rotational basis. It was supposed to have been held at Yanco but was not, due to the change, and they utilised the facilities at Yanco Agricultural High School, but this year I understand they are returning to Bathurst again. I think that is probably 70 or 80 students there over a four or five day period.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Can you see any reason why those sorts of facilities could not still be used for those one-off events? I mean it is obviously costing your community a tremendous amount of money, which is not included in that \$2.5 million in lost wages and supplies that you were talking about today, it will be on top of that, will it not?

**Mr PLUIS:** Certainly it was not included in my figures, no. I think while the college had the full-time staff there for catering and cleaning et cetera, it was relatively easy for those types of functions to be held there. I think if you are going to try to pull together caterers and cleaners for a one-off event, perhaps several one-off events, over a year it becomes more difficult, though not impossible to do that. We have our tourism staff and our economic development staff looking at that at the moment to see whether some agreement can be reached, but there are all kinds of issues with occupational health and safety and insurance problems which would need to be addressed for those specific one-off events.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** Following on from what you have said, saying that the purpose of those 12 staff was solely to cater for the needs of 28 students would be putting a wrong interpretation upon the services that they provided.

**Mr PLUIS:** That is not the interpretation that I would put on it, no. I think they catered for the 28 or however many full-time students there were plus the part-timers, which included a number of Aboriginal students who used to come for weekend in-situ training, rotary get-togethers and all types of things.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** So from the point of view of the broader community, the facilities that the college provided—such as large conference facilities and so on—are not duplicated elsewhere in the shire.

**Mr PLUIS:** No, not to the extent that they are at the college. There are clubs, such as the RSL club, that are used for wedding receptions and those sorts of things. But they do not have facilities such as swimming pools, tennis courts, football ovals and the general range of facilities that were available in one location at the college. Probably the closest we would have is at places such as Yanco Agricultural High School, but its facilities are limited to use during school holidays when the boarders are not there.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** We received a submission from the general manager of Bland Shire Council, who seems to echo your comments. The submission says: "Bland Shire Council is concerned with the lack of community consultation undertaken by the Department of Agriculture prior to the decision to close the residential courses at the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture". Do you think this is representative of a lot of government decisions that are made and imposed upon communities rather than involving local councils?

**Mr PLUIS:** Unfortunately, I must say yes. I believe very little consultation goes on between the government departments and the communities that their decisions might impact upon. That is extremely unfortunate because I think if they consulted beforehand—

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** It would not happen.

**Mr PLUIS:** It might still happen but it might be introduced and implemented in a different way—or it might not happen. There could be a complete turnaround if the community had the opportunity to have an input.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** We heard evidence earlier this morning that the department thought it was advisable to keep the decision to close the college under wraps—that is, to not inform—

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** To close the residential facilities.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** To close the residential aspects of the college. The department decided not to inform staff, students, parents or the local media. If there had been consultation—

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** They did not say that at all.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** It appeared to me that the department decided that it was better not to inform people beforehand of its decision to close the college.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** They did not close the college.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** To close the residential facilities at the college. If there had been—

**CHAIR:** Mr Catanzariti, if you want to raise a point of order that is fine, but I ask you not to interject.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Point of order: The college has not closed. Ms Sylvia Hale said that it has closed. Mr Chairman, I ask you to direct her to rephrase her question or to withdraw that comment.

**CHAIR:** I uphold the point of order. Ms Hale, I ask you to direct your questions strictly to the closure of the residential facilities at the college.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** If there had been consultation prior to the announcement of the decision to close the residential facilities at the college, even if the closure had gone ahead, do you think that consultation would have been of benefit to the community?

**Mr PLUIS:** If the college had closed it would not have benefited the community financially. There may have been other benefits—but that is drawing a fairly long bow. I guess the community could have had a better understanding of the reasons for the closure. But the closure decision would have had the same impacts socially and economically.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** In terms of people's ability to adjust to the closure over a period of time, it would have been an improvement.

**Mr PLUIS:** That would certainly have been an advantage. During the consultation process, which takes time, I guess people would have had the opportunity to make their own decisions about their futures and adjust to the situation more so than occurred when it was announced on 3 September that the accommodation and full-time courses would be removed from the site in January.

**The Hon. IAN WEST:** Would the council, perhaps the chamber of commerce or the local business community be prepared to take over the running of the residential centre at the MCA?

**Mr PLUIS:** I cannot speak for the chamber of commerce, but Leeton Shire Council would be pleased to explore any options for taking over responsibility for the operation of the facilities. I presume you are talking about the facilities not the operation of the courses.

**The Hon. IAN WEST:** The residential facilities.

**Mr PLUIS:** Leeton Shire Council would be keen and enthusiastic to explore any opportunities for the council or any other community group—be it a private operator or council—to take over the operation of the accommodation and catering facilities at Murrumbidgee college.

**The Hon. IAN WEST:** So the council and the chamber of commerce could come to some understanding about assuming responsibility for the residential component of the college to keep it going.

**Mr PLUIS:** It is possible.

**CHAIR:** Are you including catering facilities?

**Mr PLUIS:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** Catering not just for residential students but the overall catering facilities. We have seen that those facilities are quite substantial.

**Mr PLUIS:** Yes. That would depend on us being able to do some kind of business study that showed that it was viable. I understand that that is currently being undertaken by a consultant who was appointed by the director general of the Department of Agriculture, as it then was.

**The Hon. IAN WEST:** Are you aware that the latest configuration of staff to students was 12 staff to 28 students?

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Thirty-nine.

**The Hon. IAN WEST:** There were 28 full-time residential students.

**Mr PLUIS:** I am aware that there was a large staff-to-student ratio if we considered just the full-time students. I am aware of those figures. I would have to look them up to see exactly what they were, but I am aware that there was a significant number of staff to students.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Point of order: According to the evidence we heard last week, there were 39 full-time students last year. Ms Howard said that there were 34 students not 28. Furthermore, it is all very well the council offering to look at taking on management of the residential facilities at the college but that would be contingent on the department's reinstating full-time residential courses at the college, and the department has indicated that it has no intention of doing that.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** To the point of order: The line of questioning was designed to discover what entrepreneurial interest existed outside the college.

**CHAIR:** I will allow the questions to continue as they are seeking the point of view of another interested party, the council. That is a fair call. There is some confusion about the various numbers. The number of residential full-time students has been put to the Committee but there also appears to have been a history of residential not even part-time but special students. That should be clarified in the Committee's deliberations. I will allow the questions to continue. I thank Mr Colless for his information.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** With the Chair's indulgence, may I ask a follow-up question?

**CHAIR:** I will allow you to ask another question, time permitting, when Mr Catanzariti has concluded his questioning.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Mr Pluis, I commend you and your council for the initiative that you have shown since the announcement to try to keep any part of the college open. I know that you have received a fair bit of assistance from quite a few people, whom you mentioned earlier. I return to the consultation process. There appears to be a fair bit of confusion as to who said what and when people knew about the closure decision. When the announcement was made what

process took place from the point of view of the council with the advisory council and the chamber of commerce? Did you set up a meeting to try to work out the situation?

**Mr PLUIS:** You are testing my memory a little. I am not quite sure in what order or on what date things occurred but certainly after the announcement was made on 3 September, which I recall—the announcement was made at the college on the same day by some representatives of the Department of Agriculture—there were some meetings between the mayor, staff representatives and me. We listened to staff concerns and fears about their future. After that we quickly got together with representatives of the college council and the chamber of commerce. A public rally was held at which representatives of the union, various councils, the chamber of commerce and of the Riverina Regional Organisation of Councils spoke out against the decision to close the full-time and part-time courses, which would result in a significant number of job losses in our area.

From there arrangements were made and discussions were held—I think I said this earlier but if I did not I should have—with the Minister. The then mayor, Councillor Joe Burns, and I met with the Minister and with the director general of the Department of Agriculture. We later also had meetings with the director general of the Department of Education to talk about our concerns regarding the loss of training opportunities in agriculture and of Aboriginal courses in south-western New South Wales. It was confirmed to us that the reasons for the closure were the dropping number of full-time students and comparative student costs at Yanco compared with Tocal. A study had been undertaken three or four years earlier but I do not think it was circulated publicly until after the unions secured a copy of it under freedom of information legislation. I think the principals had seen it previously and made negative comments about the study.

Apart from being given the reasons for the closure and told that it was not going to reopen, we were given assurances that the short courses would continue and be expanded. It was put to us that there were opportunities in natural resource management and irrigation courses, which we accept. We hope that they will be ongoing, at least as far as the short courses go. We were also given an undertaking that studies would be conducted into the co-operative arrangement between Charles Sturt University and the Murrumbidgee college and that investigations would be carried out by the regional director of education and the regional director of TAFE into the opportunities that might arise there.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Returning to the review, when the review took place there was some concern that if the numbers did not increase or dropped any further some action might have to be taken—one option was the possible closure of the residential courses. When that announcement was made to whichever parties it was made, do you believe that the advisory council in particular took it seriously enough to get out and do something?

**Mr PLUIS:** You are talking about the 2000 or thereabouts review.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** The actual review, yes.

**Mr PLUIS:** I do not know that the college council was aware of it. As far as I know, it only went to the principals, and once they made their responses I understand that was the length of the consultation. My understanding of the situation is that it never got to the college councillors to discuss. I may be wrong. I cannot give an assurance on that.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Coming back to something you said earlier, you made comment to the CSU partnership with the Department of Agriculture and with your council as far as the working party is concerned. You had some doubts about and were not confident of getting an outcome for the college.

**Mr PLUIS:** What I think I said is that I am hopeful but not confident. I guess it does not pay to be overconfident in these situations and to remain a bit more vigilant. Perhaps if the council had been more vigilant before the event we may have been aware that the college was in a bit of trouble. So it reflects probably my realisation of the need for more vigilance.

**The Hon. HENRY TSANG:** Cautiousness.

**Mr PLUIS:** Yes.



**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Let me assure you—

**Mr PLUIS:** I would be more concerned if there were no ongoing avenues for discussion on the matter.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Let me assure you that I understand where you are coming from, given the fact that over the years you have left some very big concerns in your area, going back to the Letona days as well as your greenfields projects, and I know how hard you are working on a couple of other matters for your area so I can understand that point of view. But there has been an announcement that the working group is looking at the irrigation science of it. Have you heard about that?

**Mr PLUIS:** I have not heard formally through any avenues other than personal discussion with Councillor Burns. The indications are that they are looking seriously at courses relating to natural resource management and to irrigation, but I do not know any details of any assured outcome of that. We await with bated breath the outcome of those inquiries, investigations.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** Reverting to the public consultation and your indication that council was anxious to see if the facilities could be revived in some form and continue to operate, do you agree that it would have been preferable for the period of discussion to have allowed for the council to investigate these sorts of possibilities prior to the closure of the residential facilities and the actual loss of jobs and disruption attendant upon that?

**Mr PLUIS:** I would certainly agree with that. If we had had an opportunity beforehand to investigate the opportunities other than the discontinuance of the residential courses, we would have welcomed the opportunity and done everything we could to investigate not only the retention of the courses but the other uses of the facilities.

**CHAIR:** Thank you Mr Pluis. There is one more question that will be put on notice.

**(The witness withdrew)**

**(Luncheon adjournment)**

**ALAN JAMES BROWN**, Farmer and Grazier, Gundamain, Tarcutta, and

**JEFF DAVID SORRELL**, 255 Elizabeth Street, Sydney, both sworn and examined:

**CHAIR:** In what capacity are you appearing before the Committee today, as an individual or as a representative of an organisation?

**Mr BROWN:** I am representing New South Wales Farmers Association.

**CHAIR:** Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this Committee?

**Mr BROWN:** I am.

**CHAIR:** If you should consider at any stage that certain evidence that you would wish to give or documents you would like to tender should be heard or seen only by the Committee, please indicate that and the Committee will consider your request.

**Mr BROWN:** Thank you.

**CHAIR:** Mr Sorrell, in what capacity are you appearing before the Committee? Are you appearing as an individual or as a representative of an organisation?

**Mr SORRELL:** As a representative of New South Wales Farmers Association.

**CHAIR:** Are you conversant with the terms of reference of the inquiry?

**Mr SORRELL:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** If you consider at any stage that certain evidence you wish to give or documents you may wish to tender should be heard or seen only by the Committee, please indicate that fact and the Committee will consider your request.

**Mr SORRELL:** Thank you.

**CHAIR:** Would either of you like to make a statement before the commencement of questions from the Committee?

**Mr BROWN:** I will do that. Thank you to the Committee for the opportunity to appear today. It is very much appreciated. I should point out, and I think it is important to point out, that Duncan Frazer was unable to do this job at short notice and that is why I am here. Duncan, as you are probably aware, is very passionate about this organisation. He would have been here if at all possible. I am here to represent New South Wales Farmers and, in particular, members in the south of the State who have opposed the closure of Yanco college from the outset. I am Deputy Chairman of the association's Rural Affairs Committee, which looks after education and other matters. I am also a part-time TAFE teacher, so I feel able to talk about education. I have a degree in applied science. I have taught at North Wagga TAFE for the past 10 years. I have taught full-time students in certificate 4 and diploma in agriculture. I have also delivered adult short courses, competency-based subjects, long-term unemployed courses and vet courses.

New South Wales Farmers strongly opposes the closure of the residential courses at Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture, and believes that education opportunities must be available to address needs in the southern and western parts of the State. The process by which the decision was made was flawed. Incorrect data, failure to recognise the impacts of some underlying issues, such as teaching vacancies, lack of course promotion and the drought, no consultation with the community, college or students prior to the decision to close has resulted in great frustration and angst in the local community and agricultural stakeholders in general. They are pertinent points. The trend at MCA showed increasing numbers, with a 14 per cent increase in student enrolments between 2000 and 2003. There was no regional impact study prior to the decision, despite a Government requirement.

The dollar per contact hour of \$12.49 compares favourably with New South Wales TAFE, which varies from \$8 to \$18 per hour.

Only one student transferred to Tocal, and some previous MCA students withdrew completely from continuing their education programs. The 44 job losses had an immediate impact, including the loss of \$2.5 million in wages and a flow-on effect of around \$10 million to small businesses in the area. Many of the facilities are less than five years old, and they are unique in quality and location. There must be a strategy to ensure that these facilities are used productively to benefit agriculture in the region. I attended the last meeting of the advisory council and I had a look at the facilities, so I am well familiar with the issues they wanted to raise. We put in a written submission to the inquiry, to which I direct your attention. But for this address today I wanted to branch away a little into an area with which I am very familiar and that is young farmer education. Farmers are different to other forms of employment. Unlike plumbers, solicitors or doctors there is no requirement of formal qualification to be a farmer.

Young farmers and farm workers have to be attracted to education by convincing them that it is worthwhile. Tertiary education has numerous long-term benefits for New South Wales, such as improved production efficiency, better trade outcomes, better outcomes for human health, producers, consumers and workers, and better outcomes for the environment. There is a need to educate landholders of the benefit of biodiversity, returning trees to the landscape and preserving areas of remnant vegetation. There is also a need for better education of our future farmers because eventually they will improve the economy of rural and regional New South Wales. All these things will lead to a lessening of the drift of population to the cities, which we are all trying to address. Tertiary education for prospective farmers needs to be promoted in a carefully targeted manner. North Wagga TAFE is successful because of energetic promotion of the available courses to school leavers and other interest groups, something that appears to me to be lacking with Yanco, or has been.

This is what is required to use the Yanco facility to best advantage for New South Wales. Longer-term vision for regional and rural New South Wales is required. Provision of education in a modern facility will attract students to tertiary education before commencing a career in agriculture. A well-promoted Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture could fill a niche role for the education of farmers in south-west New South Wales. Full residential accommodation suits many young people, especially those leaving home for the first time. This facility is not provided by TAFE. The Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture could provide courses tailored to the area around the west of Yanco, including specialised training in irrigation techniques and range land management.

**CHAIR:** You mentioned incorrect data in terms of the process. Could expand on that?

**Mr BROWN:** For detail I direct you to our submission. I do not have it right in front of me.

**CHAIR:** Could you take that on notice?

**Mr BROWN:** If you do not mind, I will.

**CHAIR:** If there is anything additional that you might want to put in, please feel free. You can take that on notice and deliver it to the Committee at a later stage.

**Mr BROWN:** Most assuredly.

**CHAIR:** You mentioned that the college could fill a niche role in irrigation. Do you have any other specific areas in which you think it can provide something that is different to any other institution around the State? We have had some comparison with Tocal in terms of the types of activities, but what about in terms of the niche role that makes it special and viable independently?

**Mr BROWN:** I feel strongly that there is a big role for Murrumbidgee in Western Division management. It is not well provided for. I gather that you can do an appropriate course in Longreach in Queensland, but I think Murrumbidgee could do a really good job of providing courses for that zone. As you know, I teach at Wagga TAFE, which is quite capable of providing good specialist courses and subjects that suit that area, but once you start to go west of there the environment changes greatly and the type of farming and grazing changes greatly. We are not well suited to students who

come from that sort of area. They tend not to come to Wagga from further west than, say, Yanco because the courses we provide are not suitable for those sorts of areas. That is where Yanco could fit right in. They could do a particular job of training people for the land, but also training people for the land in that particular area.

I think it is obvious, because one student went from MCA to Tocal, that these sorts of students do not travel long distances to access education. I know from my experience with TAFE that once you get over about 1½ travelling time from the facility the numbers drop right off because generally the young people in particular are quite closely associated with the land that they come from. They like to access education in a reasonable distance. It is unrealistic to expect someone from the south of the State to travel to Tocal, just because it is such a long way. They like to be able to go home on the weekends because it allows them to keep some touch with the farm they come from. In peak times it also allows them to get home and do some work. Generally, TAFE is a four-day week so they can come to TAFE for four days and then go home for three. In busy times it really suits them well.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Mr Brown, has NSW Farmers been consulted at all over the proposed changes?

**Mr BROWN:** Not that I am aware of at all. That is one of the major beefs Duncan has. Basically, there has been no consultation. It is close the door and then tell us it is closed.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Did the association have any representative on the advisory council?

**Mr BROWN:** Yes, Duncan Fraser was our representative.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** He is on the council?

**Mr BROWN:** Yes, he is on that council as well, and I went to the last meeting in that capacity.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** I am aware that the advisory council at some stage was consulted. Would Duncan have been consulted?

**Mr BROWN:** That is a question I would have to ask him to respond to. I really could not respond to that.

**CHAIR:** Perhaps again you could take that on notice and provide the Committee with that information?

**Mr BROWN:** Shall do.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** My other question was, was the NSW Farmers Association aware of the proposed changes in any form from 2000 onwards?

**Mr BROWN:** Not that I am aware of. If you like, I can put that to Duncan as well

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** I know the Chairman asked a question regarding some figures.

**Mr BROWN:** Yes.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** And I have one. You made mention of the fact that some of the figures are flawed.

**Mr BROWN:** Yes.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Is that the question that was going to be answered on notice?

**CHAIR:** That will be answered in due time. If you have any other issues please feel free to will raise them and they can be answered now or taken on notice.

**Mr BROWN:** I would much rather provide a better quality answer in due course.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** It would be an advantage if you would take it on notice and elaborate on where you think the figures have been flawed and just give us some examples. It does not have to be now.

**Mr BROWN:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** Mr Brown, with questions on notice, you will receive a copy of the evidence from Hansard and you will get an indication of the requirements and after you receive that you will have two weeks to reply.

**Mr BROWN:** Will do.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Do you, as an association, believe that the advisory council had done all it could to try to get the numbers up, as far as patronage is concerned?

**Mr BROWN:** My understanding is they were keen to keep it going but they faced some difficulties with the lack of staff appointments and issues like that. That made the college look worse than it needed to look. That was the primary problem.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** The staffing itself was a problem?

**Mr BROWN:** Yes, or lack of staff. If you look at our submission, there are some times. If I direct you to page 4 of 8, the examples we put there, where an education officer was not appointed for 15 months and then six months and it was still vacant, and an education officer for seven months and then 19 months. You cannot run an institution if you do not have specialist teachers.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** I was under the impression that those positions were there? Somebody today referred to that and they thought that staffing was there

**Mr BROWN:** Right.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** But I will stand corrected.

**CHAIR:** I think we will clarify that by way of question on notice.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** Mr Brown, do you think it is possible that TAFE can adequately fill the void that has been left by the closure of the residential facilities?

**Mr BROWN:** Most definitely not.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** Why is that?

**Mr BROWN:** My understanding is that TAFE is not interested in any sort of residential thing. It is interesting where I teach, there are a lot of students who have to board or find some sort of accommodation arrangements. It is always difficult, because they are young, they rarely have motor vehicles. North Wagga is situated seven or eight kilometres north of the city of Wagga Wagga itself, so there is nowhere for them to reside within walking distance of the North Wagga TAFE, and TAFE just is not interested in providing residential facilities. That is one of the points we have made. We would like to see a residential facility available, because these people tend to travel long distances and they tend to be straight from the home environment and it is a much easier step for them out into the workforce through a residential facility like Murrumbidgee. TAFE definitely would not provide anything like what was available at MCA.

TAFE also provides a range of levels of courses but the Murrumbidgee course that was in place before it was closed was particularly well adapted to the target that was aimed at, people who were specifically going on to the land to manage and particularly in that south and western area. To my knowledge, certainly Wagga does not cover that subject in the depth and specialisation that you need to fit into that area. Agriculture changes as you go north and south in New South Wales, but it changes more as you go east to west, because of the climate and the soils and a range of other factors.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** I think in your opening remarks you said that farming was one of the few occupations that required no formal educational requirements. Presumably, you do need a series of licences, for example, to use pesticides?

**Mr BROWN:** No.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** You do not require any formal training?

**Mr BROWN:** You can use a contractor and you do not require a moment's training. You cannot apply them yourself without training but most larger scale farmers—I am not large-scale but I use a contractor.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** So they would rely upon the contractors. Where would the contractors get their training from?

**Mr BROWN:** The same source as the farmers at the moment.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** That is from what?

**Mr BROWN:** From Chemcert. Chemcert is an organisation run by industry specifically for chemical training.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** We were given evidence when we were at the college to the effect that one mother believed her son would be incapable of running the family farm because of the requirements, the educational requirements, or at least knowledge requirements that they faced

**Mr BROWN:** Yes.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** Would that be your belief?

**Mr BROWN:** In a formal sense no; in a practical sense, yes. That is the point I was trying to get to. The people I see when they come to TAFE and the people who leave TAFE after two years are vastly different propositions. When they come in they tend to have some building inadequacies, often coming from the previous generation. It sometimes takes a little while to break the shackles between father and son or father and daughter and for them to open up and take in some new ideas. Once you start that process they then leave much more open than when they came. That is the value of this sort of tertiary education.

The point I was trying to make earlier is that you have to create the impression in the minds of the student that he needs the education. No-one says to him that he must have it. The only way you can get them into this sort of education is to create in their minds the need to open their minds, to access better information than he has at the farm. It is not like selling a university place, where basically you can say I am in university, here is my course, and everyone runs out and says I would like to do it, and I will even pay you money to do it. This is a bit different. You have to attract students.

TAFE put out a lot of promotional material about courses that are available, but the thing that puts bums on seats, and at North Wagga TAFE is the head teacher mainly, but other teachers as well, going out into classrooms and into special interest groups and talking to people. It is all about wearing out a bit of shoe leather and getting out and telling people this is what they can do. All of our full-time students, bar very few, come direct from that process. That is what tends to be missing. I talked to the short-course manager at Murrumbidgee, and it is quite obvious that that is one of the things that is

missing, to get out there and talk to people and say this is what is available. Often they do not know it is there.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** So you would expect that had the college authorities been aware of the prospect of imminent closure of the residential facilities, they would have been out there promoting the college far more strongly?

**Mr BROWN:** I would rather not comment on their activities, because I do not know. I have seen their promotional material but aside from that I do not know what they did. What I was trying to say was this is what I have seen work, getting out there and promoting directly to people, as they do at North Wagga. Murrumbidgee could do the same thing, and if they had a residential facility, they would have that much more to offer.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Mr Brown, the costs that you mentioned in your submission, the inherently high costs for practical agricultural skills-based training compared to other classroom-based courses, are you able to expand on that at all?

**Mr BROWN:** Yes. Agricultural skills often involve one-on-one. A lot of what I do is actually one-on-one stuff, and that is very expensive, but there is no other way you can deliver practical training on, say, chainsaws, tractors, motorbikes, four-wheel drives. All that sort of stuff is one-on-one training. With practical classes, which I have done many of, I think they aim at 8:1 student to teacher ratio, which is half what they normally put into classrooms. So, that instantly doubles the cost. As soon as you get involved in some sort of specialised, hands-on training, it drops straight back to one-on-one. It is difficult to do because you have to find something else for the other students to do while you deliver that, but there is no other way you can do it. Plus, of course, you also have the high cost of any sort of machinery to train them on. It is no use putting them on a Dinky toy to teach them how to drive a tractor, you have to put them on a real tractor.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Are you aware of how the department worked out the \$24,800 per student?

**Mr BROWN:** No, I am not. I do not have that detail. I could find out if you want me to.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Yes, I put that question on notice. I intend to submit that question to the people from the department. Are you familiar with the dollars per annual student contact hours in your own job?

**Mr BROWN:** Very much so.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** How do the courses you teach vary from the larger classroom type courses and the one-to-one courses that you were talking about such as chainsaw tuition?

**Mr BROWN:** I would not have the sort of detail as to "This costs this much and that costs that much" because I am part time and that sort of thing is left to the full-time head teachers and so forth to calculate. But it is obvious by what happens that it must cost a lot of money just because of the level of staff that you need.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Is the North Wagga Wagga campus on the old Wagga Wagga Agricultural College site?

**Mr BROWN:** It is a little to the east. It was part of the Agricultural Research Institute. It actually fronts the Coolamon Road.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Is the old Wagga Wagga Agricultural College campus now part of the Charles Sturt University?

**Mr BROWN:** That is correct.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** What sort of relationship do you have with it, if any?

**Mr BROWN:** Quite close. We have shared access to its library. Staff like me talk to university staff, and also the university has been quite good in granting recognised prior learning to some courses that we deliver so that students can step from TAFE into an advanced stage of university training. It has been very good for some students because some students come to us a little immature or under-confident and leave us well able to handle university study. We actually target those people and encourage them to go on to university.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Did the Murrumbidgee college also offer that facility?

**Mr BROWN:** They absolutely should because some people do not realise when they first come to it that they are capable of university level study. TAFE and the MCA offer a vastly different type of study to university because university nowadays is almost purely academic with practically no hands-on. When I did a university course there was still a reasonable amount of hands-on stuff but that has disappeared completely out of university to the point where I actually train some teachers that come to us ready to go out to teach agriculture who have never seen a tractor. They come to us for practical training on how to drive a tractor. I have had people there who have never sat behind a wheel, and they are ready to go and teach agriculture, but that is another issue.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Are the short-course programs that you teach at North Wagga Wagga TAFE generally discrete courses of two or three days and then you get another batch of students to do a similar course the next week?

**Mr BROWN:** Yes. Short courses tend to almost exclusively be that. They are a specific course and people just come in for that because they have got to have that skilled set, often for employment, whether it is chainsaws, tractors or whatever.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Is it fair to say that somebody who wants to make a career in agriculture as a farmer, farm manager or something in that line, he or she would have plenty of opportunity to get all those skilled-based courses at various TAFEs around the State?

**Mr BROWN:** Yes.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Where do you get the training to get to the next stage from being a person with a lot of skills to being a farmer?

**Mr BROWN:** That is where people like MCA should cut in because what you need to do is link all the skills you have into management. Management is a skill of its own but it is also about linking all the various aspects that come together to actually make a farm enterprise. There is no short course that teaches that sort of management and interlinking. I spent a lot of energy trying to teach my students how to blend various enterprises together to make a farm work better, such as winter cropping with livestock because you need to be able to make them fit together to make the farm more profitable and often viable. That is where you need to teach management stuff which is basically what MCA and the higher levels of TAFE teach. University takes it up another step from there but that is essentially what we try to do with full-time students. There is no other way you can do that sort of training other than full-time, but some people do this sort of stuff at self pace by distance education but essentially it is a similar format in that you keep them in for a period and take them through a range of courses leading up to an overall management picture, if you like.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Have the changes that have occurred in agricultural education in the past 15 years or so with the previously more academic agricultural colleges, such as Wagga Wagga, Hawkesbury and Orange, now part of university and have moved off into academia basically—

**Mr BROWN:** They have left an appalling vacuum.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Yes, for that middle level management period that you were talking about basically is it only Tocal that offers any sort of formal training in that regard?

**Mr BROWN:** TAFE tries to do it but it probably does not do it in quite the same way that Tocal is trying to do now. Yes, it is an absolute need that has disappeared. I understand why the



universities do what they do but the academic creep is going all the time where they take themselves away from the sort of people that we get to train because if you do not train these people you send them out basically as walking time bombs. Everything around agriculture is pointy, or hot or dangerous not only to the operator but for everyone involved. Part of what you teach these sorts of students is how to be a member of society. In other words, do not tread on your neighbour's toes. Do not drift your chemical over his crops. When I was that age that was not even mentioned. All you did was get out there and make as much as you could. If you destroyed the soil structure in the process, I am sorry bad luck. It will be right next year but, of course, it is not right. You need to keep training them how to handle themselves properly. How to handle their position in society properly and be responsible members of society. That it was what I was trying to get at with the environment type training because when I was going through university environment training was practically non-existent. Now you need to bring that sort of detail into people to make them better community members.

**CHAIR:** Does North Wagga Wagga TAFE have a residential component?

**Mr BROWN:** None at all.

**CHAIR:** Does the other institution at Wagga Wagga have a residential component?

**Mr BROWN:** No.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Does Charles Sturt University?

**Mr BROWN:** Yes. When they come to us we direct them basically to go and find their own accommodation as there is no way we can accommodate them.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** Is there more accommodation in Wagga Wagga than in Leeton?

**Mr BROWN:** It is totally different. The thing to keep in mind is that the residential thing fits into a place. It used to fit into the university place mostly because of an age thing. MCA and Tocal tend to take mostly younger students, as North Wagga Wagga TAFE does. If you provide them with a residential facility as well as education it is relatively simple for the parents, and it is a good way to step from a home environment out into the work place.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** This committee recognises the value of these courses. Why were the numbers not as satisfactory as they should have been to keep MCA going with full-time courses? I remind you that at one stage there were 12 domestic staff providing meals or accommodation for about 28 students. Was it because of the level of service that was being provided? What are your thoughts?

**Mr BROWN:** There is a whole complex of issues. The first one is the worst series of seasons in the past 100 years which has affected everyone, including me. I am only a small area farmer but last year I spent more than \$100,000 on feed for livestock. That has an impact on everyone. There is a problem, as I alluded to in the introductory remarks, with the type and quality of staff that were recruited. There is a lack of imagination in how you could handle a residential facility. There are plenty of contractors in Leeton who could provide meals, cleaning or whatever is required. You need a bit of imagination, a bit of lateral thinking and I think there was a lack of effort in terms of shoe leather in getting out there and promoting it in the right way, and you put all those together.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**JOHN WYMONDHAM HODGENS**, Semi-retired Primary Producer, Farnham, Fernhill Road, Inverell, and

**RICHARD GORDON CHAFFEY**, farmer, Strathallan, Attunga, sworn and examined:

**CHAIR:** In what capacity do you appear before this committee?

**Mr HODGENS:** I originally set out to be an individual and I would still like to continue that. I have been asked to represent the Tocal Advisory Council as well.

**Mr CHAFFEY:** I prefer my comments to be as an individual.

**CHAIR:** Before this inquiry today you appear as a representative of the Tocal Advisory Council?

**Mr HODGENS:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

**Mr HODGENS:** Yes, I am. I have made a written submission. It is reference only to section (d) of your inquiry.

**Mr CHAFFEY:** Yes, I am.

**CHAIR:** If you should consider at any stage that certain evidence you may wish to give, or documents you may wish to tender should be heard or seen only by the committee, please indicate that fact and the committee will consider your request.

**Mr HODGENS:** Thank you, but I have no intention of that. What I say is open to the public.

**Mr CHAFFEY:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** If either or both of you would like to make a short statement please feel free to go ahead.

**Mr HODGENS:** Yes, I would. I would also like to tender for the committee's perusal Tocal college documents.

**Documents tabled.**

**Mr HODGENS:** I thank the Committee for giving me this opportunity. My individual submission should be in front of you. I see no reason to go into it now. Having been asked to represent the advisory council, I advise that council has worked closely with college staff to develop a range of new products and relatively innovative ones over the past few years. That was in response to identifying demand and trends in the rural community. The college staff, having being based within the New South Wales Department of Agriculture, was well-equipped to work in a collaborative way with the rural industries. I do not believe that that would be possible if they were embedded in a generic educational system. The products and services that are described in the documents I have tabled are not produced by any other agricultural institution in Australia. In fact, Tocal's services are unique and, I believe, are a result of the synergies between having dedicated educationalists working with technical specialists and the associated resources of NSW Agriculture.

Those products are external formal courses in agriculture, land care and natural resources; which are becoming more and more important parts of rural Australia and agriculture in general, especially in light of the new catchment management authorities and their requirements for property management planning. These products are being produced and are being taught by Tocal. Tocal is the national leader in skills recognition for agriculture. This expertise has been developed in recent years and is now being applied across the State in association with the New South Wales agricultural extension services. Tocal's staff work with the local extension officer in providing a skill assessment of the farmers. As a result a person working on the land for 20 or 30 years without a formal

qualification ends up having their skills formally recognised. This is a great boost to farmers and their morale, and I am one of them. I came up in agriculture through the university of hard knocks: I had no paperwork to prove it, I now do.

Tocal has an outstanding range of publications which are used as stand-alone books and as resources for individual courses taught at college. Again, that is unique in Australia and has been possible only through its direct association with NSW Agriculture and its technical specialists. The Tocal catalogue of publications is highly sought after and the college does business right across Australia with those resources. Tocal has become a leader in the development and delivery of short courses. Once again, this is in association with NSW Agriculture technical specialists and extension staff. Tocal and Murrumbidgee undertake short courses right across the State and these, again, are highly valued by the farming community.

Tocal field days at the Tocal campus have a unique combination of landscape and buildings, including the fascinating Tocal Homestead, which has an outstanding array of colonial farm and buildings dating from the early nineteenth century. In addition, it has evidence of thousands of years of Aboriginal land use. Adjacent to this is the architecture award-winning campus, which is the venue of those highly successful field days. These events are run by an incorporated association involving NSW Agriculture, college staff, commercial interests and the not-for-profit sector. These events promote agriculture and responsible land and environmental management to the community—something we need more and more of. Along with the previous speaker, when we first started in agriculture we did not know about it. If we did, it was unconsciously and we did not pay a great deal of respect to it; but we do now.

This event has been developed by Tocal through its being a dedicated agricultural centre. My colleagues on the advisory council and I were delighted when the New South Wales Government identified Tocal as a specialist agricultural centre. That was announced by the Premier during his visit in 2002. The formalities, along with the unveiling of an appropriate plaque were undertaken by Her Excellency, Professor Marie Bashir, the Governor of New South Wales, in 2003. Tocal is the State's centre of excellence in agricultural education and needs to remain embedded in NSW Agriculture, now known as the Department of Primary Industries. I will be so bold as to offer an invitation to this Committee to visit that college to see what we teach, and how good it is.

Students who want to learn agriculture can learn some knowledge from TAFE; they do not, as the previous witness said, get any residential accommodation anywhere else in the State as far as I am aware. TAFE is said to offer Homestay accommodation, but that does not stack up for a young student leaving after year 10, leaving the family home, and going into agriculture. He is going from one home to another—he is much better to get from home to a residential campus where he will learn to live with other people, and will have to learn to accept other people. That is a stepping stone into the hot and pointy end of agriculture. I believe it is imperative that we retain a residential campus. Apart from that, agriculture is a fragmented teaching or learning experience. You do not need a specific formal education, but there are many other small things that come together. Tocal is offering an holistic approach, in my opinion. It is drawing all those small but important agricultural teachings together to make a whole. That is probably the first of the Department of Agriculture's innovation in an holistic decision for the future.

**CHAIR:** Mr Chaffey, would you care to make a statement before the Committee asks questions?

**Mr CHAFFEY:** The Committee has my three-page submission. I will comment from my background that I have itemised and industry training experience over the years including part-time teaching at TAFE over a number of years. Also I have been a co-operative farmer in the TAFE system whereby they have utilised my facilities to provide training for students. In turn, I offered a million dollar resource to TAFE to use as a training facility in association with the local college. I am concerned about the socioeconomic effect of the drought, particularly at Murrumbidgee. That has had a real impact on the ability of people to pay for their sons and daughters to do the course. That probably has not been highlighted much today. People cannot afford to send their kids away from the farms in the west.

The decline in the wool industry and the effects of the drought on the grains industry has an effect on the type of students and the availability of money for people to send their kids away to school or colleges as they have done in the past. As a farmer it is a bit hard for me to understand how people can afford to send their children away to those places without outside resources and income.

**CHAIR:** I appreciate that, it has been brought up a number of times.

**Mr CHAFFEY:** It is relevant to the student numbers at the college.

**CHAIR:** The Committee will include that fact in its deliberations.

**Mr CHAFFEY:** Another issue is the certificate 3 and certificate 4 training. TAFE offers both, Murrumbidgee and Tocal offer both. Certificate 3 in the TAFE system, particularly in our area, which is New England, is offered only as a traineeship operation. It is not offered as a full-time course by TAFE. Therefore, there is no opportunity for a person wanting to do a full-time course in certificate 3 to any venue other than an agricultural college. The options are Murrumbidgee, Tocal or over the border. Quite a lot are going over the border, I admit. Student numbers are in decline in TAFE in our area, I do not know about the southern area. But in the northern area, for example, certificate 4 in the New England institute has only 12 trainees, which is very low for an area that was looking at putting in an agricultural college some 15 years ago.

At that time TAFE said it could cater for the system, but since then the whole system has been in decline. After being involved in the New England Institute of TAFE as chair of its council I could not see that turning around and changing within the systems and structures of TAFE. Probably the best thing I could do is to leave it to you to ask me questions. I have put in my submission with quite a lot of points and you may wish to ask me some questions.

**CHAIR:** Did the C. B. Alexander Agricultural College Advisory Council and the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture [MCA] Advisory Council meet to discuss the transfer of courses from MCA to Tocal?

**Mr CHAFFEY:** No.

**CHAIR:** No discussion at all?

**Mr CHAFFEY:** The first we knew of the changes with Murrumbidgee was the time that they knew, and we were just told that it was happening.

**CHAIR:** What has Tocal done to accommodate potential students from MCA?

**Mr HODGENS:** They have accepted those who applied, to the best of my knowledge.

**CHAIR:** No other strategy at all?

**Mr CHAFFEY:** There is very little you can do when you are given only a couple of months of preparation time to change over from a student out of the full-time course down there to a student at a full-time course up there, and there is a different nature to the courses. It is very difficult to change things immediately to fit the different requirements.

**CHAIR:** Are there any other reasons why only one student transferred from MCA to Tocal?

**Mr CHAFFEY:** A different course structure, different areas of contact. People in the southern area are probably looking at western lands management, broadacre cropping, and those areas are not covered specifically at Tocal, whereas they were down there. Tocal covers the dairy industry, the beef industry and a small amount of the sheep industry and the general management areas which are common across both colleges. But the industry specific areas are completely different.

**CHAIR:** Do you have any details of student number trends at Tocal?

**Mr CHAFFEY:** They are constant.

**Mr HODGENS:** Constant, if not increasing.

**CHAIR:** No diminution in enrolments as seen at MCA?

**Mr HODGENS:** No.

**Mr CHAFFEY:** Plus or minus 5 per cent each year.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Mr Hodgens, could you outline your involvement in agricultural education in New South Wales? I know some of the activities you have been involved in but could you expand a little on that for the benefit of the Committee?

**Mr HODGENS:** Some years ago I was a member of the New South Wales Rural Training Council for about five years, when I left my position as general councillor

with the New South Wales Farmers Association. Incidentally I possibly should tell the Committee that I am the NSW Farmers representative on the Tocal Advisory Council. I have been involved with Tocal as an advisory council member. My wife and I helped to get some of the shorter courses in financial management that Tocal originally started out with in the north-west. I then became quite heavily involved in trying to promote the possible beginning of an agricultural college in Inverell, in the north-west area. We were working in Inverell but as far as I was concerned the north-west would be fine. We did not get very far with that after 14 years work.

During that time I was still involved with Tocal. Each year we used to take all the second-year students onto our property, give them most of our financial figures but not all, and let them tell me how to better run the place. It was a two- or three-day course for them and they lived up in Inverell and travelled out to the property. It was a learning curve for me and I hope it was for them. Also we have had second-year students off campus for six weeks. I have never had first-year students, it is a bit far to travel. Now they are travelling Australia-wide and to New Zealand for the off-campus study. Since then I have continued to be involved with the advisory council.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** in terms of your long-term commitment to agricultural education in New South Wales, are you concerned about what is happening? We heard from the previous witness about the fact that Wagga, Hawkesbury and Orange had turned into university academic-based courses. There is now only one agricultural college left in New South Wales where you can get any sort of a mix of skill-based training plus management training. Do you think that is a cause for concern for the future of agriculture in New South Wales?

**Mr HODGENS:** I think it is a great cause for concern. It worries me deeply and, to be quite honest, I would not be here if I did not think it was. I only have to look over the border at Dalby, I know what is going on north further into Queensland with their agricultural colleges; from memory, they have still got five going, residential colleges. Tocal is not pure academic, it is not trying to be a university, it is a hands-on college where we are trying to get them to put all their skills together into management as well as hands-on driving a tractor properly, spraying properly. Yes, I am extremely concerned. I think one of the rays of hope has been the short courses and probably, in particular, external studies. It has been a very progressive step, I believe, especially into the property management, planning and environmental management.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Mr Chaffey, if you want to comment on any of these questions please do so. In terms of the courses that are offered by TAFE as being discrete, short course, two or three-day courses, as we heard previously from Mr Brown, what needs to happen with those short-courses to turn an individual with a heap of skills into a farmer? What sort of training does he need?

**Mr CHAFFEY:** I just might make one comment with that: it is not an easy question to answer. I am in a situation where I have a son who has just gone through Tocal and is in his first year of employment out in industry. The most relative thing involved with that is the fact that the job he has got now, the skills that he gained from Tocal are being applied and he is working with a good business manager who is teaching him and telling him what is going on with what he has done. So the link of the two has really helped. The skills and so on that they learn at the colleges, nothing is really

cemented in concrete until they put them into practice and I think they have to be able to do the practical side of that and they have to be given the grounding in being able to apply their skills.

That is one of the things I have concerns about with the TAFE situation: they get some skills but they do not get them right down to the ground application of this is why it works and the whole thing starts to fit together. It needs a wholistic approach to the education of the individual and that is what I find is missing in some of the TAFE structures, it is intermittent, bits and pieces, and the linking is not there in a lot of cases. They have attempted it in some areas but it is not the same as that approach from the colleges. The kids live in; they live and work together, they talk together, they work through processes together, they learn to live as individuals together too, and that gives them the benefit of rural industry, and particularly the nature of the work that they go out to do.

**Mr HODGENS:** One of the key attributes to a campus for agricultural learning is the fact that they are living with it 24 hours a day, basically seven days a week, as you do with agriculture: you do not knock-off at half-past five, I am sorry to say; I think you all recognise that. It is a 24 hours a day, seven days a week profession. Until the students understand and accept and learn to work with that, they have got a battle on their hands, and they do get that grounding.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** And that is something that you think cannot be provided by TAFE? TAFE does some excellent chainsaw courses and all those sorts of things.

**Mr HODGENS:** They do. I have yet to see them do anything that gives a 24 hours a day, seven days a week learning experience. I could stand corrected, but I have yet to see it.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** Gentlemen, you indicated that Tocal did not provide courses in western land management or broadacre farming. Would it be possible for it to provide those courses, or would that be impractical?

**Mr CHAFFEY:** Not completely impractical; it is difficult. There is such a thing as being on the spot at the right time and place to be able to apply the different principles of those industries, and if you are not living and working in that industry where it is you do not learn the principles. It is as simple as that. I think Tocal, with its beef management course and all the practical beef stuff that goes on there, when things are happening the students are there, they are there right where it is happening; they are learning from experience; they are learning things are real. I think I underlined one word in my report: a real environmental learning experience. I think you have got to live in that environment to learn those things. I grew up on a farm. A lot of what I learnt on the farm cannot be passed on to other people because I have lived and experienced it. I think it gets back to the real practical farmers of today; they have got to actually live and experience the environment in which they are working to be able to achieve.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** What sorts of numbers of students do you have at Tocal now?

**Mr HODGENS:** Approximately 100 on campus: about 60, I believe—give or take a couple—in first year, and about 40 in second year; about 500 doing short courses and I suggest the external studies could be 1,000.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** The numbers you were referring to earlier with the five per cent up or down, were they regardless of the drought?

**Mr CHAFFEY:** Regardless of the drought. And the numbers I was talking about there, when I mentioned that, were full-time courses, the ones that actually live on campus.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** So why do you think that Murrumbidgee college at Yanco could not sustain those sorts of numbers over that period? What do you think is going wrong there?

**Mr HODGENS:** I cannot answer that. That is like asking me how you would fight a fire in the Murrumbidgee area; I do not know, and I do not want them to come and fight a fire in my area either because they do not know that area. No, sir, I cannot answer that.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** My next question then is what sorts of inquiries have you had at Tocal from people in the western areas as far as trying to get into Tocal to do these courses?

**Mr HODGENS:** That is not my field, I cannot answer that. My only assumption is if they have applied and they met the criteria to come in they would be there.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** So you are unaware of any phone calls or—

**Mr HODGENS:** Being turned away, no.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Not turned away but asking for what is available and whether there would be any vacancies, and things like that.

**Mr HODGENS:** Not specifically, no.

**Mr CHAFFEY:** I am not in a position to be able to answer that.

**CHAIR:** Perhaps you could take that on notice.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Given what has happened at Murrumbidgee, are you concerned about the future of Tocal?

**Mr HODGENS:** "Concerned" might not be quite the right word in my case, although I am trying to keep a step ahead of the rest, put it that way. Yes, agriculture—if we want to feed the people in Australia we are going to have to do it properly for the benefit of the people and for the benefit of our country, and they are only going to learn that at an agricultural college. Yes, I suppose you could say I am concerned, in hindsight.

**Mr CHAFFEY:** I have concerns, particularly if the system goes out of the present structure into the technical further education system. Noting what has happened in the last couple of months in particular with TAFE and the amalgamations there, the rural industry now is on the short straw.

**CHAIR:** I thank you for your information. It has presented some material to the committee from very much a different perspective, which is of great value to us. I thank you also for the written information you have given both by way of your submissions and the material that you have presented to the Committee. We will certainly take note of the issues you have raised in the process of our deliberations.

**(The witnesses withdrew)**

**SCOTT WILLIAM WHISTON**, Representative, Tocal Ex-Students Association, 18 Burley Close, Illawong, sworn and examined:

**CHAIR:** If you consider at any stage that certain evidence you wish to give or documents you may wish to tender should be heard or seen only by the Committee, please indicate that fact and the Committee will consider your request. Before there is Committee questioning, would you like to make a statement?

**Mr WHISTON:** Thank you for the opportunity to address the inquiry today. I am a committee member of the Tocal Ex-Students Association and I am representing it for the purpose of this inquiry. I attended Tocal in the years 1979 and 1980 and gained an advanced certificate in agriculture. Since then I have kept contact with my fellow students, college staff and its associates, and I have also met many other ex-students. I grew up in Sydney, however, my family owned a farm at Gulgong. Since I can remember I always wanted to be a farmer but knew that I would have to study and train hard, and farming was a job like no other.

I was told about Tocal by a friend on the land who said that it was a place where future farmers were trained by farming people, the Department of Agriculture. Tocal naturally appealed because, being the Department of Agriculture, it had a very close relationship with the land, and its related industries and its future employers. On attending Tocal I found my thoughts to be correct: the college staff had a passion for the land, as did my fellow students. The information we were taught at times was direct from the department's own research centres and farms. The lecturers were skilled in their own field of agriculture as well as education. Practical training was only possible because Tocal was a fully operational farm managed by college staff and our own lecturers using the latest technology of the department. Us students could not have asked for more first-hand experience and training.

After Tocal I jackarooed for a year before returning to manage the family's 3,000-acre property at Gulgong—every facet of it, from crutching sheep to signing cheques—at the age of 20, only possible with my Tocal training. Our ex-students association has over 400 members and an active web site and newsletter. The executive meets regularly to organise reunions and other activities. We also raise money for students' scholarships, which has been most successful, and provides a great link to the college. The ex-students association has many successful graduates who have made great contributions to rural industry. Its members serve on CB Alexander Foundation, and also on the college advisory council. The chair of the college council, Margot Duncan, is an ex-student. The ex-students association strongly supports the college's continuation with the Department of Agriculture—now the Department of Primary Industries.

Agriculture is a unique industry, and training is not an easy task. Agricultural people often prefer to stay on their farms and do not undertake training. In addition, the industry is not particularly attractive to school leavers. The ex-students association and the college work hard to promote courses to attract students to rural industry. The paradox is, however, that the demand for graduates of the college far outstrips the supply. The operation of Tocal by NSW Agriculture has been extremely successful. It has enabled it to grow and develop and be a specialised campus for agricultural education. It is now Tocal Agricultural Centre, a centre of excellence in agricultural education. We do not believe this would have been possible if it had been placed in the education system: it would be just another educational campus with no strong focus on agriculture.

One of the enduring features of life at Tocal as a student was to work on the magnificent Tocal property. The property in itself is one of the most historic rural estates and remains very much as it has been for decades. Its operation by NSW Agriculture as a commercial and viable enterprise complements the college's programs and credibility to its courses. You have heard today other details of the aspects of Tocal and I do not plan to repeat those details or sentiments. I think the point will be well put by others as to Tocal's effectiveness as an agricultural educational institution run by the Department of Agriculture. I therefore conclude by saying that Tocal ex-students value their continuing association with the college and we believe the future education of farmers and land managers through Tocal is best done if it remains part of the now Department of Primary Industries.

**CHAIR:** Thank you. Has your ex-student organisation had any communication with equivalent bodies of the MCA?



**Mr WHISTON:** No, not on a regular basis

**CHAIR:** I appreciate the different local agricultural use issues at the two college campuses, but can you compare standing between the campuses in terms of the roles of MCA and Tocal?

**Mr WHISTON:** From an ex-student's point of view, I know that our alumni association has above-average membership. I am not familiar with that of Yanco.

**CHAIR:** Tocal is described by the Government as an agriculture centre of excellence. Are you concerned that Tocal could go the way of the MCA? Is that an issue for you and your organisation?

**Mr WHISTON:** It is somewhat, although we have huge confidence in the current management and staff of the college. The success of the operation speaks for itself.

**CHAIR:** Do you have any indication of any cutting down of support or finance from any government sector that may give rise to that sort of concern?

**Mr WHISTON:** It has been indicated to me that certain funding to the college has been cut. There is concern.

**CHAIR:** What funding has been cut and at what level?

**Mr WHISTON:** It is government funding but I am not aware of the exact amounts.

**CHAIR:** But there have been cuts. Were they in the last financial year?

**Mr WHISTON:** I believe so.

**CHAIR:** Do you see at present any diminution in course opportunities as a result of those funding cuts?

**Mr WHISTON:** I do not think that has happened yet as the cuts are only recent. But I would not be surprised if that is threatened.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** From a student's point of view, what did you look for at Tocal to enhance your farming aspirations?

**Mr WHISTON:** I wanted formal training. My experience was relatively limited. In all aspects—academic and practical—Tocal made me well and truly capable of entering the work force and then managing land property.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Did you compare Tocal with Murrumbidgee college?

**Mr WHISTON:** Yes, I did, mainly by talking to other ex-students, and people supported Tocal more than Murrumbidgee for what I wanted to do. I came from Sydney. I visited Tocal with my parents and its residential facilities were certainly adequate from that point of view.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** In the past 10 years there have been dramatic changes in agricultural practices, including more high-tech methods, do you think residential courses are as important today as they were years ago? Do you believe some short non-residential courses should be available on campus?

**Mr WHISTON:** I think residential courses are a must: the college would not be what it is today without them. Students come from far afield. As was said earlier, farming is unique industry. You live it 24 hours a day. I learnt a lot from my fellow students after dinner sitting around the college campus. It was a huge networking advantage and was all part of my training. The dairy operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week and we were all involved with it. The college would not be what it is if it were not for the residential aspect.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** So that is just as important today as it was 10 years ago?

**Mr WHISTON:** More so.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Student numbers at Murrumbidgee college have been decreasing while numbers at Tocal are pretty stable. Why do you think that is happening?

**Mr WHISTON:** Possibly there is a more diverse range of courses around Tocal so it draws from a greater number of agricultural enterprises that are possibly not so affected by the drought and so on—for example, vineyards and all sorts of other agricultural industries.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Is there any particular reason why? Is it staffing or the facilities available at Tocal?

**Mr WHISTON:** I think Tocal has done an excellent promotional job. The Tocal field days are a huge promotional and student recruitment activity.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** What role does the Tocal advisory council play in keeping Tocal vibrant?

**Mr WHISTON:** I believe it responds to all aspects of the day-to-day management and future of the college. I am not involved in the council, only the ex-students committee.

**The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:** Does the advisory council have a close association with the students?

**Mr WHISTON:** Yes, it does. Members of the ex-students committee are also members of the advisory council.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** This follows on from one of the questions from Mr Catanzariti about skills. As a city kid, you had to learn a lot of skills—the skills you needed to be a farmer, such as tractor driving, chainsaw operation, marking calves and lambs and so on—when you went to Tocal. What was it about education at Tocal that took you from being a city kid with a heap of skills to being a very capable and very young farm manager?

**Mr WHISTON:** I guess it was the quality of learning and to a large extent the practical experience—practical learning—not to mention the networking with students and the networking with farmers through off-campus prac. I spent probably seven or eight weeks of my time at college on outlying farms in western New South Wales. That was a huge benefit to my learning.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** You talked about changes to the education system and you said that the staff and the advisory council do a very good job. I acknowledge that. Do you think there is a risk of changes occurring at Tocal that are based on political decisions rather than on what is best for education or agriculture?

**Mr WHISTON:** I am sure that possibility exists.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Do you think Tocal is threatened by that possibility?

**Mr WHISTON:** It could well be.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** So where would the city kids go to get not only their skills-based training but also the sort of training that you described that turned you into a farmer?

**Mr WHISTON:** There would not be anywhere at all, to my knowledge—possibly Queensland.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** We are talking about New South Wales. I would like to think that we could train farmers in New South Wales rather than forcing them to go to other States.

**Mr WHISTON:** Using city kids as an example, I do not think they could go anywhere. The residential aspect—living and training on a farm—is like jackarooing or a cadet managership: you are on the farm 24 hours a day, living, working and learning. I do not know of anywhere else in New South Wales where that could happen. Quite a number of city kids whom I went through college with have been very successful in their rural pursuits.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** If the college were to be taken over by the Department of Education and Training under the TAFE system do you think there would be significant changes that would not be in the best interests of agriculture?

**Mr WHISTON:** I am sure it would not have the access to information that it has now through the department, and probably not the same support from farmers. Tocal has huge support from farmers all over the State through its involvement in off-campus work. There is general support for the college from ex-students and others. I think that is somewhat because they know the Department of Agriculture—now the Department of Primary Industries—is the mother ship; it is the government department that holds their hand.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** Mr Whiston, are you aware of Tocal ever having any difficulties finding competent, qualified people to fill staff vacancies? Have there ever been any prolonged vacancies of which you are aware?

**Mr WHISTON:** I have never had access to that information so I cannot answer that question.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** On an informal basis, have people complained to you about that?

**Mr WHISTON:** No, I have not received complaints about that and I have not heard of any.

**CHAIR:** Mr Whiston, thank you for your time today. The Tocal-MCA comparison is obviously very much in the minds of Committee members, and I thank you for your communications on the matter.

**Mr WHISTON:** Thank you.

**(The witness withdrew)**

**IAN STUART DUNLOP**, Retired Solicitor and Grazier and Member of The Friends of Tocal Inc., PO Box 33, Hawks Nest, New South Wales, sworn and examined:

**CHAIR:** Welcome, Mr Dunlop. In what capacity are you appearing before the Committee?

**Mr DUNLOP:** I am appearing in a double capacity as a member of The Friends of Tocal Inc., which is a support group for Tocal college that was formed in 1993—I was instrumental in that formation—and as an individual because my association with Tocal dates back probably to 1939 when, while in the company of my father, I met the Misses Curtis, the nieces of C. B. Alexander, with their uncle in Maitland. I also attended the Estate herd reduction sale of the Tocal herd in 1948 at Maitland saleyards in the company of Misses Curtis, my father and others. From that time I have had an association, on and off, with Tocal and Tocal college. As well as that, my firm—which was my father's practice as well—were solicitors for C. B. Alexander and the Alexander estate.

**CHAIR:** Are you conversant with the terms of reference for this inquiry?

**Mr DUNLOP:** I am.

**CHAIR:** If you should consider at any stage that certain evidence you may wish to give or documents you may wish to tender should be heard or seen only by the Committee, if you indicate that fact the Committee will consider your request.

**Mr DUNLOP:** I shall.

**CHAIR:** Before the Committee asks you questions on the time allocated, if you would like to make a short statement or raise some issues that are relevant to you at this point, please feel free to go ahead.

**Mr DUNLOP:** I handed to the clerk of the Committee this morning when I arrived a statement comprising seven divisions and 5½ pages, which I understand she has had copied and circulated to members of the Committee. That was done to save us some time because I did not want to read the entire statement.

**CHAIR:** I do not think there is any need to, and we can refer to that statement subsequent to your submission. We will have a good look at the statement and it will form part of your evidence.

**Mr DUNLOP:** I tender the statement in evidence and on oath that the facts are in accordance with my knowledge of the matter.

**CHAIR:** Yes, we appreciate that. Perhaps you could direct your comments to what you might like to add or highlight about the statement.

**Mr DUNLOP:** The composition of the statement, as you have probably gathered, the first division explains my interest. I have added to that in my evidence. Then I deal with the establishment of Tocal college, because I think it is important for you to understand how the college was brought about. That section ends with the important statement, which I highlight. The fact that Tocal college was established as the outcome of the charitable trust provided for by the will of the late C. B. Alexander distinguishes it from similar entities administered by the State and otherwise brought into being. There is no other body, to my knowledge, akin to Tocal in its inception. The fact that it was brought into being as a charitable trust makes it imperative that there be a thorough understanding of the background of that establishment preceding any decision in any way affecting the future of Tocal college.

The third division relates to the Alexander involvement, because it was the Alexander benefaction that enabled Tocal college to come into being. It is important that the Committee understands how it was that Mr Alexander came to the situation and how it was he came to undertake the benefaction. For instance, it is important to know that he guided Tocal from a labour-intensive operation to one using the latest technology. The Alexander family were extremely good farmers; they

were renowned for that. They had an ongoing interest in agriculture and it was that that led them to the benefaction which gave rise to Tocal.

I then draw your attention to the fourth section, which relates to the management of the Alexander estate by the trustees, of whom my father, Dr Gardener, who helped prepare the will, Miss Myrtle Curtis and later the public trustee were responsible. They were the responsible trustees and they managed the property in fact for 17 years. That was done with the aid of Mr Gordon Reynolds, who was an astute manager, and it was through Mr Reynolds' efforts that the Tocal asset was preserved in an improved state, if that could be so, so that when the charitable trust came to be in effect converted by the New South Wales equity court the assets were there for that to be done.

The fifth section is a short section relating to the Curtis occupancy. Because there was so much reference to Misses Curtis I thought it was important that you understand where they fit into the scene. They in fact did their part and provided an endowment for Tocal college, both in their lifetime and in their wills. They created scholarships in their lifetime which are still current—they are perpetual scholarships—they endowed Tocal college through the C. B. Alexander Foundation, with a substantial portion of their estate to assist its future endeavours.

The sixth section refers to what I call Tocal and agriculture. It underlines the importance of the fact that the whole purpose of Tocal college is in effect to promote the charitable trust of the estate of C. B. Alexander as was said by the Minister for Agriculture at the time of the passage of Act No. 61 of 1963, I think, the C. B. Alexander Foundation Act which brought into being that foundation and enabled the passage of the conduct of the charitable trust from the Presbyterian church trustees to the New South Wales Government under the responsibility of the Minister for Agriculture, as he then was—I have referred to the Ministry for Agriculture throughout my paper but I accept that that is now the Ministry for Primary Industries.

It is significant to note that at that time it was on the invitation of the New South Wales Attorney General, extended to Mr Edward Hunt as the law agent for the Presbyterian church trustees. The Attorney, when they initially discussed this, said that the ultimate authority for the administration of the charitable trust is the Government, and suggested that the church approach the matter—they had been seeking funding for the Tocal operation because part of the deal the church trustees had made with the Alexander estate trustees was that the church would not go into debt on its own account because of the conduct of Tocal college.

The State was then proposing to open two other agricultural colleges, and the church trustees discussed this situation with the Attorney and later the Minister for Agriculture. The suggestion was made that perhaps Tocal college might be taken over by the State. It was then that the statement was, if I may say so with respect to the Attorney, quite correctly made because at the end of the day the State Government is in fact the body that is ultimately responsible for the carrying out of a charitable trust. The foundation was created as a statutory authority to administer that charitable trust and to hold the assets of the Alexander's trustees in perpetuity, and that implicitly must mean for the community on the basis of that charitable trust.

I take you to the seventh section which I head " Tocal College and the Future". It is in that section that I refer to a number of matters that are future, for example, the Tocal visitors centre which recently opened. Many of these things come through the innovation and imagination of the current principal, Mr Cameron Archer. Tocal is extremely fortunate to have him in that role. This was an idea he had and the visitors centre is a key element in identifying Tocal as an agricultural centre of State significance. It is part of the indication that Tocal is something more than just a place where you get some education in agriculture, albeit on a tertiary level.

That fits in with the concept that the testator had, whose idea was the training of youth in agriculture. It was really the idea that was brought to fruition for it's the idea that is fundamental to the charitable trust. Before I go to that, I pause at 7.8 because it is vital that the questions that I raise in 7.8, in any consideration of a change in the administration at Tocal—and you will have seen from the commencement of my paper that the particular term of reference with which I am concerned is the last term that relates to the issue of the future operations of Tocal college and a possible transfer of that college to the Department of Education and Training.

The questions that must be asked in any consideration are those questions that I raise in 7.8. First of all, you need to inquire as to the outcome of any such proposed change, and it is material, in considering that, to know whether the Department of Education and Training, or indeed any other department to which the administration of Tocal might be transferred for bureaucratic or other convenience or for whatever other reason, or any proposed administrative body, has within its existing context an operating resource. Tocal college, without its operating resources—that is, the farm—would not be a viable operation. It would not be a viable proposition. To my knowledge there is no other department, such as the Department of Education and Training, that has an operating resource like the Tocal farm or farms, if you wish to take each of the bodies of the farms. You will see from the papers that there are a number of them.

**CHAIR:** When you are referring to it as not being a viable proposition, you are saying without the working farm component. Is that what you are referring to?

**Mr DUNLOP:** Yes, and that is for a number of reasons. You could straight away see that there are two essential reasons. One is that if you had that operating resource removed entirely from Tocal—let us imagine that you just left the architectural buildings and you had a teaching resource there and you had none of the operating resources—with all its commercial rigour—I shall come to that shortly—how on earth could you conduct both the internal and external courses that are now being conducted by and at Tocal. You could not. It is as simple as that.

**CHAIR:** In terms of the operation and it being a commercial and viable agricultural venture, do you think this sets it apart from other institutions, such as the MCA? Do you draw a difference in terms of the way it is functioning and surviving?

**Mr DUNLOP:** I do indeed, and I endorse what Mr Hodgins said. You need to see Tocal in full swing. The resource is a resource in which the agricultural community of Australia takes great pride. Any one who has anything to do with primary industry considers that it is extremely well run and I shall come to that in a moment. The other part about it is that the return from that resource certainly enables the conduct of all of those matters, some of which I refer to in my paper, many of which Mr Hodgins referred to, but it enables it to be undertaken because of the return from the commercially rigorous conduct of that operating resource.

**CHAIR:** Can you tell the Committee what proportion of funding to Tocal comes from the farm earnings and what proportion comes from the estate of C. B. Alexander?

**Mr DUNLOP:** I cannot answer that myself.

**CHAIR:** Could you take that on notice for the Committee?

**Mr DUNLOP:** Yes, we could take that on notice. If someone could send it to me I could arrange for the college to produce those figures.

**CHAIR:** I think it would be valuable for the Committee to know that.

**Mr DUNLOP:** Then you see I go on and say exactly what I said then: An unsatisfactory answer to any of those matters means that you are in a situation where you say that you could not. It would preclude any change in management. The last four paragraphs are important because 7.11 emphasises that Tocal college has been a self-contained charitable trust from its inception. It is as such that it was initially under the administration of the church trustees. It is as such that the Tocal college was placed, and remains, under the administration of the New South Wales Government through its Minister for Agriculture.

As I said, that was emphasised in the speeches of the introductory passage of the bill in 1969. I am sorry, earlier I think I said 1963. It was bill No. 61 of 1969. It was a 1969 bill and in 1970 it became the property of the state. The principal object of the statute was made clear by the Minister of the day at the time he introduced the bill. He said that the principal object—it was then in the bill stage—of this bill is to promote the charitable intentions of the testator, the late CB Alexander. If I may say so, that was a perfectly correct approach to take because that is the object of the administration of the charitable trust, which Tocal college is.

**CHAIR:** It is interesting to understand the impact of its being a charitable trust. In 6.10 you mentioned that the Hunter Catchment Management Trust moved its office to a building on Tocal. In 6.11 you describe the nature of that catchment management organisation and state that there was an input from New South Wales Agriculture to Tocal advisory and regulatory staff. Are there any other Government agencies located at Tocal? Do these offices have anything to do with training at the college?

**Mr DUNLOP:** As to the first part of the question my answer is that I believe not, there are no other agencies there. As to the second part of the question, I think that the relevance of any training would be the same relevance of their presence in an area where primary production is undertaken: both those bodies are useful and assets. As I indicate, the staff include not just regulatory officers but also advisory officers. Without reference to the principal who is in the room, I would say that with regard to the second part of your question the students and the Tocal entity would certainly take comfort from their presence and would probably take advantage of that presence.

**CHAIR:** Appreciating that, do you think the fact that there was a tendency to input into this establishment by the Government at the same time as we are seeing a decline in areas like MCA is consequential to the fact that there is the establishment of the trust at an early stage and that it has been through all the legislative processes, and historically it has been given a great impetus to maintain? I guess that is apart from the quality of the establishment. But there are those who would argue that there is a certain quality of MCA that should make it similarly deserving. Could you comment on that at all?

**Mr DUNLOP:** It would be probably undesirable for me to comment on ministerial intentions or regulatory intentions.

**CHAIR:** You are under parliamentary privilege. You have every right to say what you like, and you are protected.

**Mr DUNLOP:** I would rather take the optimistic attitude that the reason for the establishment of those offices at Tocal is the enlightened attitude of the Department of Agriculture. Since 1970 it has had the continuing influential presence at Tocal. It has been a very sympathetic management presence at Tocal.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** It was at MCA, too.

**Mr DUNLOP:** Yes, but what I am saying about the department is that it is an initiative they have not taken. You may regard me as naive here, but I would not think they opened those offices because they were going to embark on some course that was against some other institution, such as the MCA; nor did they embark on those courses because they felt it would demonstrate to the public that they support Tocal because of the legislation for some other reason. I think they would take a very practical view, which has probably emanated from the local operators of those offices, that Tocal, being the excellent entity that it is in every way, we should be there to both benefit from what they are doing and so that we may have an input and they may benefit from what we are doing. The Hunter Valley is a bit like that. I was born and bred in the Hunter Valley. It is probably a little parochial in some ways, but it takes great pride in seeing that one another are helped, particularly in primary industry. That seems to brush off very much so, and has certainly in my lifetime, with the various offices associated with primary industry that operate in the Hunter Valley. They always seem ready to help. You get a corresponding return from the primary producer. But if I could pass from the charitable trust conclusions, 7.9 and 7.10 refer to the outcome of any inquiry, such as I have suggested in paragraph 7.0. In 7.11 I underline the need for the conservation of the charitable trust and all it entails. That must predominate in any consideration of the future of Tocal. But then of the last three points—

**CHAIR:** When you make that statement in 7.11, the conservation of that trust and all it entails must predominate in any consideration of the future of Tocal college, is there a compulsory nature to that due to the legislative set up and commitments given, or are you talking in general terms?

**Mr DUNLOP:** I am talking in general terms about the way in which the charitable trust ought to be approached. This is how Tocal really came about. The Chief Justice in Equity, Mr Justice McClelland, was the one who determined, after a lot of work had been done in regard to this an application had been made by Legacy—I believe there was one other application—but there is a doctrine, which, in short, enables the court, where it determines that the charitable trust as contained in the will is impracticable that the trust may then be shifted by the court to another charitable trust or another scheme that approximates the charitable trust proposed by the testator. The courts will bend over backwards, as it were, to see that the testator's intention if it possibly can be fulfilled is fulfilled. That is the way it does it without going to the legalities and the way we came down that path. That is why His Honour was able to say that the scheme under the will is impracticable. That has been demonstrated, and that is over a long period.

But the scheme of Legacy was not in accordance with the precepts the court established from the testator's scheme, but the Presbyterian Church trustees scheme was, and they approved that scheme. Nonetheless it remained a charitable trust that was being administered by church trustees. The Alexander Estate Charitable Trust did not then become the property of the Presbyterian Church to be sold by the church or whatever onto the State. That is why the Attorney said what he said to the trustees, and that matter was adverted to in the reading of the bill. The primary purpose of the legislation was to ensure, was to promote the intent of the testator and the testator's charitable trust. That is why I reiterate that. I have no doubt that the Parliament of New South Wales is sovereign. I do not propose to suggest that it could not legislate to do all sorts of things. But what I am saying is that particularly in view of the responsibility it is spelled out in enacting the legislation and it is spelled out through its chief law officer beforehand, its understanding of the need to properly administer a charitable trust.

What I am suggesting is that any movement of Tocal away from the situation in which that charitable trust can be achieved in a way that is seen to be a promotion of the testator's intention would be open to question if the Government did not go through all of those steps first of all. For instance, if it were charitable trust that ended up wasting public money then no-one would have any objection to the Government saying, "We just can't afford to spend money like this, even though it is a worthy and laudable object. We must bring down legislation to deal with it." But if you are dealing with the future administration of an entity like Tocal, it is distinctive in many ways. You need to look at it in that context, in the context not of just another educational institution with some special features where it is more convenient to do it this way than that and perhaps more economical to do it this way than that, but you need to look at the whole thing, these special features. That is why I say you need to look at the background and you need to go through it to see how we got to the point we are at. It is a bit like knowing your history because that tells you where you are at and why you are there, and seeing what you can do in light of that history.

**Ms SYLVIA HALE:** What you are saying is that there could well be legal constraints and even if there were not, obviously, there are considerable moral restraints to any moves to fundamentally alter the nature of the institution. If it were to take place it should be done only with great care. I assume that you want to bring this to the attention to the Committee because you have seen what has happened to MCA, and you have also put it in the context—I hope not to put words into your mouth—of the history of a number of other residential facilities having been closed. I assume that has created some sort of alarm in your mind as to the ultimate intentions with regard to Tocal?

**Mr DUNLOP:** Indeed. That is precisely it. There was some inquiry about this, not Government inquiry, but I could not tell you the precise details. About 10 years ago there was some suggestion that there would be some change in the administration. At that time the matter was not raised specifically. Straightaway I thought of this because to my mind it was an important part of the Tocal background. I could imagine the public outcry, for instance, if a benefactor now for a perfectly proper purpose gave as much as \$20 million—I did not do a proper conversion—to the State and said, "Minister, I would like to give you access to the value of \$20 million in today's terms to be used for, want of a better thing, public health and administered by the State Government. I propose to incorporate that into a charitable trust, and I will." If the State Government accepted that but then did something else with the money, something it was perfectly justified because we did not need another hospital or it would be wasteful so it decides to do something else, there would be a public outcry. It is not the opprobrium of the public outcry, but at the bottom of everything—this applies to democracy and government—there must be a form of morality. There is no doubt in my mind that Alexander's



benefaction belongs to the public, the community. Tocal college is a community-based entity. It is that because of what made it and that is why it became what it today is. That must be borne in mind by everyone, including the legislators. So, if anyone thinks we might make some changes, they need to take into account all that.

I daresay—and I hope it would not occur in my lifetime, but I am a bit long in the tooth to undertake those sorts of battles—if that occurred, as you have seen in the past on matters of great moment, there would be some public outcry. If you bring matters to the notice of legislators—and legislators are like juries, they are a good cross-section of the community—they do their best. Sometimes you get outcomes not so welcome to the public and sometimes they are very welcome, but if you do not bring matters to their attention, if you do not underline matters that are salient, they will be overlooked. You cannot blame them if they do not do something and you have not told them. They will say, no one told us that, not even the Attorney.

That is part of my reason. If I bring it to notice and is on the record, someone will say—just as you said, Ms Hale—there is something odd about that. There is a loquacious old fellow who came along and talked to us one day about charitable trusts. He did not seem to know too much about it. Maybe we ought to ask a lawyer who does know about it what we ought to do. That is part of the reason.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** If we put aside the morality of it, at the end of the day, in your legal opinion, a bequest as it is does not prevent the Minister from selling it?

**Mr DUNLOP:** What you have to remember about that, Mr Colless is that, one, I no longer hold a practising certificate and therefore I am not insured. I then have a contradiction. I do not know whether it is a good defence to say I am under oath and I had just given the Government some gratuitous advice it does not want. I do not say you cannot sell because that is a charitable trust. What I am saying is it is a charitable trust and all the matters I have averted to this afternoon are what go along with a charitable trust. As you heard me say earlier, I recognise that the Parliament of New South Wales is sovereign in this State. It is not for me to forbid it doing something—what an impertinence. I think Ms Hale put it succinctly. She said quite properly it is something we always have to be conscious of and there is a legal problem. I have not sat down and found the legal business on that, because I have been away from the law for 10 years. But I think something has to be looked at, particularly what was said at the time of the passage of the bill.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** Do you see any common threads, though, between what is happening with some agricultural research stations in New South Wales—quite a few of them have been listed to be sold—and what is happening with the agricultural colleges? In terms of the bequest, I understand the research station called Shannon Vale in northern New South Wales was sold just six weeks ago, and I understand that was a bequest to the department that was subsequently sold. So, obviously it has the power to do it?

**Mr DUNLOP:** There may have been something in the will that said in the event of X or Y you have the power to sell. But I think if the Government was resolved on a course of action in relation to the matter, no doubt it could legislate, but I think it would have to look at the statute—I think it is 61 of 1969. If you look at that statute you would agree with me that you would have to legislate to overcome what is in that statute. If that happens, a lot of other issues would then have to be addressed, not least of which is if you wound up the whole charitable trust lock, stock and barrel, and it came to the public knowledge that a charitable trust now worth \$35 million or \$40 million, and the government of the day of whichever political persuasion was proposing to use it for its deficit in the railways, I think some very strong representations would be made. I think a wise Government would confer with everyone involved and say we have had this huge sum of money and we are set on this purpose.

**The Hon. RICK COLLESS:** A much easier course of action would be to do exactly what it has done with Murrumbidgee, that is close down the residential courses and just offer short courses?

**Mr DUNLOP:** My answer to that straightaway is that Tocal being what it has become without the opportunity for residents would be circumscribed indeed. The reasons given by everyone else who have spoken today about the residential courses and the abolition of them, and I can readily

recognise there are a number of reasons why residential courses are difficult to run these days from every point of view. Lawyers have contributed to that themselves and they encourage litigation over liability. But there are all sorts of other reasons, and that is a problem the entirety of society has to grapple with and determine those things. I think, particularly as they were homes for destitute children who shall be trained in agriculture, that there was always a concept that Tocal would have residential facilities, and it has worked out extremely well in the context of what they are doing. I foresee that going to greater and greater things, because the whole thing that underlies Tocal is the extreme rigour with which everything is done. Whatever you see there, there is nothing sloppy about it. Even things like Pumby Brush Walk that I mentioned, there is a wonderful exercise in environmental restoration done with loving care and great detail, and everything is like that. You go and see the dairy in operation or something else happening there. It is done rigorously, and that is the reason it has the reputation it has in Australian agriculture, because people recognise that as a place where excellence prevails.

**(The witness withdrew)**

**(The Committee adjourned at 3.53 p.m.)**