

# **PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 3 – EDUCATION**

**Monday 10 March 2025**

**Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio areas**

## **SKILLS, TAFE AND TERTIARY EDUCATION**

<b>CORRECTED</b>
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**The Committee met at 9:15.**

### **MEMBERS**

Ms Abigail Boyd (Chair)

The Hon. Susan Carter  
The Hon. Anthony D'Adam  
The Hon. Dr Sarah Kaine  
The Hon. Stephen Lawrence  
The Hon. Rachel Merton (Deputy Chair)  
The Hon. Tania Mihailuk  
The Hon. Sarah Mitchell

### **PRESENT**

**The Hon. Steve Whan**, *Minister for Skills, TAFE and Tertiary Education*

## **CORRECTIONS TO TRANSCRIPT OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS**

**Corrections should be marked on a photocopy of the proof and forwarded to:**

**Budget Estimates secretariat  
Room 812  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000**

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the second hearing of Portfolio Committee No. 3 – Education for the additional round of the inquiry into budget estimates 2024-25. I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are joining us today or watching online. My name is Abigail Boyd. I am the Chair of the Committee. I welcome Minister Whan and accompanying officials to this hearing.

Today the Committee will examine the proposed expenditure for the portfolios of Skills, TAFE and Tertiary Education. I ask everyone in the room to please turn their mobile phones to silent. Parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses in relation to the evidence they give today. However, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside the hearing, so I urge witnesses to be careful about making comments to the media or to others after completing their evidence. In addition, the Legislative Council has adopted rules to provide procedural fairness for inquiry participants. I encourage Committee members and witnesses to be mindful of those procedures.

I welcome our witnesses and thank them for making the time to give evidence here today. All witnesses will be sworn prior to giving evidence. Minister, I remind you that you do not need to be sworn as you have already sworn an oath to your office as a member of Parliament. Witnesses who appeared at the initial hearing before this Committee for this inquiry also do not need to be sworn.

**Mr MURAT DIZDAR**, Secretary, NSW Department of Education, on former affirmation

**Mr JEREMY KURUCZ**, Relieving Deputy Secretary, Education and Skills Reform, NSW Department of Education, on former affirmation

**Ms AMANDA LAWRENCE**, Executive Director, Training Services NSW, NSW Department of Education, affirmed and examined

**Ms CHLOE READ**, Acting Managing Director, TAFE NSW, affirmed and examined

**Ms KERRY MEREDITH-SOTIRIS**, Acting Chief Product and Quality Officer, TAFE NSW, affirmed and examined

**Ms JULIE TICKLE**, Chief People Officer, TAFE NSW, affirmed and examined

**Ms JANET SCHORER**, Chief Learning and Teaching Officer, TAFE NSW, sworn and examined

**Mr PETER ARAMBATZIS**, Chief Operating Officer, TAFE NSW, sworn and examined

**Ms FIONA RANKIN**, Chief Information Officer, TAFE NSW, on former affirmation

**Ms REBECCA McPHEE**, Deputy Secretary, Investment NSW, Premier's Department, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** I note that there are witnesses in the overflow seating area. I'd like to remind you to, if you come forward to answer a question, please bring your nameplate with you and place it in front of you at the table. This assists Hansard in ensuring the correct witness is identified in the hearing transcript. Today's hearing will be conducted from 9.15 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. We're joined by the Minister for the morning session from 9.15 a.m. to 1.00 p.m. with a 15-minute break at 11.00 a.m. In the afternoon we'll hear from departmental witnesses from 2.00 p.m. to 5.30 p.m. with a 15-minute break at 3.30 p.m. During those sessions there will be questions from Opposition and crossbench members only and then 15 minutes allocated for Government questions at 10.45 a.m., 12.45 p.m. and 5.15 p.m.

We will begin with questions from the crossbench. I will go first. Minister, there has been a lot of media coverage and discussion of late in relation to universities. I know that we've discussed before the distinction between your role as a New South Wales Minister and obviously the Federal Minister's role when it comes to university governance. But I note that, under the legislation under which the universities are set up in New South Wales, you do have powers to, for example, request financial information and that sort of thing. Have you exercised any of those powers?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** In general the role of the New South Wales Government is we establish universities by our legislation. We appoint two people to their councils. In terms of the financial question, we do get reporting from the universities each year about their financial positions. That is available—I believe, Secretary, we make that publicly available. Last year's reporting suggested that the vast majority of our universities in New South Wales were losing money and I think we've heard from them the reasons for that, particularly the decline and difficulties with overseas students that they've had. They're facing a challenging situation. That's what the financial reporting to us has shown us. Secretary, do you want to elaborate on that?

**MURAT DIZDAR:** Like the Minister indicated, their statements are available in annual reports, particularly in relation to their funding. It is \$179 million across governments in 2023 compared to \$160 million in 2022.

**The CHAIR:** Can I stop you there because I think there are a couple of things the Minister has just raised. Firstly, I'm well aware of the annual reports. I read them on a regular basis but, under the actual legislation—for example, the University of Wollongong at section 21D:

The Minister may request a report from the Council as to University commercial activities or as to any particular University commercial activity or aspect of a University commercial activity.

For instance, when the University of Wollongong was reported as having financial difficulties quite recently as well as a couple of years back, did you, for instance, take that opportunity to seek more information under that provision?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Not formally under that provision. I do get, as I said, an annual report about the financial status of the universities. I also do speak to them regularly, so I have face-to-face meetings with universities on occasions and Wollongong is one of those that I've had a meeting with and they've talked to me about some of the challenges that they're facing. I also meet regularly with the vice-chancellors. I have been kept very well informed about some of the challenges that they're facing.

**The CHAIR:** One of the other things you mentioned there was student numbers. My understanding is that there is a huge amount of wasteful spending within these universities on things like consultants. We had almost \$1 billion in consulting fees just in the 2023-24 financial year—also, of course, the \$1 million-plus salaries of the CEOs and the executives, most of whom are earning more than half a million dollars in each of these universities and then also a bunch of redundancies and things that then they have decided was actually a mistake and have to go and re-hire people. Given that what we understand from the annual reports is quite different to the media narrative, what have you done as Minister having these powers under these Acts to actually work out what's happening in these universities?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'll ask the secretary to elaborate on this in a minute but my powers are very limited. We don't direct the governance of the universities. The New South Wales Government doesn't have a role in being able to tell the universities how much they should pay the CEOs, for example. The one thing I have focused on in my discussions with the universities and the vice-chancellors is on urging them to act quickly to rectify underpayments for staff. That's something which I have asked them to report to me about regularly and they have been doing that. The secretary can elaborate on the other aspects.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** Yes. As the Committee would know, New South Wales universities—they're administratively autonomous so how they then meet their financial obligations and go about their tasks around teaching and learning, their faculties, their course offerings, their content, their enrolment, their employment is up to them. They're not subject to, for example, the savings that the Government has requested that we make across agencies for consultants, which I've covered in the education committee, about where we're up to. I guess, like the Minister is indicating, it's up to them around how they organise their financial management. You'd know that they've got university councils that they report to around that.

**The CHAIR:** Can we just come back to that, then? Minister, I hear what you're saying about some of your limitations, but given that not only do you have powers to inquire into financial and commercial activities and get yourself satisfied that the universities are running effectively, but you also appoint members to university senates and councils. That's quite a lot of responsibility and power. What are you doing to exercise your functions in a way that helps these universities to clean their act up?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I think it's very clear that the Commonwealth has the power over universities, in terms of regulation and funding. The direction comes from the Commonwealth. It hasn't been a role for State Government to take a day-to-day role in the administration of universities or in oversighting the administration of universities. That's not been a role the State has taken.

**The CHAIR:** But you're appointing people who do.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes, we appoint two members of councils, and we've focused, in doing that, on ensuring that we are asking universities to bring forward candidates to us. They bring us candidates. They are appointed. We've been asking universities to bring forward candidates to us who have education experience, particularly, and represent the diversity that we want to see on the councils. The reason for that focus on educational experience is that we've tended to see universities have gone with commercial experience, particularly, but having that educational experience and the diversity of council members is something which this Government has felt was important. That's what we've been focusing on with our appointments.

**The CHAIR:** Obviously universities exist under State legislation, and that State legislation sets the object and functions of universities. You have recently made changes to certain aspects—I think it was University of Sydney, something to do with the accommodation. Apologies, I can't remember. It was last year.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes, there was some legislation. Fairly minor changes went through, yes.

**The CHAIR:** The point is you do have powers to influence how they operate, in terms of changes to the Act. For example, could you put in some sort of change that would stop consultants from sitting on university boards?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We don't control the other appointments to the councils. That's not something that the State Government has been involved in. The New South Wales governments, over a long period of time, have essentially accepted that our role in this is as the legislative basis for the universities to be there, but that the Commonwealth—and the Commonwealth has been taking the lead through things like the Accord review. That's focused very strongly on governance. It's focused very strongly on campus safety and a range of other areas like that, which I think are very important.

**The CHAIR:** I appreciate that.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Perhaps the secretary could elaborate on the extent of the role.

**The CHAIR:** I might come back to the secretary this afternoon. Again, let's look at, for example, section 6 of the University of Wollongong Act. It sets out very clearly what the objects and functions of the university should be. It is entirely within your powers, isn't it, to restrict what sort of things they can and can't do? It talks about the establishment of the university, consisting of the council et cetera. It's got appointed members. It basically sets out the whole administrative structure for a university. You could change that, couldn't you, Minister?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Parliament could change that, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, but you could propose it, if you were concerned about it.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** The question is to what extent should we be duplicating the Commonwealth's role in this. We've accepted over a period of time that the Commonwealth has the prime responsibility in this space.

**The CHAIR:** If the Commonwealth was to decide that it wanted to change the make-up of the senate and council on Wollongong university, for instance, how would it do that?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Hypothetically, if it wanted to do that—we've been working with the Commonwealth over a period of time over their accord discussions. If they came back to us and said that there were issues around governance which they wanted to see addressed through the State legislation, then we could attempt to take that forward.

**The CHAIR:** Right, but it would still have to go through State legislation—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** But that's a hypothetical at the moment—

**The CHAIR:** —which brings it back to you.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** —because at this stage the Commonwealth has, through its accord discussions, suggested that it will be working with the universities directly. That's something which we've been engaged with.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Minister, I just wanted to ask you this morning about Bankstown TAFE, which I'm sure you'd be aware I probably would ask. Can I just refresh the Committee on this issue, and that is, of course, that a decision was made by the Government to proceed with putting a hospital at the Bankstown TAFE site, and that the whole site would be redeveloped. Bankstown TAFE is going to be seeking temporary accommodation while this rebuild happens on the site there at Bankstown TAFE to accommodate a new hospital. On 18 September, there was an ROI for delivery of temporary accommodation for the TAFE site, I think with a closing date of 15 October, and an announcement set for 16 December. It says on that eTender that you as Minister will make a final decision. So which location has been identified from the tender?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** You're right; the ROI did go out. We did have a number of responses to that. I'll ask TAFE to elaborate on that in a minute. TAFE has been undertaking due diligence investigations on those sites. The investigations are actually ongoing at the moment. Obviously, that's a part of the process of working with Health over the planning for the site.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Is that why there's a delay in the announcement? Because it says on 16 December you would announce where the temporary accommodation would be.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'll ask Ms Read to elaborate on that, because I'm not sure that I remember saying 16 December.

**CHLOE READ:** That's not a date I'm familiar with. As the Minister said, we're working through due diligence on a site in Bankstown and hopefully will be able to advise students and staff on that location very soon.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I'm pretty sure I saw 16 December as the—it's online. You can go and look at it online. It says, "Estimated decision date 16 December 2024." Do you want to have a look yourself?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I didn't make any public comment on that.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I can table the document, if you need to see it, but it says the estimated decision date. It's now three months, so I'm just wondering what's the delay in the decision as to where the temporary accommodation is going to go.

**CHLOE READ:** I might take on notice the difference between the estimated date and where we're at in the discussions. I'm not sure whether they are set as a standard thing, or whether that's indicative of something in particular.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** It's online. If you look up the document that talks about the delivery of temporary accommodation, it quite clearly says that it's been published on 18 September, the close date was 15 October, 3.00 p.m., and estimated decision date is 16 December. We're now 10 March 2025.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** "Estimated" being the key thing, obviously.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I'm asking what is the reason for the delay, Minister? What's the reason for the delay in announcing this?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** As Ms Read has said, we have been in the process of assessing the sites and ensuring that they demonstrate value for government. I'm confident that we will be able to meet our time frames on this.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** What's the available budget for the tender for the temporary relocation of Bankstown TAFE, Minister?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** The relocation is a part of the overall budget for the hospital project, which we don't actually know. Health is leading that project and they'll obviously come up with the final cost.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Wouldn't you need to know what your budget is for the relocation as you go out for a tender?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'll ask Ms Read to answer that.

**CHLOE READ:** One of the elements of the way that we approached the market on this was a request for information and then for proposals, so we could understand the shape and scope of the potential costs for the relocation. That obviously depends on the types of premises that are available, the fit-out that we would need to do, and the rates that we would be offered.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** You didn't have an available budget?

**CHLOE READ:** As the Minister said, the budget exists for the project overall.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** You've just said to me in your response that you were going to look at what sort of options for the sites—to work out the costing of the specific temporary accommodation.

**CHLOE READ:** That's how we narrow down those costs and make sure, as part of the procurement exercise, that, as the Minister said, we're getting value for money in the relocation to that site.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I think it's not the practice of government normally to indicate the cost of something before we go to tender, because that frames people's tenders.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Hang on; it's after tender. You've already gone to tender.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** And we—the discussions that—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** And you've already gone three months after the estimated decision date, Minister, so by now I would have thought there'd be some thoughts on it.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** The decision hasn't been taken finally yet. I can confirm that. But the final cost is—obviously the discussions with those tenderers are commercial in confidence anyway.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Minister, you haven't had anything before your desk about which sites are being considered?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No, I have not.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** It hasn't been discussed with you at this stage. Is that what you're saying?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Not yet, no.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Minister, regarding this eTender, an amendment was made on 26 September and it called for the "removal of conflicting requirement from introduction text".

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Sorry, say that again.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** On 26 September there was an amendment made to the ROI, and it called for the "removal of conflicting requirement from introduction text". Why was this amendment made?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'd have to ask TAFE to clarify that or maybe take that on notice.

**CHLOE READ:** I might need to take that one on notice. It's before my time.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can I ask if you've received a proposal from Canterbury Bankstown council?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Personally, I'm not aware of who we've received proposals from. I suspect that would be commercial in confidence, but I'll ask Ms Read to answer that question.

**CHLOE READ:** That's right. We wouldn't be able to disclose who's put in a proposal under this process.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** What I want you to take on notice is I want to know when your estimated date will be, given there's a three-month delay to an estimated decision. You've got timelines because you're supposed to have this whole rebuild of the hospital completed—when? By the end of 2026?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'm happy to take on notice the time frames for the relocation, for the process. If we can as a part of that, I'm happy to—I will take it all on notice, obviously.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** You're confident that everything is on plan, then, Minister, for the rebuild of the site—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** It's a very big project and Health is obviously running it.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** —if we're already delayed in the tender?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Health is running the project overall, but I'm confident that the TAFE portion of it is on track. We've been discussing—I've been meeting regularly with Minister Park, who's obviously got overall carriage of the proposal. Our departments—TAFE has been meeting with Health Infrastructure on a regular basis. We are confident that we'll meet our targets for relocating the TAFE so that the build can commence.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Is NSW Health actively involved in this process or not? Not with the temporary relocation—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** They are the overall managers of the project, but Ms Read can clarify whether they're involved in the relocation portion or not.

**CHLOE READ:** They're not involved in the process or the governance of it, but obviously we're keeping them closely updated.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** But they must be giving some dates as to when they need—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes.

**CHLOE READ:** We're keeping them updated. We have, as the Minister said, regular contact with them. Obviously, when you're running a project like this, there's essentially a need for every party involved to be communicating well with the others.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I put on notice that I'd like some more details about when the estimated decision date will be. To make it very clear, I also put on notice that I want to know the reasons the amendment was made to remove the "conflicting requirement from introduction text", which is quite significant—who made that decision and why.

**The CHAIR:** Minister, at the last estimates in September we spoke about the role of TAFE's training colleges and universities in preventing gendered violence. Has there been any progress made in working with the Commonwealth on the initiatives coming out of the Universities Accord relating to safety on campus?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We have had continuing meetings with the Commonwealth around the implementation of the Universities Accord. We've seen, obviously, some significant work that the accord group has been doing over antisemitic incidence. The campus safety aspect of it has been Ministers have agreed that would be the priority area for implementation in the accord. I might hand over to the department to elaborate on where that's at at the moment.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** I can add, Chair, the National Student Ombudsman—which was the call for a new statutory function under that accord—has been set up and is taking student complaints. That kicked off on 1 February this year, so that's underway. Also, the universities accord bill 2025 was introduced to the Australian Parliament on 6 February. If passed, that legislation would empower the Federal education Minister to establish the new national code, which will require national higher education providers to take specific actions to prevent, and appropriately respond to, gender-based violence. That code is set to comprise seven standards that cover the following areas: leadership and governance is the first; trauma-informed processes is the second; reporting and data collection; and further areas, as well as student accommodation. There has been movement, and that key legislative piece would help in that space as well.



**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Good morning, Minister and officials. It's nice to see you all. Minister, I want to start with something that my colleague asked in relation to the universities. You said that you meet quite regularly with the different university vice-chancellors. Are you able to tell me the last time you met with anybody from the University of Wollongong?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Can I take on notice the date? I did meet in the last months with somebody from the University of Wollongong. I specifically discussed with them issues around international students.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** If you could take on notice, that's fine. Are you able also to advise the Committee whether you spoke to them about what their budget will be going forward, any other cuts or changes that they may need to make to improve their financial position?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Not in specific terms about what cuts they might make, but they certainly conveyed to me the challenges they were facing as a result of declining income.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Is that based on concerns with international students or more broadly?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Primarily with international students.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I might follow that up with them this afternoon. Thank you for that. I want to take you now to what's happening on the North Coast in the Northern Rivers. I understand that there are a number TAFE campuses that are closed. Are you able to provide an update on how many are currently closed and when you anticipate they will reopen?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes. There are currently 20 TAFE campuses which are closed for students. We have two of them which are evacuation centres: Kingscliff and Murwillumbah. Murwillumbah is a staging centre for the SES. Those three campuses have activity on them. Twenty campuses are currently closed. Obviously we're watching the situation very closely. Ms Read has informed me this morning that TAFE is currently looking to reopen on Thursday. Ms Read?

**CHLOE READ:** Obviously what we're doing—yesterday, today, tomorrow will be to, where safe, assess the condition of the campuses. Then we'll need to undertake any rectification or safety measures. As the Minister said, we're still obviously watching the weather in a couple of places really closely. The incident management team has recommended that those campuses are closed until Thursday, but we'll be making those assessments over the coming days.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Have you been able to assess yet—and you may not have given the ongoing weather—if there has been any damage that you're aware of to any of the campuses at this point?

**CHLOE READ:** I'd say not in a fulsome and comprehensive way. There's a few things that I'm aware of. There was a tree at our Kingscliff campus that did land on a building. They think the damage is fairly minimal from that. There are some bits of guttering from roofs and things. Kingscliff we know about because it's operating as an evacuation centre, but many of our campuses are closed. We've made sure that staff do not attend onsite, and they should continue to not attend until we've made those assessments.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** The campuses that are being used as evacuation centres and also as the—what did you say?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Staging centre.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Are you anticipating that they'll be in a position to open on Thursday? Or will that take a bit longer, depending on community need?

**CHLOE READ:** I think that will take a bit longer, depending on community need. Again, that will be very dependent on the weather, in terms of whether the individuals at those centres are able to return to their homes, then we'll need to make sure that we put the campus back as it needs to be for normal operation.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** What support are you providing to students who have been impacted with the closure over the course of about a week—fingers crossed—if you can reopen on Thursday? What's in place for those students?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'll ask Ms Read to talk about individual support. Obviously we've been very conscious of the safety, first and foremost, of our staff and students, and thus the decisions. I could also say that I've been to Kingscliff three times since I've been Minister, which is interesting, and also Wollongbar. One of the things which I have heard from the staff there is just how passionate they are about providing that support that they're doing, because Kingscliff was also an evacuation centre in 2022.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I remember.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** So we're very focused on looking after the welfare of the staff, but I also hear from them just how satisfying, I suppose, it is for them to be able to help in the way that they're able to do in those circumstances. Ms Read can elaborate on that.

**CHLOE READ:** We have had regular contact with students. We have sent them emails but also SMS texts, and we'll be offering them the full range of services in terms of support. In terms of their learning, first, where we can, we've been moving provision to be online and to make sure that they can continue where they need to, and then of course we have counselling staff and educational support staff, who can assist where students might need additional support.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Picking up on what you said, Minister, about a lot of these areas being impacted back in 2022, I am obviously aware of that having been the education Minister at the time. I think some of the underlying issues around trauma and things are tending to be triggered quite a lot again, and that was something that came across very obviously back then, and I anticipate that's happening with community now. Will you look at some mental health counselling support for those who may need it, through TAFE as well? And what do you envisage that will look like?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We certainly have a very strong range of individual supports, and I absolutely acknowledge that trauma of an event coming so quickly after a previous one, and I certainly remember the 2003 bushfires in the ACT region. Whenever there was smoke in the air after that, you could feel the tension and concern, and I would absolutely understand people in the Northern Rivers feeling the same way. So TAFE will be continuing to offer the support that it does for our students, and Ms Read can perhaps elaborate on that.

**CHLOE READ:** Obviously we have the employee assistance program; that's there all the time. But we can also arrange for additional onsite support where needed, and we're likely to be doing that at some of our campuses in the coming weeks.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** So you'll just assess when you're back, and see what's needed?

**CHLOE READ:** Yes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I just thought it was important to ask on behalf of the Committee. We're thinking of everyone up there and what they're going through. Minister, did Stephen Brady quit or did you sack him?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** It was my decision, and I made the decision on a few things. First of all, can I say that Mr Brady, in the period he was there, provided stability to TAFE, which was very much appreciated. He has gone through a number of areas of strong reform in TAFE as we have gone over the last period, where there has been quite a lot of change, with the VET Review, with putting in place a new operating model for TAFE, developing the TAFE Charter. I felt, though, that we had some challenges coming up soon, which needed a different skill set. We all have different skill sets.

While I very much appreciated working with Mr Brady, I took the decision that we needed a different skill set to take us forward over the next period, where there is a number of quite significant changes which need to take place at TAFE. I have been very pleased that Ms Read has agreed to be the acting managing director of TAFE and brings to it—as I know you're aware, because you would have worked with Ms Read when you were the Minister—a breadth of experience in the skills portfolio, which can really help us to actually take the next steps forward. Some of those are really important, like bedding down the new operating model, moving us through the implementation of the rest of the VET Review and a whole range of areas like that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Just to be clear, he didn't resign; he was terminated from that position? Is that correct?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Correct.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Can you provide on notice any details of the payout that he received as part of that process? I'm happy for you to take it on notice.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Certainly will take that on notice. Of course, it was consistent with the legislation under the Government Sector Employment Act.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** You just mentioned then, Minister, that you felt that he was missing some skill sets that you wanted going forward. Can you elaborate a bit more on what skills they were that you didn't feel he had?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Firstly can I say I'm not criticising Mr Brady at all, the work that he did in the time. He brought stability to TAFE over a period of time which had had a series of managing directors with a fairly

quick rotation, and that's something which I very much appreciated his work in. The challenges that we have got moving forward, in terms of where TAFE is going, is obviously continuing the transition to the new delivery model. The Government has committed, over the next 12 months, to remove TAFE from contestable market, so from the Smart and Skilled market, which is something which is a very significant change and one where we need to work through closely with Treasury and the central agencies and Department of Education, how that's going to work. There's phase two of the operating model, which needs to happen. There's a number of other challenges, I guess, which come from the implementation of the VET Review. I felt it was really important to have someone in place who could make the linkages between the rest of the Skills portfolio and the Federal initiatives, who could take us forward with the Federal Government and the implementation of things which we'd agreed to do.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Was there any sort of performance management? Or was it just a decision you made as Minister, that you wanted a new direction?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** It was a decision I made in January, that we needed a different skill set.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** There has been some media reporting too about TAFE being in turmoil. There's a restructure going ahead, I understand, as well. Can you tell us how many positions have been made redundant so far as part of that restructure?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I would dispute TAFE being in turmoil, obviously. We have had a new operating model which we're putting in place. We're moving TAFE to a faculty model. As you'd know, under the previous Government, your Government, you changed to the One TAFE model, but it was halfway in a lot of ways, and we have moved to a faculty model because we felt that was a better way of ensuring that we could share skills and best practice in the development of curricula and a range of other areas across the State. I have had really positive feedback about the faculty model to start with. One example was a discussion recently around the challenges of delivering heavy vehicle mechanic programs in the mining areas, and the faculty model has meant that they can actually have a look at what the rest of the State is doing and make sure that they're offering best practice. That's an illustration of why we've gone to that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Just keen on positions and restructure, if I can. Thanks, Minister.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes. I think we're moving in a direction. Obviously any change in structure does lead to some restructuring. There has been a change to a number of—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** There's media reporting about 80 positions being made redundant. Is that accurate?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I said "up to 80" in an answer in the Parliament in early days. We have not seen 80 positions made redundant, but we haven't finished the process yet either. I'll ask Ms Read to elaborate on that.

**CHLOE READ:** The current scope of the change—the Minister alluded to some further changes to the operating model to come yet—is a net of 53 positions at the moment. You'd understand, as we work through these processes, we have consultation with staff. We take their feedback on the design and we make sure that the design, where appropriate, reflects those changes. So those numbers will move around during that sort of a process. Then it's just also important to remember that doesn't mean 53 people. It means 53 positions. We still have employees who are in the government mobility process as a result of those changes. So we don't have an answer on the number of staff overall who might—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Because they may go to other positions.

**CHLOE READ:** That's right.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Would you be able to provide, as best as you can, on notice, if people have accepted redundancies for any of those 53 positions; I'm sure some have—how many and again the costs associated in terms of any kind of redundancy packages?

**CHLOE READ:** Yes. Because they're still working through that placement, I suspect that there haven't been redundancies. Is that correct, Ms Tickle?

**JULIE TICKLE:** We'll take on notice the number of redundancies. But, as Ms Read and the Minister have said, we're still in the placement process, so we haven't got final numbers. Quite a number of people have accepted positions with government agencies other than TAFE through the mobility process as well.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Any updates you can provide, that would be great. Ms Read, this is in no way a reflection on you. Having worked with you—and I'll echo what the Minister said—I know you're an excellent public servant.

**CHLOE READ:** I understand.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** But, in terms of the recruitment process for the permanent position of MD, where is that up to? And when do you anticipate that to be finalised?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** It is obviously my decision as to how to progress that, and I'm expecting to make that decision quite soon.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** So there's no process underway at the moment.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'll make a decision on that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Will that be publicly announced, that process, or just the successful appointment? What's the plan?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I will come back to you on that. I will make some announcements on that in the next few weeks, probably.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I want to take you to the TAFE Charter that was released, I think, last month, or not that long ago. Who was ultimately responsible for the work on this document? Was it yourself or through TAFE? Where was the genesis of it?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** The genesis of it is the VET Review, which recommended that we should have a TAFE Charter to set out the Government's responsibilities and to recognise that TAFE should be recognised as being the heart of the vocational training system in New South Wales. The philosophical basis of it, obviously, is that central position. You would know from the VET Review that it talked about stewardship of the vocational training system. We really wanted to place TAFE in that situation. The charter is attempting to ensure that we're outlining where we see government's responsibilities, in terms of our community service obligations, our responsibilities to rural and regional areas, and to people who have more difficulties accessing training. The development of the charter happened from TAFE, but in consultation with other agencies across government and then with me as the ultimate person who took it to Cabinet, obviously.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In terms of the consultation with current students and staff, what did that look like?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We actually went through a period where we had discussions around it. Ms Read wasn't the managing director at the time, but I'll ask her to perhaps outline or pass on.

**CHLOE READ:** I don't have an outline of the consultation specifically.

**JULIE TICKLE:** I can give a little bit of information, if it's helpful to the Committee. The consultation for the charter involved various stakeholders, including the unions. There was some feedback feeding in from TAFE Connects, which is our survey that went out to communities across the State. That was fed into the charter. Employee groups—the teacher reference group, for example, that we had in place last year for the operating model, they had some input into the charter as well. I'm not sure if that's the fulsome amount of consultation.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'll also add that the TAFE board and the Skills Board were obviously a part of the process, too.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** What about current students? Was there any input from them?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** As you have heard, we surveyed and we've been through that process getting the views of students.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** What about industry, local government or anyone external to TAFE?

**CHLOE READ:** I think the other place that may have consulted on the charter was that review reference group, which contained a range of industry stakeholders, different agencies across government and those types of bodies.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** And obviously the Skills Board and the TAFE board include representatives of industry as well.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Yes, I understand that. Is there any plan to evaluate the effectiveness of the charter and whether you're going to meet some of the outcomes that you've got in here?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Ms Read will elaborate on this. Yes, we didn't want to just put it in place and then leave it on the shelf.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** It's a lovely glossy document, but how are you going to make it a reality?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We see a lot of those, don't we? We want to make sure it is something which is effective and we will be reporting back on that progress on the charter. That is my understanding.

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, that's right. The plan would be for an annual report. We have had some discussions with the TAFE board about them playing a role in the oversight of that process. And then also, under the NSW Skills Plan, there's also an element of reporting there in terms of outcomes and the actions under the Skills Plan, too, and an annual report specifically on the charter.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Is that with metrics or how are you going to measure whether it's successful?

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, we would include appropriate metrics and also things like feedback from students and staff and industry and those types of elements.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In terms of some of the specifics—I'll address this question to you, Minister, but I'm happy if you need one of your officials to provide some information as well. I have had a read through some of the specifics. I think page 4 states:

TAFE NSW is committed to addressing the underrepresentation of women in male-dominated trades and fields by creating supported pathways for women to enter these areas.

To pull that out as one example, what are the kinds of things you anticipate that you want to do differently? How will you measure whether you've been successful in meeting that outcome?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** That, as you would know, is a whole-of-government objective as well. We're working across the skills portfolio and with some of our major infrastructure delivery departments on increasing the number of women in trades. TAFE will play a role in that. There is a number of programs which are out there to try and encourage more apprentices to come in. I think the figure at the moment is around 3 per cent of actual trades on building sites are women. So we have a fairly low base to be starting from. We recognise in the charter and across also quite consistently with the accord process at the Federal level that the ways of assisting people who have less access to courses need to change and to develop. Some of what we're doing will be working on the way that we assist people and the way that we provide them more wraparound support for people as they come through. We also then need to work through with industry about how you change some of the expectations. I think we see fairly consistently the messaging that I give and many others give, which is that we need to be talking to parents. This is not TAFE, but you would be aware of the Educational Pathways Program we started. That is something which the VET Review said was a very positive program. We do need to reach back in and link in to the high schools to try and link the women.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** But specifically, and I appreciate everything you are saying—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I will come back to Ms Read—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** How will you measure whether you've been successful in that outcome? I just picked one. There are many I could ask about.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Sure, there are. We do measure those at the moment. We do have that information. Ms Read could elaborate on that.

**CHLOE READ:** There are also the specific programs TAFE runs that are successful in this area that we would like to make sure that we either continue or increase, things like Girls Can Too and things like having some of the microcredentials at the Institute of Applied Technology in construction. Some of those places are targeted specifically towards women and making sure women have access to those. I'd like to see us understanding some of the destination pieces out of that. If a student undertakes one of those qualifications, are they more or less likely to consider a career in that area and do they end up doing so? That will be a longer term piece for us, I imagine, but one that will be worthwhile.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Minister, how many students are currently enrolled at Bankstown TAFE?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I will ask for the specific figure. I was out there recently. There is a lot of activity on the campus.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** When were you out there?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** TAFE Bankstown's 2023 enrolment was 5,400 enrolments over 80 courses, with 175 teachers and 133 non-teaching staff.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Has there been an update to that, though? I'm concerned that the numbers have dropped.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** For the 2024 figures, I'll ask Ms Read.

**CHLOE READ:** They'll be finalised in March when we report to the National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** It's March now. Later in March?

**CHLOE READ:** Sorry, at the end of March.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Anecdotally, I haven't heard that there has been a drop-off in enrolments.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I'm just concerned, given all these announcements of rebuilding and the relocation and so forth.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Overall we do see shifts in enrolments in different courses, obviously, over time.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Minister, I was a member for 12 years there.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I understand that.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** It was a very busy TAFE.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** It still is.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** And I hope it remains so.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** So do I.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** What were you out there for, by the way?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** To have a look around. I regularly visit TAFEs and have a look and talk to staff and talk to students.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Did the member for Bankstown join you?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** The member for Bankstown, I think, was with me. I'd have to check that.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** You would remember, wouldn't you? He is a colleague.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We're at a lot of things.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** You would remember him being there, wouldn't you?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** He was with me.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I'm glad you remembered. That's good. He can be quite forgettable.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I didn't say that at all.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** You might have, actually.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** He's a fantastic Minister and local member and has been doing a great job up the North Coast.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Has he discussed the relocation of Bankstown TAFE with you?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We have obviously discussed the fact that—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Have you met over that particular issue? Has he raised concerns that the delay in the date of announcing—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** You mean the location of the temporary facility?

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** That's right, the temporary relocation. Has he discussed that with you? He would be concerned about that, wouldn't he?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** He is aware of the process that's going on.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I had to get you guys to clarify the process at the start of this budget estimates. The date was meant to be 16 December. We should have had a decision by then.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** He's a member of Cabinet. He's very well aware of what's going on in government and delivering for the people of Bankstown.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I hope you both are very aware of how concerned I am about this TAFE. Has the member for East Hills made any representations to you about Bankstown TAFE or met with you over the issue?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I have—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** A lot of the people that reside in the electorate of East Hills actually go to TAFE.

**The Hon. Dr SARAH KAINE:** Point of order: I have sat and listened to the last little bit and haven't wanted to interrupt the Minister giving answers or the flow of questioning, but it's getting to a point where the Minister hasn't had a chance to offer any answers. I wondered if we could make sure he is afforded that opportunity.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** To the point of order: It was a completely different question about East Hills.

**The CHAIR:** A little bit of backwards and forwards is fine, but for Hansard's benefit we will try and pause between questions.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Have you got an answer, Minister?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I visited Padstow TAFE with the member for East Hills. Obviously Padstow TAFE is where I previously told the Committee that the animal care functions that are currently at Bankstown are going to be relocated to, because they've got better opportunity to have outdoor space there and it will be a better facility for the animals. I visited that TAFE with her. I haven't specifically discussed the rest of the Bankstown project, but I have certainly heard from the member for East Hills that she'd like us to be investing in the Padstow TAFE, not surprisingly. I haven't met a member yet who doesn't want us to invest in their TAFE.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I didn't ask about Padstow TAFE. I just want to make sure that—that's great that she's involved with Padstow TAFE, but I'm more interested at this stage in Bankstown TAFE, because a large proportion of students that go to Bankstown TAFE reside in either the electorate of Bankstown or East Hills.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Bankstown—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I was interested to know that they were both talking to you and raising their concerns.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I do talk to my colleagues, yes.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Minister, can I ask you what will be the floor space of the new Bankstown TAFE, compared to the current Bankstown TAFE floor space?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** That's not a question I can answer at the moment.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can you take it on notice? I'd like to know the current floor space of Bankstown TAFE.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We're still in the planning process for the permanent TAFE. Do you mean the permanent new facility?

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Yes, the permanent TAFE.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We'll take that on notice.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** You'll take that on notice? Okay. I don't expect—I'm not too concerned about the relocation floor space, but I am concerned that that be done. In the December '23 announcement about the relocation, by the way, you say that this is all going to be done at the start of 2026. So they should be already inside the new temporary accommodation at the start of the 2026 enrolment year?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** That's our plan.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** All right, just making sure. And you can guarantee that?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** That's my expectation, yes.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can I just then ask you a little about this new site? It's the same site for TAFE; they're just going to get less floor space, obviously, because they're going to share it with the hospital. Have you had discussions with Health Infrastructure or the Minister for Health in relation to the amount of parking that will be allocated for TAFE students?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** That will be considered as part of the planning process, and TAFE will put in its requirements as part of its input into that planning process.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** When will that planning process be, Minister?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** The planning process is underway at the moment, and TAFE is engaged with Health Infrastructure, but—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Right now, given you've visited the site, you know that there are lots of parking available for TAFE students and TAFE staff.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes, and I would expect that there will be provision for parking. Obviously TAFE is working with Health Infrastructure on that, who, as I've said, have carriage of the project. We are not—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** But it's your site. It's not their site.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Well, it's going to be their site, and they will be managing the process.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Okay. And you'll be advocating that TAFE students and TAFE staff have parking?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** TAFE will be expressing its requirements, obviously, for the site.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Minister, has the business case for the jointly designed hospital and TAFE been completed?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'll have to ask Ms Read to—the design process is still ongoing, and the final budget hasn't been determined yet.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** This is the business case.

**CHLOE READ:** We certainly have a business case that's well progressed, although—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Has it been completed? That's the question I'm asking.

**CHLOE READ:** The business case is not yet finalised, no.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Minister, you might recall I actually asked you some supplementary questions at the last estimates hearing. I asked you when the business case would be completed, and January 2025 was the answer that you gave me.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Well, obviously that's not the case. I'm sorry about that, but—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** No, another delay.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** TAFE NSW is involved in the preparation of the strategic business case, and it will be considered for the future budget.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Will you provide on notice the new date, then, now that it's not January 2025? Can you take it on notice, that you can actually—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We'll take the question on notice.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can you provide a date, though?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I don't know yet.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** You don't know.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We'll take it on notice.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Do we know the new student capacity, what you're expecting the student capacity would be for the new Bankstown TAFE? Do we have any idea of that?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We are still in the planning process with that. Ms Read could perhaps elaborate on that.

**CHLOE READ:** As the Minister has outlined, we're still in planning for that, but we'd expect it to be able to accommodate expected and future demands, noting, as the Minister has outlined, that some of the students will be moving to Padstow in that animal care area. So I don't have the—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** How many students are in animal care at Bankstown TAFE?

**CHLOE READ:** I don't have that number with me, but I'm really happy to take that on notice.



**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** It's not the dominant course, is it?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No, not by any means.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Thank you. Let's move on from animal care, please, because—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I think we should be clear that—as I've said to you in previous hearings, this is a really exciting opportunity for us to get a new TAFE facility at Bankstown. I think in the longer term it's something which is a really huge positive for the Bankstown community—a new hospital and a new TAFE facility, both delivered by the Minns Government. It's going to be a fabulous asset for your community.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Well, as long as it doesn't take away from what they currently have, because they've got a pretty good TAFE there now, wouldn't you agree, Minister? It's an excellent site.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** It's a good TAFE, but as so many TAFEs are, getting some upgrades or new buildings and new facilities is something which can enhance the educational experience, and I expect to do that.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** What was the number of students you said? Was it 5,700?

**CHLOE READ:** I think it's 5,400.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** That's a lot of students to fill into a new site.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** It's 5,400. Yes, I mean, it is. It's a large TAFE, and I expect it to be able to cater for the current and future demands in Bankstown. One of the reasons why we're so determined to keep TAFE there is because Bankstown is such an accessible location, not just for locals but also with public transport. It's a really vital campus, so we're 100 per cent committed to it.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** How many students are currently enrolled at Padstow TAFE, Minister?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'll have to get you that figure. I haven't got that specific figure for Padstow. I'll take that on notice.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Would you be able to come back in the next session on that?

**CHLOE READ:** I'll see what I can find.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Ms Read will—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** You got me the Bankstown one pretty quickly.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There are 154 campuses across the State. You won't be surprised to know I can't remember all their enrolments.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** No, I'm just asking if you could get it back in the next session. You might be able to ask someone. That's all I'm saying. If you can't, that's fine. You can take it on notice. Have you considered having health administration, health-related courses at the new Bankstown TAFE?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes, we have. We are in active discussion with Health about how the co-location of the new Bankstown TAFE and the new hospital can enhance the delivery of those courses.

**The CHAIR:** Minister, in the last round I was asking you about what New South Wales specifically has done in terms of progress, working on the Commonwealth—sorry, the initiatives coming out of the Universities Accord, working with the Commonwealth. Do you have any specifics around what New South Wales has done?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'll ask the department to elaborate on this, but obviously we work with the Federal Government on the Universities Accord. To this point, we've talked to them primarily about them developing their—I think I have "codes of practice" in my head, but it's not the right word, particularly on campus safety. We have been talking to them about their implementation of that. At this stage, there hasn't been any necessity for us to look at changing our legislation or taking specific action, but we've been working with them to highlight the priorities that we felt that the Commonwealth should be pursuing through their activity. I'll ask the department to elaborate on that.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** Through the accord, we've been working at an official level—Mr Kurucz might add to this—but it went to earlier what I described around the Student Ombudsman but other areas. We've been working with them and giving input into the establishment of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission, which is an interim set-up on 1 July 2025 and permanently to be established 1 January 2026. We've been giving input into a needs-based funding approach, which will enable universities to provide additional support for students from underrepresented backgrounds and those that are studying at regional and remote university campuses.

**The CHAIR:** I might come back to you in the afternoon, then, Secretary.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** There were a few more areas too, Chair, if you—

**The CHAIR:** But can I ask a specific question? A really good example or a really good opportunity would have been this TAFE Charter that has just come out. It doesn't mention student safety once.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** TAFE had existing policies on student safety, which I can ask TAFE to elaborate, but it's not part of the Universities Accord process, obviously.

**The CHAIR:** No, but in terms of—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** But we've certainly been very conscious of student safety on our TAFE campuses as well, and we had existing policies in place around that, which—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, I have pivoted slightly, but, I mean, it's all—we're talking about higher education and safety, particularly for women on campus. You would expect that the charter would profile, given the recent controversies and media—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I will ask Ms Read to talk about the measures which we already had in place and which we have had a strong focus on as a lot of the issues were emerging.

**CHLOE READ:** As the Minister said, the Public Service Commissioner issued a directive in, I think, May 2023 relating to the need for agencies in the New South Wales public service to have a policy relating to sexual harassment and sexual assault. TAFE has a policy and also undertakes regular review of that policy.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, can I just stop you there? I'm aware of the policies, but is this charter, then, everything that there wasn't an existing policy for? Why would it not be in the charter?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No, I think we felt we had the policy in place. But I will ask Ms Read to—

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, I think it would be wrapped into some of the pieces around support for students. But I'd agree it's not in there perhaps as explicitly as it could be. We do have training underway and ongoing for managers and senior leaders across TAFE, as well as regular communications. As recently, I think, as November—Ms Tickle, you might help me with this—we had a month of awareness activities based on countering domestic violence. Also, when we're on campuses, there is an app that people can download called the SafeZone app. They can use that to connect with security and those kinds of things when onsite. Did you want to hear—

**The CHAIR:** I might come back in the afternoon, because time is limited.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Ms Dizdar has more on the higher education side of it, if you wanted to come back to that.

**The CHAIR:** Is it specific to what New South Wales is doing in terms of concrete, on the ground, in the campus?

**MURAT DIZDAR:** Yes. We've been working with vice-chancellors around a higher education strategy for New South Wales—so it's not related to the Commonwealth—that we want to bring in front of the Minister and hopefully launch in the first quarter this year. That has gone to also talking about student safety under the broader umbrella of achieving better participation and outcomes. It has been a topic of discussion and it will be captured broadly in that strategy as well, which supplements what the Commonwealth has been doing.

**The CHAIR:** Can I ask you something totally different? I understand that there was a pre-apprentice program between TAFE NSW and the Land and Housing Corporation, where students who were enrolled in a specific pre-apprenticeship trade would have access to work alongside licensed tradespeople as they were demolishing and then building homes for Land and Housing Corporation. But I understand that program has now been cancelled. Is that true?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'm not aware of any pre-apprenticeship programs being cancelled.

**CHLOE READ:** No. I might see if Ms Schorer—if it was a TAFE program—has anything on it.

**JANET SCHORER:** Thanks for the question, Chair. Yes, we had a program with the Land and Housing Corporation in three locations across the State. The program has finished. We are at the end of the program. We finished the completion of the houses in most of those locations. We have a maintenance relationship that we continue for a period of time, but there are no further projects.

**The CHAIR:** I understand that program has been going for 20 years.

**JANET SCHORER:** Yes, it may have been with Land and Housing, but TAFE NSW is not continuing with the program.

**The CHAIR:** How long has TAFE NSW been involved with that program?

**JANET SCHORER:** I will have to take that on notice. It certainly predates me. But we are at the end of the current contract and we didn't take the option to do it further.

**The CHAIR:** And why wasn't the option to renew taken?

**JANET SCHORER:** Because our primary role is teaching, and the role we had in those projects was also building houses. Whilst we want to absolutely support apprentices to get hands-on experience, in those locations it was better for us to focus on teaching.

**The CHAIR:** Minister, we are in the middle of a much-needed housing boom—or we are trying, at least, to increase supply in housing—and we know that there is a significant shortage of workers in the construction industry. We also know that these pre-apprenticeship programs are really valuable for getting people to then take on a trade. What do you think about this program being cancelled?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We do have a large number of opportunities for pre-apprenticeship programs which are separate to that program, so there are a lot of opportunities which are there. There is a number of programs through the Commonwealth, fee free, which have been assisted for pre-apprenticeship in the construction industry, and we also obviously fund construction apprentices. We have had some anecdotally positive news about increases in construction apprenticeships in the last month or so, which is good, and we are seeing, obviously, strong interest. We are focusing very much on things like building the links with the high schools to try and get people into apprenticeships. As part of that, a number of pre-apprenticeship programs are offered across the Skills portfolio by a big range of providers. We have also got things like the Government's 1,000 apprentices and trainees, which has been very successful, and we have seen a number of those coming to areas like energy.

**The CHAIR:** I'm not taking away from that, but this particular program was very well respected and I understand a number of people had gone through it. It is also a government-to-government program. Were you involved in the decision to cancel it?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No. But it wasn't, as I said, cancellation; it was completed, from what I have just heard.

**The CHAIR:** "Completed" just means "not renewed".

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** But we have a range of other programs. We can't leave every program exactly the same, particularly if we want to actually modify it and meet needs.

**The CHAIR:** Was this replaced with something?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We have a range of pre-apprenticeship programs which are out there. One of the key ones is one I mentioned before, the Education Pathways Program, which helps to link people in high schools with—

**The CHAIR:** Perhaps we could just narrow this down, then, to a question of how many, in total, pre-apprenticeship programs for construction were there when this program was still going—in total, with all of the different programs—versus now.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I think it's probably better not to look at individual programs but numbers of people.

**The CHAIR:** That's what I'm asking—numbers of people who were given that pre-apprenticeship opportunity before this was cancelled to now. Is it more or less?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I will take on notice that direct comparison there. But I can tell you that in 2024, 800 students in years 10 to 12 were enrolled in VET part-qualifications and 758 of them completed the training. We have seen training in apprenticeships and trainees; as I said, some positive figures on the construction sector over the last—or some positive anecdotal figures with anecdotal information which will be confirmed, I hope, by the figures as we go forward. That is very positive.

**The CHAIR:** If you could take on notice—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We will take on notice that comparison over time.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Just one more from me and then I will hand to my colleague. Just back on the TAFE Charter, Minister, I was interested in item number 18. It states:

Where necessary, TAFE NSW will work with industry to adapt nationally accredited courses to meet specific local economic and workforce requirements, employing a considered approach to curriculum development, while upholding the highest quality standards.

What does that mean in practice? Where do you think you will look to make changes to curriculum or courses, and for what reasons?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Recognising that there are 770 courses, that is a fairly big question, potentially. As you are well aware, there are nationally accredited courses. It is a fairly cumbersome process of changing those. The ASQA process at Federal level and the accreditation process for curriculum is very slow. What we are finding at times is that industry is saying to us that we're not keeping up with the developments in their industry fast enough, so we're looking to try and be more flexible. That might be through the work that we are doing with our centres of excellence, where we are looking to develop additional qualifications, part-qualifications, short courses and also higher degrees.

We are seeking from the Commonwealth the capacity for TAFE to be self-accrediting, which they don't have at the moment, which would enable TAFE then to, particularly in conjunction with those centres of excellence, actually develop and accredit their own courses. There is a fairly big complexity in the space. What we're seeking is the ability to respond more quickly to local and industry needs, which we are a bit hampered in doing at the moment. Perhaps Ms Read can elaborate on that.

**CHLOE READ:** The work in the Institute of Applied Technology – Digital, and Institute of Applied Technology - Construction, and also in the centres of excellence, is a good example of where we would look to design often shorter courses with industry that might be very well aligned to the broader national training framework that for whatever reason don't yet exist or don't yet exist in that form. The Minister referenced self-accreditation there also, looking to progress some higher apprenticeships in the advanced manufacturing space where we would develop those courses. That's part of the pilot of self-accreditation.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** What about in other areas of service delivery around health or early childhood services? Is there anything in that space that you're looking at?

**CHLOE READ:** Ms Schorer might know if we have specifics on those. I think some of the health and early childhood requirements—because they are professions where someone will need the nationally recognised qualification to work in those services, we might be doing that less in those sectors. Ms Schorer, do you have a sense of whether we're doing anything in health or early childhood in that vein?

**JANET SCHORER:** Certainly. What I'd point to there is the national network of centres of excellence—that a number of other jurisdictions' TAFEs have centres of excellence, for example, in early childhood or in health. The network enables us to utilise the curriculum, the course development that they're undertaking for those particular courses and share it. I think that's a really exciting opportunity to advance some of the course material in those particular areas, acknowledging, as Ms Read has said, some of the limitations around the regulatory environment in both of those course areas.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** You wouldn't want any corners to be cut when you're talking about those areas.

**CHLOE READ:** No.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No, not in those areas where you need a recognised qualification.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** If I could pick up the issue of Bankstown TAFE, Minister, when we met in September—I think it might have been in this great room—we spoke about the budget provision relating to the Bankstown TAFE and the proposed hospital relocation. At that time you indicated that there is no provision within the Skills budget for any of the costs related to the change to Bankstown and we'd expect that to be covered in the health allocation. Does that still remain the case?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes, it does.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Minister, in the recent health estimates the issue was put to them as to the relocation of Bankstown TAFE, the reinstatement of Bankstown TAFE to the new hospital and it was determined the \$1.3 billion is not sufficient to deliver the full Bankstown hospital as it was originally proposed plus the TAFE. Health are saying they've got no money to cover the TAFE.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I don't think they were saying that. My report of that estimates hearing—I wasn't there obviously; you probably were—is that they advised that the original indication of \$1.3 billion would not be sufficient to fund the Bankstown hospital and new TAFE campus. At the time in September obviously we didn't know that but we continue to work with Health Infrastructure NSW to address the funding requirements. They will be coming back to Government with a future proposal.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Minister, does it still remain unknown about what the required budget is for the relocation of the TAFE and the reinstatement to the new hospital site?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** It's still in the planning process and, as we said before in answer to Ms Mihailuk's questions, there is still a process going on of completing the business cases and getting those costings.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Minister, when the options paper was considered, which we were expecting at the end of 2024, Health reported that a business case was being developed due at the end of last year to consider options. Among the options to be considered was to do nothing. Does that still remain an option?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No, the Government has made a very clear commitment to the project. I have met on a number of occasions with Minister Park, who has obviously got carriage of the project, so that we are in agreement about the provision for TAFE particularly, which is obviously the only part of it that I have carriage of.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Do you register the uncertainty that no budgets are known, the allocated money is inadequate and there is no detail on this?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There is absolutely no uncertainty over the Government's commitment to deliver this project and I'm sure Minister Park made that absolutely clear as well.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Minister, what reassurance can you provide to students and families at the Bankstown TAFE that the facility will be reinstated to the new site?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Government has made a commitment to do that. I expect to see it delivered.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** In terms of the priority in the current environment to the construction industry and skills and training for the construction sector, including plumbers, electrician and carpenters in particular, what do we know in terms of commencement numbers of students enrolled in vocational training for apprenticeships every year and how many are totally enrolled in the TAFE system?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I can probably come back to you on notice with some of the specifics on that. But obviously we know that we have very strong skills shortages in the sectors you mention particularly. I've noticed the housing industry is consistently telling us we need significant numbers. I think I've seen variations—80,000 to 100,000 over coming years. The electrotechnology sector is also short, particularly when you consider the work that needs to be done in net zero transition, as is the plumbing sector. I note from your Facebook that you recently visited one of those centres. We have some big challenges there. The enrolments in TAFE are quite significant. We see some changes in the enrolments in TAFE and we're seeing a little bit of a shift, which is positive, I think, towards apprenticeships in the enrolments at the moment and a little bit away from some of the shorter courses which were funded when there was a larger pool of fee-free funding, and that is also a positive.

We've made some changes in the fee-free space. Under the previous Government, you could do multiple enrolments in fee-free and that meant that people were enrolling in different courses and not completing. We've changed that to focus it on the areas of skills shortages as identified in the Skills Plan. I released the Skills Plan late last year. It was the first Skills Plan New South Wales had had in 16 years. It's a very significant directional document for where we're going. What we've said out of that is that we will focus our resources on those six areas of skills shortage that were mentioned in the Skills Plan as well as other areas of high need across the skills sector. We've got areas in that Skills Plan of construction, housing and infrastructure, digital and cyber, net zero and energy transition, care and support economy, agriculture and agrifood, and advanced manufacturing. Out of that, I think it covers most of the areas you mentioned there before. They will be our focuses going forward. Obviously, we continue to—as I said, there are 770 or so qualifications in TAFE. There is a lot of area we cover.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** I appreciate the priority, as you stated. We're presented with by the housing industry that 35,000 additional electricians will be required by 2030, so absolutely—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** So encourage your kids to become apprentices.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Minister, if I could just go back to my question about the completion rates for these trade apprentices by occupation in terms of the plumbers, the electricians and the carpenters—not enrolment; I'm looking at completion rates—what do we know?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Completion rates—obviously, not everybody completes trade. One of the things which we're recognising is that we need to do additional work on completions. We need to provide better wraparound services for people as they go through. But we have seen completion rates in New South Wales which are slightly better than the national average. Total completion rates for training in New South Wales in 2024 was 50 per cent, which was above the most recent national average, and we'd also like that to be better. Ninety per cent of students who finalised a part-qualification who successfully completed—

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Sorry, Minister, is this relevant to the identified trades?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** So we're saying 50 per cent completion?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes. I'll take on notice specific trade completions if you like. I do think we need to have a conversation around defining success in training. Because often we see people who come in and do a part-qualification and they've actually got the skills that they want or their employer wants, so they may go out or they may go and get another job. We're in a low-unemployment environment at the moment. There is a lot of other options out there for young people, which makes it even more important for us to be promoting those trades that we need.

For instance, in Monaro electorate, I'll just brag about my unemployment rate of 1.2 per cent. It's very low. There's a lot of demand for employees there. We have a big job to try and make sure that we're attracting people to do what is a long-term investment in their career, rather than go out and take the short-term jobs. That's not new, but it's a particular focus when you have a low unemployment environment. Completion rates are something which we recognise that we actually want to do more work on to work out—firstly, defining what success for people is in meeting their objectives in education training; but, secondly, what more support we can provide to people in a wraparound sense to actually help them to get through and why people are dropping out when they do. That's something which was highlighted in the VET Review, and something we will continue to try and focus on.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Minister, how does the TAFE completion rate compare to the completion rates of industry-led, not-for-profit registered training organisations for these trade apprentices?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** The latest figures from the NCVER are that the TAFE NSW completion rate is 48 per cent for students who commenced in 2019. That's above the national and New South Wales rates in comparative courses. I think what we recognise is that TAFE has higher proportions of disadvantaged cohorts and they do record higher completion rates for a number of equity groups compared to national rates, including students with disability, students from regional areas and students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** If I could just redirect: How does that compare to the completion rates of the industry-led, not-for-profit RTOs for the trade apprentices? We're saying TAFE completion at 50 per cent.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There are quite substantial differences in the cohorts that are in there, but I will take on notice that specific aspect.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** So there's no knowledge of completion rates of apprentices led by—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes, there is. It often does depend on which NCVER report time period you look at. It does vary and it does go up and down.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Given the urgency on this, would we be able to have this information by the break?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'll take the question on notice, but I'll hand over to Ms Read for her elaboration on this.

**CHLOE READ:** On the reporting through NCVER, we'd have to go and confirm whether we have information down to the qualification level comparing the public provider with other types of providers. Usually those reports are fairly broad in their comparisons between different parts of the VET sector, and then between States and Territories versus nationally.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** I'm obviously looking at New South Wales.

**CHLOE READ:** I'm not sure we would be able to give you, from TAFE's perspective, the difference between our rates and those other providers for a specific set of qualifications, because we've narrowed down into a specific sector.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We can certainly do it for an overall—yes.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Minister, what is the current cost to government for each of these trade apprenticeships attending TAFE?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** That is a fairly detailed question and which I'll take on notice. The cost to government, as you'd probably be aware, under the Smart and Skilled system, which TAFE has been a part of, there is a cost established for each of the courses and TAFE gets a share of that. We are looking to move TAFE out of Smart and Skilled, because we believe that—firstly, TAFE is a trusted government provider and I think it's

really important for us to acknowledge that. Nationally, ministers have been seeking to acknowledge that as well. Taking TAFE out of the Smart and Skilled system will mean that we can remove a substantial amount of administrative work that our TAFE teachers—head teachers particularly—have had to undertake. That will mean we can focus on education delivery and also on engaging the expertise that our teachers have in curriculum development as well. As part of that, we'll also be putting in place a mechanism to make sure that the unit cost of delivery of a TAFE course is not getting out of proportion with the rest of industry. We're working on that process at the moment. I can take it on notice, if you have some specific courses. I'm not sure exactly whether we'll be able to give you many specific costs, but I'll ask Ms Read to elaborate on that.

**CHLOE READ:** The cost to government, and Mr Kurucz might have more on this, is broken down into the price of the qualification, any offset of student fees that might have otherwise been incurred, as well as loadings that are specific to individual students and their characteristics. So it might be difficult to put a single cost on that, because it depends on whether the person enrolling in the apprenticeship, for example, is a person with a disability. Then there would be a different loading applied because of that. We can certainly take on notice—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I can tell you that, overall, the Government, for TAFE and for the RTOs spent nearly \$400 million in 2023-24 on apprenticeships and traineeships.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Minister, what is the current cost to government for each of these trade apprenticeships attending an RTO? I appreciate the \$400 million covering both, but in terms of—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** The cost to the Government of those would be the Smart and Skilled provision. I suspect we might take that on notice as well, but I'll ask the department if they'd like to speak to that.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** The bulk of the apprenticeship and traineeship placements are in TAFE. The figure the Minister gave, the \$400 million, close to, expenditure on apprentices and trainees across the State in 2023-24, the bulk of that would be TAFE. But if you're looking for the split, Ms Merton, between other providers and TAFE, let us get that for you.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** I am, thank you. Minister, what is the current utilisation rate at TAFE campuses?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I will ask Ms Read to elaborate on that. You'd be aware TAFE has a lot of assets—1,700 buildings with an average age of 42, some of them over 100 and many of them over 50 years old. There are 154 TAFE campuses across the State. Whenever I go to a TAFE, they always tell me all their buildings are being used. But there are obviously some areas where there is—

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** I'm specifically looking at the physical utilisation on the physical campus, in terms of facilities.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'll ask Ms Read to—

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** I recognise there's been a move to online, but in terms of physical utilisation.

**CHLOE READ:** What I would say on that is, as the Minister mentioned, there are 154 campuses and over 1,700 individual buildings. The utilisation of those different buildings will vary greatly depending on the nature of the facilities, the student cohort enrolled and the type of courses that we are offering. I think a statewide comparison will be—not quite meaningless, but won't give you that kind of granularity. I'll take on notice as to what we have in terms of utilisation for TAFEs overall and come back to you on notice with that. I'm just flagging that it really does vary greatly. As you know, some of the courses can be online, some of them can be online or in person, and some of them entirely in person.

**The CHAIR:** One of the issues we spoke about in the last estimates, Minister, was in relation to people being unlawfully dismissed by TAFE corporate. I had this discussion with Mr Brady at the time. What actions have been taken now in relation to people who have been responsible for decisions which have been found after the event to have been unlawful?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I think we talked about a specific case on that occasion. We have had a new operating model put in place. I'll ask Ms Read to answer the specifics on that.

**CHLOE READ:** I don't have the specifics relating to the decision-makers. But I know the case that you were referring to—that those three employees were reinstated. We're undertaking a review of the way those processes were managed, to make sure we can highlight any issues identified out of that and address those.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Minister, there was an opinion piece in the Sunday Tele on 12 January by Luke Mangan—the chef—talking about wanting to have more chefs and hospitality experts going into TAFEs

and schools to help encourage young kids into that industry. He basically said there's been no uptake from the Government in relation to that. Why are you resisting having that occur?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We're not. I've met with Mr Mangan. He's a very strong advocate for it. We certainly do have contact. In fact, one of the reasons why we've started the change to the faculty model is so we can try to ensure that we are enhancing that industry contact and exchange.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Will we get to see more chefs and hospitality industry experts in TAFEs and schools in the coming weeks and months?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** As long as, obviously, they're appropriately qualified—if they're teaching a class on their own, they obviously need to be appropriately qualified to be a TAFE teacher or a school teacher. But if it's coming in as guests and things like that—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** This is more about educating parents and kids about the hospitality industry; I think that's what they're offering to do.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** When I met with Mr Mangan, which was after that, we talked a bit about engagement with some of the programs that we've got out there for linking with industry—things like the EPP, the RIEP program and a range of others which we have out there—and how we could actually link them with those programs. So we're certainly having discussions. He continues to have discussions with TAFE, as I understand it.

**The CHAIR:** Before we break, because it may be useful for you working out your plans for this afternoon, I want to let the TAFE officials know that the crossbench and the Opposition have discussed and we don't think we will require anyone except for Ms Read from TAFE after 3.30 p.m.

**CHLOE READ:** That's great. Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** That's an early mark for the rest of you. Does the Government have any questions at this time?

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** No.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. We will now take a break and be back at 11.15 a.m.

**(Short adjournment)**

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back. I'll just start with some questions. Under the NSW Skills Plan, the six critical skills areas—you have got construction, net zero and energy transition, digital and cyber, care and support economy, agriculture and agrifood, and advanced manufacturing. Net zero and energy transition is, obviously, critically important. It is great to see that in the list. I understand that TAFE NSW offers 25 electrotechnology credentials. Which of those do you consider relevant to the net zero and energy transition critical skills area?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'll get TAFE to be more detailed in the answer, but one of the things I'd say about this is that the aim of our manufacturing centres of excellence is to work with industry specifically on the net zero stuff. We have got the traditional apprenticeships in electrotechnology, which, obviously, contribute to housing construction as well as net zero transition and a range of other areas. At the manufacturing centre of excellence, we'll also be working with industry on some shorter quals, assisting people with making transitions, existing qualified people, to skill up to work in the net zero transition sector. We have got discussion going on about those higher apprenticeships that I mentioned before, which are also directed at the sector. We have been working with the PICAC to set up a hydrogen centre of excellence. Government gave it capital funding, and we, obviously, fund through Smart and Skilled for that. That is aimed at some of the plumbing side of the transition. And then there is also other work going on in the Newcastle area. Can I also say Government is working across whole of government on workforce planning for the net zero transition as well. I will just ask Ms Read and TAFE to talk a little bit more about that, and we can come to the specifics of the quals.

**CHLOE READ:** I don't have the full list of 25 that you might be referring to, but some examples in the microskills space that have been introduced in the last couple of years would be things like training for emergency responders to respond to electric vehicle incidents, introduction to fuel cell electric vehicles, hydrogen energy fundamentals, guides to the wind industry, preparing to work in the renewable energy industry. And then also, as the Minister mentioned, in the manufacturing centres of excellence, the centre focused on net zero and sustainable manufacturing. There is an intent for us to produce the higher apprenticeship in renewable manufacturing and sustainable manufacturing practices. That should be in play in 2026. Then you referred, I think, to, more broadly, there are a number of electro-tech, electrician courses. They would all be highly relevant, I would have thought, but I can take on notice the specifics against a list if you wanted to share that list.



**The CHAIR:** Thank you. If you could tell us which of these credentials are relevant to grid-scale renewables and which are more for the residential, that would be useful as well.

**CHLOE READ:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** What does it look like when we are looking at the availability of these credentials across the renewable energy zones? Are we ensuring we have got the capacity to skill up in those areas?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** That is a really important question, and it is quite a challenging thing, obviously, to match where we are training people with where those REZs are. So that is a strong focus for us in terms of our workforce planning. There's a couple of aspects to that. Firstly, I think, we know that communities in regional areas want to see long-term benefit out of these REZs. They want to see jobs that come from their local communities, young people or people who are actually training, living and staying, rather than flying or driving in and out. They also want to see that the workforce is actually there in the renewables but also in a whole lot of related areas, a number of areas that they're short on people to work in—the water sector and a whole range of other things which are indirectly related but important.

So we are talking across the portfolios about how to best target that, but then some of our resourcing also and some of our focus out of the VET Review is on how we can make a better model of regional planning for skills. The Department of Education skills section at the moment is working on developing a model for how we can actually go out, talk to industry and local government in regional communities to say, "Where do you see your skills future as being? In those REZ areas particularly, how can we best tailor our offerings through either Smart and Skilled or through TAFE to assist to provide that workforce in the future?"

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Again I am just going off what I have been told, but I understand that there's, basically, no courses available in the Hunter-New England REZ in relation to being able to skill up in these grid-scale renewable projects. Is that correct?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There is a lot of different areas. I think maybe you are hearing and I am hearing, as well, there's a shortage of people to build the transmission lines at the moment. That is certainly an area which a number of industry groups have been talking to me about. Currently that training is generally delivered by the transmission companies, as I understand it, and industry mainly. They have certainly been talking to us about how to make that more available. I'm not sure if TAFE or the department may know any more about that.

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** We are happy to take the details on that on notice, in terms of the specific courses that are available. I know that we are also working with TAFE and with others in relation to their workforce needs, from a training and assessment perspective, because part of the challenge that we have is also making sure that we have got enough trainers and assessors in registered training organisations and TAFE to actually deliver these particular qualifications as well.

**The CHAIR:** I think we talked last time—maybe it was last estimates—about having the ability to go into whether it is companies that are already involved in the renewables rollout or even companies involved in coal-fired power et cetera and being about to quantify and assess the skills that they already have in order to then be able to transition them across and work out what that upskill specification is. What work—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There is work happening. The Government is working on that, led by Minister Houssos on that sort of transition side of things. And my portfolio is involved in that on the skills side. So we are certainly planning that assessment. But working out what people need to transition from one industry to another is something which is very strong focus for us as well. There is also timing issues in that. When we talk to the renewables sector, they are talking to us about how soon can we be attracting those people. But, obviously, they are still working and earning pretty decent incomes in their jobs, so we have got to work hard on that transition phase of it as well, and it is early days on that still is my understanding.

There's a few things which we are doing, I think, which are assisting in this space. We have the Paid to Learn program, which we've just received another \$4.9 million from the Federal Government, from the Albanese Government, to expand, and that is helping us to address some of those areas where we need more qualified teachers for TAFE. The idea of that program—I probably said it at a previous hearing—is that we find, in many of these sectors, that it is hard to attract people out of industry, because their incomes are quite high, to then do training with no income and then come in and teach, so we are paying them to and shortening that process of getting their cert IV so that they can actually teach in TAFE. That is proving to be successful in a number of areas. This expansion that we've announced with the Federal Government is targeting some of these areas, not just the industries but also the regional locations where we want to have those people.

As part of that manufacturing centre of excellence in Newcastle, we are also at Tighes Hill. Tighes Hill is the physical location, the campus there, but it is designed to be able to be delivered remotely. As part of those

manufacturing centres of excellence, we are also delivering mobile training units to be able to deliver in regional areas, and I am expecting that we will see some more investments in training in areas like the Central West as well over time.

**The CHAIR:** I understand there is a shortage of—it's estimated—about 55,000 electrical apprentices. What are you doing to attract them and make sure that we have got them in the right zones?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** The same thing as we are doing across the other shortage areas. We are working hard to try and make sure that we are building the linkages between students in high school and the potential for those careers and also talking to people about mid-career transitions and people from non-traditional roles into those transitions. We have got some very active programs in those areas. But I would acknowledge that there is a lot of work still to do on it.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Minister, I quickly want to wrap up the Bankstown questions. I just want to confirm—and I think you are going to answer it by telling me you can't answer it—has the Government received a proposal from Canterbury Bankstown council regarding the temporary relocation of Bankstown TAFE?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I can't answer that, you are right, because it is commercial in confidence at this stage and the process is ongoing.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** But you will take on notice when you will finalise the tender? From then on, I assume, I can ask some questions. Can I just also quickly ask you whether TAFE NSW has sought advice from Transport for NSW regarding the traffic flow management on Chapel Road North during and after construction of the combined Bankstown TAFE and hospital?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** As you know, the overall project management is with Health. It would be Health that would be engaging with other agencies over those things. That is my understanding. Ms Read?

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, that's correct.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Wouldn't TAFE be involved in that, Ms Read?

**CHLOE READ:** We may have been. I would need to take on notice whether we have had specific discussions with Transport on traffic. But I would expect that to be Health in the overall master planning of the site and that they would be having those conversations.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** What about actually consulting with the LaSalle Catholic College and the St Felix primary school? They are your neighbours at Bankstown TAFE.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Health Infrastructure is running the process. We don't want to have multiple bosses of this. We want one.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can I then also just ask you a couple of questions about your Skills Plan for 2024-28? Was the final data that was collected on that to the end of 2023? Is that how that reads when I look at it?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** The data on skill shortage areas?

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** What is the final data that you are relying on? Is the date up until the end of 2023? I am looking at the graph.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I think there are a number of different data sources. I will pass over to the department to answer specifically.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** What is the final date?

**MURAT DIZDAR:** It's the Skills Plan for 2024-28, Ms Mihailuk, so we looked at the data up until that point.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** But at what point? To the end of 2023? I just wanted to ask. You're using the date 2023, so I just wanted to make sure what that means.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** That aligns with the release of the plan. We did have some 2024 data in there because it was released on 29 November, so it was released towards the back end of 2024. The important thing in the plan is you don't just set in concrete the data. We will keep following all of the data points that are nationally and State available.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Minister, I am reading the graphs in the critical skills appendix. You have got a NSW Skills Plan. Have you got the critical skills area data appendix there in front of you?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We do on the bench here.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Do you want to turn to it? I am going to ask you a couple of questions about it.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Which bit are you looking at?

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I am specifically looking at the critical skills area data appendix that is an appendix to your Skills Plan. It's not the 35-page document; it is the attachment. Online you can see it. I have a couple of question I wanted to ask. I am just concerned with the data, for example, on apprentices and trainees. On the first graph there it has got "construction, housing and infrastructure". There is a general statement that says "in contrast". What is that data referring to for apprentices and trainees? Is that only for housing infrastructure and the courses that relate to that? What does that graph mean there?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Which of those graphs—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** You have got the title "construction, housing and infrastructure" and a specific page on that and then it has got specific data.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** The bar charts there with commencement and completions?

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Yes, you've got "students with disability", "females", "low SES", "regional", "language other than English" and then it talks about apprentices and trainees. Is that specifically in relation to courses in housing and infrastructure? What is that data?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'll ask the department to tell you what the source of the data is.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** If they can clarify that, yes.

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** I'm happy to assist the Committee with this. The way that data was formulated is that we contribute to national annual reporting through the NCVER. That data is based on 91 occupations that link to the housing and construction sector and then we map back, from those occupations, the relevant qualifications from that and so that is the data that is reflected on that page there.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Is there any reason why, if you look at that graph and then go to the next graph where it says, "net zero and energy transition", they are identical? Is there any particular reason why that data would be identical?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There are a number of crossovers in those occupations, but I'll ask for the specifics.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Could you answer that, perhaps?

**MURAT DIZDAR:** Mr Kurucz might add to this, but I encourage us to look at the vertical and horizontal axis. The vertical axis—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** No, you are putting data in. You are talking about apprentices and trainees and you are putting in data about females, Aboriginal participation, students with disability et cetera. I am just saying the data that you are relying on is identical for net zero and energy transition and housing and infrastructure. It is not for the rest of them, by the way.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** It is not identical. The vertical axes on those two sets that you are referring to are different. It looks the same, I agree, but the vertical axes on the two sets are very different.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** What about apprentices and trainees?

**MURAT DIZDAR:** For which one?

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** For both. For net zero and energy transition, is that also taking in the data that this gentleman mentioned earlier?

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** For net zero and energy transition there are 40 occupations, so it's different the 91 occupations for housing and construction that we spoke about earlier.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Does the report specify those 40 occupations?

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** No, but I'm happy to take that on notice and get that information.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can you also provide the occupations for the housing and infrastructure data on apprentices and trainees?

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** Of course.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I am interested to know why it is so identical. Can I also then ask, there was a spike in 2022 for apprentices and trainees in terms of commencing the courses in both categories and then it drops in 2023. Do we know what that data reflects? Why is there a drop, Minister?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There is a number of factors that you see in these. Often it depends on the incentives that are out there, particularly coming from the Commonwealth Government, like how much fee-free, for example, is being put out there and whether there are employer incentives that are being provided. That actually does lead to some fluctuation. I would say that one of the things which we have made clear to the Federal Government is we would like to see a consistent year-on-year approach to employer incentives. For instance, we have just recently seen an announcement by the Federal Government of incentives for people going into construction, so you would expect to see a bit of a boost. The department, perhaps, might elaborate on that.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Given both Federal and State are very keen on net zero and energy transition, you would think there would be some sort of incentive to ensure more students are commencing those courses. They have dropped from 2022 to 2023.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Our incentive that we offer from the State perspective is that we pay the fees. That is consistent and has been for a few years. From the Federal Government's perspective, they did a complete review of the employer incentives for apprentices. They announced the outcome of that review last year and then more recently announced some initiatives that came out of that. When they came into Government they undertook that review. That is why we saw a change in that focus. But we do see some variation—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** The data, for example, in "net zero and energy transition" says that between what looks like 2020 to 2022 there was a substantial increase in students commencing courses relating to net zero energy.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** That predates me, but I will ask the department.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can we find out what that was? Was that related to COVID-related incentives or something? I am not sure.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I think what you will see is that there were a number of federally funded fee-free initiatives there, which have shrunk since.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** They've dropped off after 2022. Is that what has happened?

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** That's correct, Minister.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** So once the Federal Labor Government got elected?

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** There was a very large Federal Government program called Boosting Apprenticeship Commencements, and it was specifically about employer wage subsidies to increase the number of apprentices commencing an apprenticeship.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Sorry, could you say it again to me? Boosting—

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** Apprenticeship Commencements. That was then superseded by a subsequent program called boosting apprenticeship completions, which was about providing further employer wage subsidies to support apprentices completing their studies as well. That's the reason for the very large—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** When did the Boosting Apprenticeship Commencements program end?

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** I believe, from recollection, it was in 2023, but we'll take that on notice and just come back to you. That was a Commonwealth Government employer wage subsidy scheme.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Minister, just a quick one back on the termination of Mr Brady, how did you let him know that he would not be continuing in that role?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Face to face. Unlike one of your former colleagues—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Not my question.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** —who asked the secretary to send the message.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I was just wondering whether you met in person. Good to know that that's what you did. I want to take you now to the issue about—we've had a few examples raised with us—a delay in trade licences being formalised. I appreciate some of this would fit with Minister Chanthivong.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Sign-offs for people and their apprenticeships?

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Yes. We've got a specific example—Hyne Timber down in Tumbarumba shared with us an electrical apprentice who finished his qualifications and submitted all the paperwork in November but didn't get the official sign-off until February, so a delay of some months of being able to be both working and paid as a full electrician. Are you aware of some of those delays and the concerns in industry about them?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I certainly hear from individuals at times about delays in either the employer or administrative sign-offs, and we do try to follow those up. I obviously want to make sure that people doing apprenticeships can get the full pay as a fully qualified tradesperson as soon as they are able. I'll declare a small interest: My son-in-law is currently a third-year apprentice, so I'm hoping that he'll be able to get the full pay soon, to support my granddaughter.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** What trade? I'm just interested.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Hopefully he's going to complete it.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** He is going to complete it; he has almost completed it. He's a cabinet-maker, which is very good. I'll ask the department to talk about the sign-off process and delays—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'm not sure if it's with you or with the Building Commission, but there's some concern about the delay.

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** We'll look into that.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** If there are specific cases, we'd be very happy to look at specific cases as well.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That one was just an example of where it was almost four months from completion versus the paperwork coming through and questions about the delay.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Sure. I understand the frustration. I absolutely understand the frustration.

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** We'll look into that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Thank you. Is that something that you've discussed—I'm assuming Minister Chanthivong would have a role to play in that as well. Have you discussed that with him?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** In terms of the building sector—and I think we still have that process of sign-off—

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** Yes, we are meeting regularly with the Building Commissioner, though we will come back to you on that specific example in relation to that too.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** If you have any data, I am happy for you to provide it on notice, in terms of the average time it takes for that approval process. Again, I appreciate sometimes there are discrepancies. That's one example, but there have been a few others that we've heard from industry about that delay. Obviously, the more builders and sparkies and people we can get out working is what we want.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Minister, if I could just pick up the Bankstown hospital and TAFE relocation. Earlier, I made reference to comments from Health estimates where this issue was considered, questioning whether the allocated \$1.3 billion for the new Bankstown hospital would also cover the relocation and reinstatement of the Bankstown TAFE. I am happy to table this, Minister, if I could just quote here from the Health estimates:

The \$1.3 billion is not sufficient to deliver the full Bankstown hospital as it was originally proposed, plus the TAFE.

It goes on, "The TAFE wasn't part of the original budget, either." Minister, if I could also just remind you—I've spoken earlier about consideration of this issue at an earlier Health estimates on 10 September, relating to whether the \$1.3 billion for the new hospital will also cover the relocation and reinstatement of the TAFE. I can table this, and the Health official reports:

I think that it is too early to say the answer to that question definitively because we are in the early planning phases, and there are another few months ...

Minister, it appears that there is no funding commitment relating to the Bankstown TAFE and its future.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** To be absolutely clear about this, the Labor Government has made a commitment to build a new Bankstown hospital. The local member there is very strongly backing it, and, as part of that project, it will incorporate the new TAFE. That's absolutely clear. I've met with the health Minister on this, on several occasions. Officials from the department and TAFE are meeting with their counterparts in Health Infrastructure NSW. I will get the secretary to outline the process, but what will happen is that it is a Government commitment, and it'll come back with a proposal when they've done all the full costings for the full project,

including the cost of the TAFE and the cost of the temporary relocation of the TAFE. That is my understanding. Mr Dizdar, do you want to add to that?

**MURAT DIZDAR:** As the Minister and Ms Read have indicated, this is not a project where there will be two separate submissions, two separate business cases and two separate planning processes—one for the hospital and one for the TAFE. It's a combined project. That's why we're working very closely with our Health officials to take forward to Government what is the required budget and what is the required commitment here. We've got clear instructions to deliver that. Having worked on that TAFE premise before, on the school site as an executive director in the area, I think it will be a fantastic outcome for the community to have upgraded and new facilities that can be state-of-the-art and meet training requirements into the future. It's a very big commitment here, and we're hard at work, with Ms Read and the department supporting to make sure we've got a very solid business case.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Minister, just in terms of reassurance for the students and for the families in Bankstown, Health officials at estimates hearings here are saying there's no budget provision. There may be a verbal agreement between Ministers, but—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No, I think that's not the way to characterise it. It's clear at the moment that we are in the process of getting the information needed to go back to ERC and to Cabinet to get approval for this, but it's a clear Government commitment. It can't be any clearer than the commitment that has been made by the Minister, the local member and the Premier. There will be a new hospital on that site at Bankstown, and there will be a new TAFE on that site at Bankstown.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Back to the priority of the construction industry and training, Minister, what is the current waitlist for students in the construction sector who are waiting for a spot to attend TAFE to commence their class-based learning?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We obviously agree to train all apprentices who come through into TAFE. I'm not aware of any—I'm aware that sometimes if a TAFE—and I'm aware certainly in other sectors that there are some areas where we've had to get students to wait. But, in the construction sector, I will ask TAFE if they can provide specific information.

**CHLOE READ:** I don't have information on a waitlist for construction apprentices. I'm looking down the table to Ms Schorer to see if she might have any information, but we regularly work with the apprenticeship network centres in the department to make sure that there's a really smooth process wherever possible to enrol apprentices in their training, noting that they get employment first, usually, and then come.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** If you want to take that on notice, that's fine. It was just the waitlist relevant to the construction industry for those—

**CHLOE READ:** Can I see if Ms Schorer has any information on that?

**JANET SCHORER:** I'm happy to add what I can. We can provide what we can on notice. Generally, there are not waitlists. When a student comes through seeking an apprenticeship with their employer, we endeavour to try to find them a placement as soon as we can. There might be a delay whilst we work out the best location for them, but, in general, we try to secure a suitable placement as soon as the student and the employer is lined up.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Minister, I have reports in terms of a student wanting to enrol in cabinet-making—a fine trade.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Interesting.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** The experience being at TAFE was that the application was made, the quota was not met and the course was cancelled. Minister, in light of the demand for skills training in the industry, both shared by TAFE and the industry-led not-for-profit RTOs, is there not a better way to be doing this?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** For sure. That is the system that the previous Liberal-Nationals Government left us with. The Smart and Skilled system specifies that if you don't have a certain number of people in a class, it can't continue. Sometimes those classes were cancelled two days before because they didn't get enough people. Obviously we will need to have classes in the long term which are viable, but taking TAFE out of the Smart and Skilled system will give us some more flexibility to actually go to an area, for example, and say, "Look, we haven't got enough for one year but we might be able to make a start every second year and guarantee it," which we can't do at the moment under the Smart and Skilled system. It will certainly give us more flexibility. I'm not going to say that we're going to be running unviable classes, but it will give us the ability to provide that certainty. That is

really important. In the case of that individual, if you want to give us a location after the event if you want us to follow up on that person, I'm happy to do that. Ms Read?

**CHLOE READ:** When those circumstances arise, we would work with the individual students who may have expressed an interest in that course or sought to enrol to see if we can find an alternative location they can attend or an alternative course. Very happy to follow up if you have specifics on that.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Minister, in the event of such courses not proceeding, would there not be a role to partner more with the industry-led RTOs to help meet their training needs in terms of shared facilities?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** My understanding is that the apprenticeship networks don't just look at TAFE; they do look at private RTOs as well. Again, in terms of sharing, as you're referring to there, it has been difficult for TAFE to share and to work cooperatively with RTOs when they have been in competition with them over the last few years. When TAFE comes out of the competitive market as part of that, being stewards of the system, as government is, maybe we will see the opportunities for more cooperation.

**CHLOE READ:** Certainly the department would have a role through training services in identifying alternative providers who might be able to support that apprenticeship.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** But Minister, in light of the priority—and I appreciate the work done in addressing the skill shortage in the construction sector—is this not a directive that you as the responsible Minister could make?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I will. We will find a spot for each apprentice.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** But in terms of the history of the training sector?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We will work individually with each apprentice to try to find them something which suits them. Sometimes the location isn't in their home area. If not, we will work with them on what components they can do online, what components they can travel for and the assistance that's available for that.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Minister, I'm aware of the ETU and NECA with a joint submission for your consideration in terms of coming together in conjunction with TAFE to meet the skill training need. Would that be under further consideration—the ETU, the industry groups wanting to partner with TAFE to help meet the training need by better utilising government facilities at TAFE campuses?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** The discussion I've had with them to date has been about land for construction of a facility with, potentially, Federal funding. But I haven't had confirmation around that. Is that something that one of the department or TAFE can tell us about?

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** I can provide their submission to you. It has been around for the last two years.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** My understanding is not that we have a specific proposal at the moment.

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** Nothing further to add on that, Minister.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** But I have had discussions with them about it, absolutely.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Minister, if I could just move to Gosford TAFE. I open this by acknowledging the representations and the work of Adam Crouch, the member for Terrigal, relating to the Gosford TAFE. We spoke about this at the last estimates. I think this was a campus that you hadn't visited, but it was on your list. Have you visited Gosford TAFE?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I was due to have visited it a couple of weeks ago, but something else occurred and I didn't get to go—but I will. Where we are at, at the moment, with the Gosford TAFE and the proposals for redevelopment is that we did secure an extension from Central Coast Council to retain our option to get the land for a future redevelopment. TAFE has been working on developing its proposals to take to government about where we may be able to go on that. In the meantime, we've been investing in some essential maintenance. Even if we were to go to a new campus, obviously we need to keep the current TAFE operating for some time. Gosford campus is having about \$4.2 million invested over coming years to address maintenance issues and upgrades to safety and usability at the campus. I'll ask Ms Read to talk more about the project overall.

**CHLOE READ:** As the Minister said, \$4.2 million in the coming years, but also \$700,000 in essential maintenance has already been completed this financial year. That includes things like upgrades to lighting, to ceilings and to things like carpeting, and then looking to, as the Minister said, in the forward years some replacements of things. For example, there is a lift that I believe needs to be replaced—those kind of repairs into the future, as well as some new systems.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Minister, you may recall that Gosford TAFE teachers are reporting, "You owe it to us to give us a responsible and safe place of work." Could you enlighten us on the time frame in terms of a change to the campus?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** In terms of a new campus?

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Yes, correct.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I can't at this stage. The Government will be considering whether or not it is going to invest in a new campus at a later date. Can I tell you, though, in terms of visits to Gosford, Federal Minister Giles is there today, which is very nice. No doubt he is talking about fee-free and the Albanese Government's terrific investments in vocational education and training. I am now scheduled to go there on 8 April.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Minister, earlier you mentioned changes to the sort of One TAFE model and moving to faculties. You talked about heavy vehicle apprentices and access to those courses for people in the mining industry. We've had a bit of feedback with some issues at Kurri Kurri TAFE in relation to that—concerns from industry that they're not able to get the block requirements that they need for lessons, and some are going to Tamworth and Coffs Harbour. What are you doing to alleviate that particular situation in the Hunter?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I've had a lot of conversations with Clayton Barr about this. He's written to me a number of times and talked to me about it quite a lot, and I know the industry talks to him as the local member. Clayton has been very strong in advocating to rectify these problems. We made some progress and then have gone back a bit—a couple of steps forwards, one step back. Through the Paid to Learn program—and I will ask TAFE to elaborate on this a bit—we were able to get, I think, three new teachers for the heavy vehicle mechanics. Unfortunately they were attracted back out by big salaries in industry, I can only assume, and we lost a couple of them again.

The history of this is it goes back to a backlog that came out of COVID. I know it seems a long time ago now, but we had a difficult situation of apprentices who were potentially running into their fifth year of an apprenticeship, which is hard to work through and very hard on them. We've now have had some difficulties at Coffs Harbour in recruiting enough teachers to catch up the backlog. That's why some people have been being assisted by Coffs. Also, I think some teachers may be coming from Coffs, but I will get TAFE to confirm that.

I had a meeting just recently with the Minerals Council and representatives from industry, and set up a meeting for them with the new faculty heads on this. As I mentioned to you before, one of the big benefits out of the faculty model, they're telling me, is that there were slight differences in the course being delivered at Kurri Kurri and in other parts of the State, and they may be able to reduce but still remain relevant in some aspects of the course. That's happening in parallel with trying to address some of the teaching shortages and working with industry about what role we can play with them to do that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Can I ask quickly in terms of time frame—and I just want to acknowledge Dave Layzell, who has been quite strong on this as well, and I know that he and Clayton represent similar areas, so it's something that is probably across the community.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** It certainly is.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In terms of any kind of time frame of when you'd maybe hope to see some improvement in that backlog in local—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I recognise it has dragged on. I absolutely recognise that. As I said, when we had the Paid to Learn teachers come in, we thought we were getting on top of it and then we lost a couple of those teachers. Perhaps Ms Read can talk a little more about that.

**CHLOE READ:** I think that what is needed in this area is some of that engagement with the faculty leads to work with industry on how we can attract and retain some teachers in that area. I know that that work has begun, including the meeting the Minister referenced. I can take on notice if we've got any more specifics on the time frame.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** It is more just time frames or when you would hope to be able to—particularly the concern seems to be about that block lesson requirement. That is where the backlog appears to be. If you can provide anything more on those, that would be great.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Back on this Skills Plan, Minister, I'm conscious that—I think it was Mr Kurucz. Is that right?

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** Correct.



**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** He has said that he will take on notice what particular jobs that data related to. So the courses—there were 41 for net zero and 91—was that right?—for housing infrastructure? Because I just want to see what the overlap is that might explain the data.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There is a substantial overlap.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I suspect there's an overlap, which is why I want to get the list of them. Minister, your Government has said—and it is in your report. We know that the Premier has talked a lot about housing and he has talked a lot about the net zero transition. They have been your two big-ticket items. Your Skills Plan certainly reflects that because there are six critical skills areas and your first two big areas are construction and housing, and net zero and energy transition, which is why I raised those graphs because it is showing a drop as you head into 2023. I'd like to know any further data—whether that'll continue to drop, the commencement rates, in those particular areas. If housing and net zero, your big-ticket items—the Labor Premier, the Minns-Car whatever Labor term that you have here. What I'd like to know is what you're going to do—and I know that you're going to give me the answer that it may be related to Commonwealth funding, but there has got to be something that you can do as well.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Aspects of it that relate to the Commonwealth are those aspects which relate to incentives for employers. We don't set the wages and fund the employers to employ apprentices. Those are the aspects, but our responsibility is, in that space, how much it costs to do a course, and that is why we are subsidising the fees at the moment and that's fee-free at the moment for those courses. A couple of things to this—obviously in the training space we've got the Skills Plan, where we're focusing on those skills areas. We're working to engage young people in high school, which I've talked about before, with the Education Pathways Program and a number of other programs throughout the State—come-and-tries and all those sorts of things, some of the pre-apprenticeship stuff. The Federal Government also provided some additional fee-free funding recently specifically for construction and that has gone into non-apprenticeship things—things like those, I think, pre-apprenticeship programs and so on, but I'll ask someone to confirm that. The other thing we're doing hand in hand—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Is that the boosting apprenticeship program that you talked about earlier or is it something different?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No.

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** No, that was an additional phase.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** That was about employers. Our programs tend to be focused on the cost for the participants, for the students and what we can do with the students. The other thing we're doing on this skills area is that I've also released a summary of our State skilled migration policy, and that also has the same six priority areas for our skilled migration. The Commonwealth obviously runs most of migration but we get 5,000 positions in the State which the State gets to nominate and there is a segment of those—about 1,500 for regional and rural and the other is statewide. We're focusing those on those key skills priority areas as well. There are a few aspects that we're looking at in terms of how we address the skills shortages. Just in terms of that recent—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Sorry, just on this migration, what is that referring to, Minister? I'm not aware of this.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** The State's role, obviously, is limited in migration, but the Commonwealth sets an overall number and then it allocates to the State a number of applicants who can come in under skilled visas nominated by State governments.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** But you're not funding those particular positions?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No, employers fund them.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** So you don't reduce the fees or anything like that?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No, they're not training. They're coming in as skilled migrants. Sometimes they have to get accreditation obviously.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** But are they competing with apprentices here for the same roles?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We're focusing them in areas of extreme skills shortage so they're adding to the workforce in an area where we've got—we'll train every apprentice who wants to give it a go.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** But you don't have a—is there a skills shortage in the housing and construction, and net zero transmission areas?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** There are?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Absolutely. Huge numbers.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** There was a rise up until 2022 and after 2023 the commencement dropped.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** But that's only in new numbers. That didn't mean—that is nowhere near enough to address the skills shortages. We have a low natural population growth—it may even be negative in Australia. We have low unemployment and we have big skills shortages across those six key target areas that we've mentioned in the Skills Plan. That means we need more people working in them if we're going to deliver the houses and the net zero transition.

**The CHAIR:** I understand, as part of the student services tranche 1 and 2 projects—this was shifting from six regional structures to a statewide model. Tranche 1 and 2 was finalised in October 2022. But I understand that there were six director of student services positions who were supposed to be overseeing that transition that were still employed until January this year. Do you know about that, Minister?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I will ask TAFE to answer the specifics of that question.

**CHLOE READ:** Ms Tickle, do you have something on this?

**JULIE TICKLE:** I'm not quite sure of the positions you're referring to. Could you say the name of them again?

**The CHAIR:** It is director of student services positions.

**JULIE TICKLE:** We've got a lot of positions in student services. There were some that were retained to look after the transition, yes. But I'm not sure about the six and if that was one of them. I'll take it on notice and let you know if that's okay.

**The CHAIR:** That would be really useful. If you could let us know on notice what those positions—how long they ran for and then, also, what the salary was of each of those positions as well and was there any severance pay or what happened at the end of their employment. That would be really useful.

**JULIE TICKLE:** Sure.

**The CHAIR:** Last estimates we talked a bit about our Portfolio Committee No. 3 inquiry that was looking at the experiences of children and young people with disability in the education system and we had made a recommendation that the New South Wales Government, in cooperation with the Australian Government, seek to review the governance of New South Wales public universities in relation to the educational needs of students with disability and complaints mechanisms et cetera. This was a recommendation that was noted in the Government's response to that report. We spoke about this broadly last time. What action have you now taken in relation to speaking with your Federal counterparts specifically in relation to meeting the needs of students with disability?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Again, I'd come back to the discussions that we had with the Commonwealth around the accord process, which talks about access and is talking about developing a needs-based funding model for people, so physical access versus monetary access, I suppose. There might be a difference there. But I'll ask Mr Kurucz or Mr Dizdar to perhaps elaborate on—the conversations that we've been having with the Commonwealth have been ongoing around that accord process. I speak with the Minister obviously in between—but also at ministerial council meetings, where we have had some discussion on these issues. But the department has been in more constant contact.

**The CHAIR:** Just before we go to the answer, just to try and direct the answer a bit, I'm particularly interested—we spoke last time about situations at, I think, University of Sydney, where basically one of the student organisations was lending out little ramps for people to carry around on their wheelchairs, so that they could get in and out of rooms and things. When you talk about needs-based—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'm talking about funding in terms of access—

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Are we still progressing towards universal access—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** —rather than physical.

**The CHAIR:** —rather than individuals having to carry around mobility assistance?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Sure.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** I'll get Mr Kurucz to add to this, but on the broader governance issue—this might be of interest to you, Chair, and then we can go straight to the disability—the Australian Government has convened an expert council on university governance. Early this year, it got set up. That's been tasked, this expert council, with developing new university governance principles. This is an issue that you're raising that's not New South Wales specific. It cuts across the country. That expert council will come up with recommendations for the Federal Government against which, if the Government adopts the recommendations, universities will be required to report their compliance. It's Minister Clare here who has indicated that this expert council is tasked with looking into governance: how to strengthen governance and improve it across the board, for both universities, for students as the major shareholders in the system, as the customers here, and specifically in relation to what you raised earlier around staff and student safety as well. I think that will be a very important piece of work that tackles, off the back of the accord, the improvements that can come around university governance, that'll be requirements if adopted. Specifically to disability, Jeremy?

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** Yes. We're in those discussions with the Commonwealth at the moment, particularly around that needs-based funding aspect: What's the additional targets, for want of a better term? The Australian Government has set an overall tertiary attainment target and is now working through what specific targets might look like for particular cohorts of students, and the needs-based funding work that they're undertaking is designed to complement that. We're working with them on what is that needs-based funding for; how can the model best work consistently across the country? Some of it is about physical access; sometimes it's about additional teaching and learning support for the individual students. So we're working with them about what that funding model may look like going forward.

**The CHAIR:** Is that funding model just "Here's a pool of cash. Go forth", or is it actually tied to a mandatory "You need to make sure that your building is accessible", for instance?

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** The Australian Government's working through that at the moment. I don't think they've made any final decisions on what that might look like, in relation to whether it's pooled or whether it's tied to a particular student or individual. I don't think they've made a final decision on that, at this point.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** I think it's a really good point, Chair, and we'll be advocating, like we've done on the school side, that there are specific loadings that are very clear, so that you can see the money go to those students in need. As you know, in education we've got low-level adjustment for disability; we've got English as an additional language, dialect and low SES. We've been advocating that they're very clear around the needs-based funding model, and loadings are very clear for those groups, so that the money can go to directly support those students. But I think it's a fair question you raise around what would the accountability around that look like. That's still to be worked out.

**The CHAIR:** I think there's a difference. Maybe this is the same discussion that we've had in the schools space, as well, that obviously there is a benefit in having more funding based on higher need, particularly when you're looking at regional areas, and people of lower socio-economic situation, and also when we're dealing with individuals with particular disability needs. But in terms of that overall infrastructure kind of piece, where we're just looking at buildings that are really old and not up to modern standards when it comes to accessibility, I would hope that more of that would just be like a blanket, where it doesn't matter how many people of disability need this in your institution; it shouldn't be up to the student to come and demand access.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Universities have to meet the building standards with accessibility.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, but they're not. What are you doing to make sure they do?

**MURAT DIZDAR:** I think this is a line of questioning you asked Sydney university last year, and this afternoon it might be one that you ask again, but they've got requirements under the law, just like I do in the education sector, to make all the necessary adjustments. Like we've tabled in the education hearings, it's a challenge given the asset footprint, but one that we have to meet. On the new school and capital upgrade side it's easier to do, but it's more to the point of existing sites. We can't turn away a student. I think that's a great premise, and we've got to make sure that we do achieve accessibility on that site for that student, which is the same challenge that every university faces, as well.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Can I just answer one of your previous questions, Ms Mihailuk? There's 1,400 students in 2023 at Padstow TAFE.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Thank you, On Padstow TAFE, have they had any increase in funding as a result of the Bankstown TAFE relocation?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** What they will get is we would expect that new animal facility to be funded as part of this overall project. Capital funding for that will come from that. Obviously, the operational funding—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** The capital funding will come from the \$1.3 billion?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No, whatever the total ends up being.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** We don't know what it is.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** As we know, it's not going to be \$1.3 billion, as I think we've canvassed extensively already.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** We've acknowledged that there's going to be extra money.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** It will come from that.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** When is the last time you met with Minister Giles?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There was a week not long ago where I saw him three times in a week. We were starting to feel like good buddies.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** That might have just been some niceties between you guys. Was there any conversational substance?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We meet, obviously, in the ministerial councils. We have conversations on the phone and also discuss specifics. Is there any particular issue?

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** This issue of critical skills areas and this issue that they've reduced funding for employers under the Commonwealth program, so that you're seeing that drop after 2022.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There is a new scheme they've recently—there's some new funding of \$10,000.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** But have you raised the impact that's having on New South Wales students, because it means that there's not enough apprenticeships in the areas of housing and net zero, your two big-ticket items for Labor?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** When the Commonwealth was doing its review of employer incentives, we advocated to them that they should be providing a consistent framework of incentives. One of the responses to that was the recent announcement of funding for students in construction, which was—Mr Kurucz might be able to give me the proper name.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Which would then reflect on the numbers going higher after 2023, because at the moment it's dropping. Your graph says it's dropping.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** As I said before, it's my understanding that we've actually had increasing enrolments this year. We'll be able to confirm that soon.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can you take that on notice, then, where that's increased?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I haven't got official figures yet, but once we can we will be able to provide that.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** When do you expect the official figures to show that that's increased in that area?

**CHLOE READ:** End of March.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** End of March. When we're looking at the work—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Then you can provide them—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** —that we're doing with the Commonwealth, for instance—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** —because you've got 21 days with notice.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Sorry?

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** You should be able to provide them as part of these budget estimates. Is that right? You've got 21 days for anything that's taken on notice.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We'll take on notice what we can get.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** That will get you over March. Sorry, go on, Minister.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I was just going to say that, in terms of the Commonwealth's priorities, again, one of the things which we did do when I first became Minister was get the housing construction to be actually included in one of their priority skills areas. So we're all on the same page with that.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Has Minister Clare met with you over Bankstown TAFE?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No, I haven't met with Minister Clare on Bankstown TAFE.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** No representations have been made by Minister Clare with respect to this main TAFE in his electorate?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'd have to take that on notice. I've met with Minister—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can you take it on notice, whether he's made any representations?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Minister Clare and I have met on, obviously, issues of portfolio responsibility, particularly in terms of the Universities Accord, and those sort of areas.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** But specifically I'd like to know if he's made a representation about Bankstown.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'll take that on notice.

**The CHAIR:** I want to take us back again to last estimates, where we were talking about 1,000 VR headsets that had been donated by Meta. I understand that there was a team who was working in TAFE that had been working on making those headsets basically of use to TAFE, and that they had suffered redundancies in that group. I was also assured at the time that those VR headsets would be put to good use and wouldn't have a problem now that that group who was looking after the technology side has been disbanded. What's happened to them?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I will ask TAFE to respond specifically to that.

**CHLOE READ:** I don't have information with me. Ms Schorer might have knowledge of the specifics on this one. If not, we can take that on notice.

**JANET SCHORER:** The headsets continue to be used, as far as I'm aware. The functions of that sits within my group now.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Meredith-Sotiris looked like she wanted to say something—no?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No, I think Ms Schorer has covered that. We can find more information for you, though. We'll take it on notice.

**The CHAIR:** That would be very useful. I'd like to know how many of them are being—not just physically located somewhere but actually still being used on a regular basis for TAFE education.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There are some fabulous augmented reality welding stuff out there as well, which is awesome. You should have a look at that when you visit a TAFE one day. We got a huge boost in training in welding.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, which is why you needed that team that you got rid of.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We're covering it.

**The CHAIR:** Hence the question. Another question I asked last time was in relation to how many TAFEs didn't have an onsite counsellor. I got back on notice a bunch of data. It says all students at TAFE have access to an online or a telephone service. But my actual question was in relation to how many don't have access to a physical counsellor that they can walk in to if they've had some sort of sexual assault or harassment.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Some of our campuses are very small, so they're not all going to have an onsite counsellor. I'll pass over to TAFE for a specific answer.

**CHLOE READ:** Ms Tickle, do you have that information?

**JULIE TICKLE:** I covered this question last time in terms of how they access the counsellors. On our campuses, people work between a number of campuses. I think I gave the example of where I'm from, the Mid North Coast, where there's a counsellor that travels across a couple campuses. The question isn't simple to answer because we wouldn't want you to think that they have access to a counsellor five days a week at the campuses that they cover. They do travel around, so there's access to counsellors at some campuses some days of the week. But all students have access to counsellors via Microsoft Teams or the phone across the State.

**The CHAIR:** Maybe that should have been my question, then. Are there any that have five days a week access?

**JULIE TICKLE:** We can take that on notice, certainly.

**The CHAIR:** And how many; that would be good.

**JULIE TICKLE:** You're asking which campuses have a full-time counsellor that only looks after that campus?

**The CHAIR:** Yes. I understand what you were saying last time about the moving around, but I'm interested in how many have a full-time—

**JULIE TICKLE:** Sure.

**The CHAIR:** That will be very useful, thank you. I should have worded the question better.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Minister, I wanted to ask about the North Coast Community College. I met recently with Ted Nabung, who is their CEO. I think he also might have met with you the week that they—he and Mayor of Ballina Sharon Cadwallader—were in town.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** There's a couple things that they raised with me that I want to get your input or view on. One of the things that they are asking for is opportunity to access some more land. They're interested in the Southern Cross School of Distance Education, which I did raise in the Education estimates as well, which Mr Dizdar will remember. Have you had a meeting with them? Did you talk about trying to advocate for them to access a little bit more physical space to roll out their—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I did meet with them. They talked to me about a couple of things, firstly around the provision of some of their fee-free courses. They did also have a map and showed me some areas of land. They talked to me about what they were delivering, and it sounded great. There's obviously a process that the Government is going through in terms of excess land, which is prioritising housing at the moment. I haven't had a follow-up on the specifics of that site. We may have to take on notice whether there's any specific further action that's coming out of that. I'll just ask the department if they know more.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** On the Southern Cross distance ed site, my recollection is that we committed to follow up with them.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I know that they met with the Minister while they were in town—so I wondered if there'd been any more done on that.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** Our infrastructure folks were looking at that. I'm happy to come back with any detail.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Yes. We recognise it's still being used as a school campus as a school of distance ed, but it has quite a large footprint. If there's a chance to make it a co-location educational—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** They showed me the maps, the space and everything.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** If you could take that on notice, that would be fantastic. Again continuing on with that community college, one of the other issues that they've raised with me was about—and I don't profess to be an expert in this space—the cap on their Smart and Skilled funding and the challenges they have, given they basically went from having a cap of \$271,000 in 2020 and now it's \$120,000. They've had COVID and they've had floods, so they had issues obviously with delivery. They feel that they're being impeded by the cap that they have, and they've asked for a review. What's the process around that or opportunities for them to have more funding to deliver services for the community?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Was it just that or also fee-free places? I thought they'd raised—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** They raised the cap specifically with me.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'll ask Mr Kurucz to—

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** Our training services officers work with providers such as the North Coast Community College in relation to their caps. I'm happy to take the specifics on notice. Obviously that's subject to an annual process that runs on a financial year basis where we look at caps within the overall budget allocation envelope that we have, and we look at previous demand and uptake by particular providers. I'll specifically look into the North Coast Community College.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That would be great. Their concern—and I take your point about previous demand—is they had a couple of years where they weren't operating at full capacity post-COVID and the floods. I think they feel that they're a bit disadvantaged—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** By history.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** —by previous numbers obviously being lower, in the circumstances. If you could take that on notice, that would be great. I have one more question on that particular organisation. Recently, last year, they offered the foundational skills qualification to some disaffected high school kids who now go there, so they have that opportunity. Again, they're having an issues with the places that they can offer because of their funding. They've got demand from students who want to go there and maybe look into that pathway because traditional schooling is not really working out for them. They've got the qualification to offer that foundational skills course but not the funding to have the cohort of students based on demand. The concern especially, coming from the mayor and others, is about anything you can do to keep young people engaged who might be at risk. Is there anything—again, you may need to take it on notice—you can provide in terms of that specific course for that provider?

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** I'm happy to take that on notice, because they will receive separate funding under the Adult and Community Education program initiative as well. We'll come back to you comprehensively across both.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There are two aspects to that. As you're probably aware, we've recently had a increase in funding for foundation skills as part of our agreement with the Federal Government, which went to community colleges. I think they were specifically talking about, essentially, a school-equivalent course as well. So we'll come back to you on the funding of that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** It's a good model that works for students.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** It's working in a number of community colleges really well.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** If you could provide something on notice, that would be fantastic. Minister, I wanted to take you now to Broken Hill TAFE. Again, I'm sure you're familiar with what's been happening out there, but could you provide an overview? There's a lot of community concern. The mayor reached out to me, and I think to you and a number of our parliamentary colleagues, particularly on the decommissioning of the lathes and milling machines. What happened? Is there going to be a review of what's happening out at Broken Hill TAFE going forward?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes. I'm actually going to Broken Hill tomorrow. I'm meeting the mayor, so I will talk to him about that. I'll get TAFE to be more specific about this; they will obviously participate in that meeting. Fundamentally, there hasn't been much demand in that course for some time. It seems like the impression was that there wasn't a teacher; but there was actually a teacher who could come into Broken Hill to deliver the course. The lack of demand and several of the parts of the machinery—there's a number of machines which are decommissioned. They're too old and not up to standard any more, so they're going. But the latest that I heard was we would not be moving the other machinery. Instead, we will be doing what we'd like to do in a lot of places, which is sitting down with industry in the local area to work out how we can work with them to ensure that we're meeting their needs. I'll ask Ms Read to elaborate on that.

**CHLOE READ:** We've started that process in Broken Hill with an industry consultation session that happened on 4 March. We confirmed in that discussion with the community that we wouldn't remove any operational equipment at this time. But, as the Minister said, the equipment is tagged out and needs to be refurbished or replaced. That should continue. We're looking to establish a reference committee for Broken Hill based on manufacturing, which is going to concentrate on three key themes. One is a delivery strategy: What should we be delivering there? That, obviously, needs the input and consultation with local industry. A workforce strategy—I think we do, as the Minister mentioned, have teaching capacity, but I believe that that person travels to get to Broken Hill to deliver. So it would be ideal to bring together the delivery strategy with a workforce strategy where we work with industry to make sure we have delivery onsite where we can.

Then it is listed here as a marketing and promotion strategy, but I think it is one of those things where, if you have had declining enrolments in a particular area but industry and the community are really interested in keeping that provision, there is something not quite right in how young people or potential students in that area are thinking about their careers and the offerings that might be available to them. So it is something in TAFE and industry and people like the local council working together to really promote the opportunities that this type of course will have for people in Broken Hill to stay in the area and then to work in the area into the future.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'll just add two things to that. Firstly, this was raised with me first by Roy Butler, the local member. He has been very engaged in making sure that we are addressing this, and that has been excellent. Secondly, I mentioned expansion of Paid to Learn before. Broken Hill is one of those particular areas where we are looking at whether or not we can use Paid to Learn to attract some more teachers.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Is that also for the mining industry as well? You talked about the manufacturing industry.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** This course is really specifically about mining and related industries. We are offering a number of similar courses. They're continuing. This one is one that, I know, relates to the mining sector.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Did you want to add something, Ms Tickle?

**CHLOE READ:** We were just saying three Paid to Learn teachers at Broken Hill.

**JULIE TICKLE:** Yes. Three Paid to Learn teachers at Broken Hill—nursing and health, electro-tech, community services and ECEC are on the program and currently working in Broken Hill.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** So you might be able to expand—that is what you're saying—with some of the other industry.

**CHLOE READ:** Yes. There's an intent in the next tranche of Paid to Learn, for Broken Hill, Wagga and a couple of others regional and rural areas, to make sure we are attracting teachers all across the State, using that program.

**JULIE TICKLE:** We go out for advertising in April. So, if there is anyone who wants to work in Broken Hill, please apply.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'm sure they're all watching budget estimates and you'll have a flurry of applications.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I'm sure they are.

**CHLOE READ:** We talked marketing and promotion. If anybody wants, here we are.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I don't know if this is the forum where you'll get high numbers for marketing and promotion, but we live in hope. Just one more on Broken Hill. Again, Minister, I would just appreciate your views. It is the issue around the minimum of students to run particular courses, challenges in more remote areas—obviously, Broken Hill is a city. But how do you rectify that?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I did see that. Moving away from TAFE being part of the Smart and Skilled system is a really key part of that. I'm not going to say to you that we will be able to afford to run a course with only seven students, but we may be able to work with industry and say, "Can we do this course every second year?" or something like that. The move away from the previous Government's Smart and Skilled system, hopefully, gives us some flexibility. We will still have to be economically viable, and we will still have to stay in our budgets, but we will, hopefully, have the flexibility to actually be able to do some things like that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I just have a few questions now on some specific TAFE campus upgrades. You mentioned before Kingscliff, you'd been up there a couple of times. I think the sod turn was April last year for the new buildings. Do you have an expected completion date and where that progress for that project is up to?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I was up again just a few weeks ago and looked at several of the buildings that have finished their refurbishment, including the nursing facility there, which is looking great. The new facility that includes the animal section is due in around July, midyear, and that should be—hopefully, all things going well and, hopefully, not too much disruption out of the current events up there—complete then.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Okay. Coffs Harbour TAFE campus—the same thing. I think the sod turn was about 12 months ago, and the media release at the time said the project would be expected to be completed sometime this year. Do you have an update on that one?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Estimated June this year.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Again conscious of current events, but I know Lismore TAFE campus—you were up there not that long ago with the local member, but again just talking about the way forward there, notwithstanding current issues, but—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** That is a little more complex. The Lismore campus that was flooded—the restoration of the heritage buildings on that site is complete and was set up in a way which was trying to think about future floods. So some of the equipment is up on a higher level to try and keep it out of floods, but also it is largely moveable. We are seeking to demolish some of the other buildings on the site because we just don't think that it's worth upgrading them when the potential for a flood is there. We have discussed that with the community and with Janelle Saffin, who, you'd all be very well aware, keeps a very close eye on everything there. Some of that discussion about delivery sites—some things have moved to Wollongbar. Temporarily some are at the university. But there is a bit of an ongoing conversation with Janelle and her community about some of the future of that.



**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I guess in terms of—again, I know it can be challenging—for time frames of when you would expect to have it back to full delivery?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I believe the section of the Lismore campus that we have restored is finished and is being used. The demolition hasn't started on the other part, which we won't be using again. We are seeking, essentially, that those—there is too much equipment in there which was lost, is likely to be lost in future floods, unfortunately.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I wanted to just move now to the centres of excellence, which I think you talked about before, particularly just in terms of time frames of commencement, completion, scope et cetera—the Tighes Hill campus in Newcastle first, the net zero one. What is the latest in terms of that particular project?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I think one of the key things about the centres of excellence is it is not big capital projects. We are not building new buildings. The capital money that's going in is generally about renovation and upgrade of existing facilities, so time frames are quite short. We are already delivering some courses in those areas. We are in the process of then working with our university partners on things like the higher apprenticeships. They will take a little bit longer. And some of the short qualifications are being implemented, as well, and I'm expecting there will be more from next year. So all of those are up and running pretty quick because they are not about building a building. We have got some work that's going on on mobile training units, where they will be built or constructed. Perhaps Ms Read can elaborate a little bit on the rollout of courses particularly.

**CHLOE READ:** Yes. There is some investment, as the Minister mentioned, in the campuses and in mobile training units, but we have already begun with some of the shorter courses that can be delivered virtually or don't require that specialist equipment: pieces like discovering renewable manufacturing careers, discovering advanced manufacturing careers and also maths foundations for those wanting to work in the manufacturing industry. We are on our way with the development of a higher apprenticeship in manufacturing and applied digital technologies. We are working through that process with TEQSA on accreditation for that course.

Then, as I mentioned earlier, I think, a higher apprenticeship in renewable manufacturing and sustainable manufacturing practices is in development. We probably would be planning to deliver that from 2026 onwards. Then from here there will be a number of short and longer courses coming online across all of those centres of excellence, aligned with their overall purpose. I think Ms Schorer mentioned earlier the networking of the centres of excellence and the ability to share that course delivery. That's something that is, obviously, in its early phases as we start to stand them up but really looking forward to understanding the opportunities that brings us, as well.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I asked about Newcastle, but that's the same for the Western Sydney campus. It's a similar—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** It's the same sort of progress.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** How many mobile training units? You just mentioned those, Minister. How many are you looking at delivering for those?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I will ask TAFE to answer that question. I'm not sure of the specific number. We might have to take—

**CHLOE READ:** I only have two or three in my mind. Ms Schorer, do you know the number?

**JANET SCHORER:** We'd have to take the number on notice. We have a large fleet. As Ms Read said, there is more in development, being fitted out, to support the work of the centres of excellence as well.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** If on notice you can provide some numbers on that, that would be great.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We will.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** On that, I did ask last time for a breakdown. My understanding is for, say, the Newcastle campus, it's a \$60 million investment between State and Federal and I think \$53-odd million for Western Sydney. I asked for a breakdown of how much was State and how much was Federal money. With all due respect, Minister, I got an answer back that referred me to a press release which didn't actually have the breakdown. I will try again. Would you be able to provide what the breakdown is of State and Federal funding for those centres of excellence, please?

**CHLOE READ:** For all of it, aside for a small component of turbocharge funding, which was \$5.27 million for the renewable net zero centre of excellence, it's matched funding, so it's fifty-fifty, but I'll just look at Mr Kurucz—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Did we run the total figures? There is \$56.21 million at Tighes Hill, 53.95 at Wetherill Park, as the basin, and 47.07 at Wollongong.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I noticed in some media recently, Minister, that there is going to be TAFE's first artisan brewing course being offered at Ultimo. I thought we would finish on a high note. I thought that was very interesting. Obviously, there is a lot happening in terms of that industry. Do you have any updates in terms of the take-up of that course and how popular it is?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I haven't been asked to taste anything yet.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** We could do a Committee visit, perhaps.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes, do that. I will ask Ms Read to—

**CHLOE READ:** I'm disappointed to relay that I'm not able to give you more information on this one, unless Ms Schorer might have something. But I will certainly take it on notice.

**JANET SCHORER:** Apart to say that we do have a number of courses around brewing and winemaking and other things that are related to those hospitality and food industries. We can very easily provide you with the numbers on those.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'm genuinely interested in the take-up and also the geographic spread of students.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I think it should be very popular.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** My understanding is that it is not all face to face. I would be interested to know. There seems to be a lot, particularly in regional areas, where you have craft brew houses coming that are great for our local community, and we're happy to support them.

**CHLOE READ:** We're very happy to take that on notice and conduct investigations into what we are doing.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I highly recommend the existing restaurant there at TAFE Ultimo as well. It's very good.

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, I went there last week or the week before. It is fantastic. It is called the Apprentice. Apprentices doing the Diploma of Hospitality Management are in the front of house area and then apprentices in the kitchens are doing all the cooking. The food was fantastic and the service was excellent.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Minister, on the animal centre that is going to be put into Padstow, is this similar to what is at Wyong?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** In design? I don't know. The facilities would be similar, I think. I will have to ask for a specific on that. But I have been to several. Generally, they involve trying to replicate some of—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** The one at Wyong is \$5 million or something.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** The Wyong one is a lovely building shaped like a whale. It has got facilities indoors and outdoors. I would expect the new one to have it, but I'm not sure of the differences in the animals they might be dealing with. Perhaps, Ms Schorer may be the one.

**JANET SCHORER:** Yes, that would be correct. Most of the animals—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Does Padstow already have these courses?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No.

**JANET SCHORER:** Animal studies.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** So it going to be new. Is there demand? Has there been a request for it?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There is very high demand for the animal courses, actually.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** But in Padstow, specifically? Is that something that is demanded by south-west Sydney, or students from Newtown?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** It is currently in Bankstown. There is currently a high demand in Bankstown. That's what is going to be transferring. But it is going to be transferring from the fifth floor of the building indoors to being one which has some outdoor space.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** What is offered at Bankstown now?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Animal care courses. There are quite a few different levels of certificates in animal care that are available.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** We are seeing an increase in enrolments in animal care at Bankstown?

**JANET SCHORER:** Yes, and generally. People are training to work as veterinary assistants and veterinary nurses. There is very high demand.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** That's what it is, certificate IV in veterinary nursing and not specifically animal care? They're different certificates?

**JANET SCHORER:** There will be other courses they offer as well, yes.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There is a range.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Do we know how many are going to be at Padstow and which ones?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There is a range of things. When I went to the one at Wyong, I was talking to people who were training to become wildlife park keepers—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Yes, you've got five there.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** —right through to vet nurses. There is a big range and there is a big demand.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I expect on the Central Coast there would be because they have got a lot of wildlife sanctuaries there.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I have to say, when I visited the animal facility at Bankstown, it was also very well populated with students.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** But it's not coming back to Bankstown, is it?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No, because it's currently on a higher floor of a multistorey building. I think you would probably agree that maybe animals might like to have some outdoor space.

**The CHAIR:** Normally.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I'm not sure how many will want to go there.

**The CHAIR:** Can I ask you, Minister, the Illawarra Heavy Industries Manufacturing Centre of Excellence, which defence industry partners have been selected for that?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I will have to ask TAFE if they can answer. I've seen a list of some of the tertiary partners but I haven't seen if there's a defence. We may have to take that on notice.

**CHLOE READ:** We might need to take that on notice, I think. Yes, I will take that one on notice.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Some others for you to take on notice, just in this last minute: Back on those renewables courses, if I could get from you what the enrolment rate is, how many people are on the waitlist for those courses and where—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** The full suite that might be relevant to renewables?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There are quite a few—or the ones that we mentioned?

**The CHAIR:** The ones that TAFE considers relevant to the net zero and energy transition critical skills area.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** We'll give it a go.

**CHLOE READ:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Very good. Also, in terms of that waitlist, whether people have been dropping off because of the waitlist, particularly if they have done, say, one year and then they're waiting to do the second but the course isn't available.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** My understanding is if someone started on the process, unless there's something outrageous like a pandemic, we wouldn't be delaying their second year. Perhaps TAFE could confirm that.

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, I would be surprised. Let's take it on notice what we know about any waiting list there may be. Many of the courses that I referenced earlier are online, shorter courses with actually probably minimal waitlists. But let's take it on notice and see what we can find for you.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'm moving on from beer, sadly, but to a good program. Minister, you've talked a little bit today about the Education Pathways Program. I know that that's something that has been

there for a while, and I think it has been expanded as well because it has been successful. Are there any plans for further expansion or further funding? Obviously I know there are a number of high schools where it's offered, with quite a good geographic spread, but there are other areas of the State where it's not happening.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** There are quite a few high schools where it's not offered. I think it's a great model. Out of the VET Review, I think it recommended further expansion, and it's something that I would like to be pursuing.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Is there any kind of indication of what areas of the State you would look to go to?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No, I can't give you that yet. I'm obviously from regional New South Wales, so I have a slight interest in that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Absolutely. You'd have my full support with that, Minister. I don't know, is it running at Queanbeyan or anywhere down there?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** No, it's not in the Monaro electorate, I don't think—is it, Secretary?

**MURAT DIZDAR:** I don't believe so.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Outrageous.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** It might be worth having a look at. As I said, I know it has had good uptake, and it has been quite positive in terms of the outcomes as well.

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Indeed. I have constantly positive feedback about it, really good.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Is it a funding challenge in terms of expansion?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes, it's obviously—one of the things out of the VET Review is that it talked about how we strengthen the links between careers advisers and these programs. There are a few challenges in that, in terms of resourcing. They're probably more appropriately dealt with, though, by the education Minister or the secretary.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** It's a \$31 million program at the moment, for 173 schools. We've prioritised it in the Education budget until the end of 2026. You are right, it has been very successful. In my movements, I have had the same feedback. One of the things you might be interested in is that school-based apprenticeships and traineeships have increased by 19 per cent in those settings. We're certainly monitoring the impact. We're certainly speaking with those schools that have it, and we're certainly committed with those 173 schools to continue, and we've been prioritising that internally in the department budget.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** So the funding, that \$31 million and the 170-odd schools, that's locked in until next year—is that correct?

**MURAT DIZDAR:** Yes, not financial year because, as you know, school years go—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Yes.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** We've locked it in and made it a priority at the executive level, with the department's budget, to the end of 2026. We've committed to continue to monitor it. On all reports, every site I have been to, it has been very, very successful, and the data is saying that. So it's something you'd want to back in.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Fantastic. Just a quick one to finish: I noticed, Minister, you were again back at Ultimo with the beauty training facility upgrade recently. I thought it was interesting that your media release talked about the growth in enrolments in beauty courses over the last five years. Are there any other plans at other campuses to upgrade any of those facilities across the State?

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** I will take on notice the specifics. I've certainly visited a number of upgraded facilities around the State in my travels and seen some of the interests in those areas, but I will take on notice any specific other upgrades in beauty facilities around the State.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I think you said it was a 26 per cent increase over the past five years, which is—

**Mr STEVE WHAN:** Yes, there has been some interest.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Okay. That would be good. I will finish there with four seconds to go. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** How generous. I will check if there are any Government questions.

**The Hon. Dr SARAH KAINE:** No, thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Very good. That concludes our questioning with the Minister. Thank you very much. We will now take a break and come back at two o'clock.

**(The Minister withdrew.)**

**(Luncheon adjournment)**

**The CHAIR:** We will recommence with questions from the Opposition.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** In terms of TAFE, I raised in the morning session about the waiting list, and it was framed just in terms of the priority to meet the skill demand in the construction industry. I was wondering, Ms Read, if you might be able to elaborate a little bit more the waiting list or trying to meet this demand.

**CHLOE READ:** I'm not sure about the waiting list part of it; I think we undertook to find out on notice if there were. In terms of the construction industry, we have a number of measures underway designed to address shortages and the ongoing demand for enrolments. Ms Tickle, you mentioned Paid to Learn earlier. In our new cohort, how many of those places are awarded for teachers who will be in the construction industry?

**JULIE TICKLE:** There are 45 teachers—they just started last Monday, actually—in that cohort. There's 12 electrotechnology teachers, eight in plumbing, six in fitting and machining, and two in carpentry. There is also an Aboriginal-identified role in carpentry. The really great thing about this cohort, actually, if I talk about the Aboriginal teachers for a moment, is that all the cohorts so far have had around 6 per cent Aboriginal teachers coming in. That's more than double our Aboriginal employee population overall, percentage-wise. This cohort actually has 15 per cent, so 15 per cent of that incoming 45 is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, so it's great. We've got a couple of identified roles in there as well.

**CHLOE READ:** That's great. And then if we go to the fee-free places and the additional measures that we talked about being in place, I know in semester one there's an additional 941 fee-free places in 23 qualifications. But we also talked a bit about pre-apprenticeships before lunch. There's a thousand fee-free places in pre-apprenticeship courses, which obviously will really help with that idea of attracting young people and getting them a sense of what a career in the construction industry might look like. Ms Schorer, did you want to talk about specific initiatives in terms of construction delivery in the State?

**JANET SCHORER:** I can talk a little bit, particularly, about how we're trying to tackle the waitlist side of things. Obviously with any apprenticeship, the relationship with the employer—so having work available in a local area is really important. As I said before, we really try to make sure that where we, for some reason—we've alluded to the availability of teachers, but where we don't have the capacity to teach at that time, that we have a timeline for where that student might be able to start the formal course apprenticeship that they want to start. But there are other things that we can assist them with prior to them starting that initial course that might prepare them for learning. That's either digital readiness or doing earlier units that might help them to start well, around work health and safety and those sorts of things. We do try, where someone is ready to engage with learning, to enable them to start that as soon as possible in earlier pathways.

In terms of waitlist, I mentioned earlier that it's really not a concept or a term that we have around the apprenticeships. We really try to funnel people into available places or to available modes of learning, because we have a significant TAFE digital campus where, for many of these types of courses, there is the opportunity to start learning asynchronously as soon as a learner wants to, and in lots of the apprenticeship areas as well. There are obviously things you do need to do that are face to face, but we tried to make sure that we have a learning option for anyone who needs to start with us as soon as that's possible.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** In terms of the national training package, were all courses that required updates for start of term one 2025 finalised relevant to New South Wales?

**JANET SCHORER:** I might ask Ms Meredith-Sotiris, our acting chief product and quality officer.

**KERRY MEREDITH-SOTIRIS:** Thank you very much for the question. TAFE NSW has made considerable progress in the last two years to implement sustainable and scalable processes for course development. Just to give you a bit of an idea, in 2022 we developed 277 courses; '23, 179; '24, 144; and 2025, 140. In terms of these courses, that change in numbers is obviously that, in 2022, we did have a peak of training package transitioning products, which is why the increase in the numbers. We've been able to reduce our course development time by approximately five days per unit, reduced from 25 days, all of which is intended to improve the outcomes in terms of producing the resources required for learning and assessment.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** In terms of those numbers, what is the number of courses not finalised?

**KERRY MEREDITH-SOTIRIS:** TAFE NSW uses a progressive release, which allows courses to be developed in a timely way. In some cases, courses will be developed in readiness for delivery at different stages throughout the year. This does not occur with all courses, but it does occur certainly with those that are being delivered over a period of time—and in line with the training package update requirements also.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Has there been the removal of courses as this process has been undertaken?

**KERRY MEREDITH-SOTIRIS:** Could I clarify the question, please? Do you mean the removal of course materials or the removal of courses from scope?

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Sorry, courses.

**KERRY MEREDITH-SOTIRIS:** From scope? I might pass over to Ms Schorer.

**JANET SCHORER:** We look at the scope, or what we have available to deliver in TAFE NSW, annually. There are courses that we remove at different times because we've had no enrolments in those. Or sometimes, as the training packages or other modes of delivery change, it makes more sense to have, if you like, a parent course, and then specialisations flow out of that parent course. What we will do over time is just remove where we see duplicates or other of those sorts of things that just need tidying up. That's the process that we go through.

**CHLOE READ:** But maybe to clarify, I don't think that we've removed any courses on the basis of training package provision.

**JANET SCHORER:** No, not on the basis of training package; just on the basis of demand, really.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** If I could touch on Smart and Skilled, the Minister stated earlier that TAFE sees industry-led RTOs as competition. Is that the formal view of TAFE?

**CHLOE READ:** Currently under the funding that we receive from Smart and Skilled, it operates in what's called a contestable market. Courses from certificate I to III are—and Mr Kurucz might want to talk more about this—available for a range of providers, including sometimes TAFE NSW, to deliver. Training Services in the department decides the numbers of places and who is allocated which courses. The idea of that concept, which was introduced back in 2015, is that there would be competition between providers in that kind of pool of course funding. I don't know if you wanted to say more on that, Mr Kurucz?

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** No, you captured that well.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** The Minister also advised that he wasn't aware of requests to utilise unused TAFE facilities by industry RTOs. Has TAFE had any discussions with industry RTOs regarding such opportunities?

**CHLOE READ:** I'm not sure that's quite what the Minister said. I think there might have been some confusion between interest in land versus existing facilities. Certainly I'm aware from discussions with my predecessor that we have had conversations with registered training organisations about delivery onsite. In fact, there are a number of instances where TAFE does lease its facilities or buildings to registered training organisations. Usually that happens where one of two things is true. One is that the delivery that that RTO is undertaking doesn't conflict or compete with TAFE's delivery or they might be renting or leasing space from us for administrative functions rather than for actual training delivery. I'm aware there are a number of arrangements already in place across the State for those.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Just in light of the skill shortage and the priority given to this, should industry and TAFE be working together as opposed to this competitive, historic—

**CHLOE READ:** Absolutely. My take on being able to progress TAFE being removed from that contestable market operation means exactly that. We can look at how we partner really differently or extend the partnerships that we have with industry across the State. I think it's a really productive place for TAFE to be exploring into the future.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** Can I just add? I think the Minister also referenced that there's work that the department has to do to make sure—I think he used the words "to take administration away", particularly from head teachers. This Government has got a commitment to make TAFE number one by budgetary certainty as the pre-eminent provider. That's what we're doing to deliver that, looking forward to working with Ms Read to make sure that, when it is removed from the contestable market, it is not just the funding certainty but also the administrivia that is removed for what is the pre-eminent government provision. I don't think he was referencing the lack of importance of the private providers. In fact, they're 22 per cent of the budget allocation at the moment.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** My understanding is that there are some situations where industry bodies do use TAFE facilities currently. Is there a formal policy for that? How does that get worked out? Is it per campus? How do you manage that?

**CHLOE READ:** As I said, I know that there are certainly some arrangements in place where I've come across them and been briefed on them. An example would be, when I was visiting Kingscliff, they were doing motorcycle training in one of the areas of the campus not delivered by TAFE, delivered by somebody else. The industry liaison, I think, would be specific to particular arrangements that have been negotiated over time. Ms Schorer, do you have any more information on—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Not necessarily even just industry but just like a different provider other than TAFE using a TAFE facility to run—like the example you gave. Is there a policy that covers that? How does that work in practice?

**JANET SCHORER:** There is either in development or live—I couldn't tell you which off the top of my head—basically a licensing policy, so the ability for us to make those sorts of local arrangements particularly at a local community level. That was some very clear feedback from the VET Review as well about TAFE campuses and TAFE facilities are public assets and for us to be able to make them much more open and available—whether that's for other providers or for other community colleges, other sorts of organisations to partner with us. If that licensing policy isn't available, it is imminent. I'd have to just take that on notice but—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Yes, if it's available, maybe just a copy of it—

**JANET SCHORER:** —that's absolutely the intention, yes.

**CHLOE READ:** Then, just to round out the conversation there, there is also community use of TAFE facilities. There are over 150 short-term hire arrangements in place and then there are some other long-term licences too. But that—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Maybe if on notice you could just provide what you can in terms of how that works in the different—

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, very happy to.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Ms Read, that would be good on notice. We're really looking for some examples where there is a partnership there in terms of the industry, not-for-profit RTOs utilising TAFE facilities, working with TAFE in this. I preface that by saying some of the feedback that we're receiving from the industry groups is discussions have been held, TAFE then say to the not-for-profit registered training organisations, "It's got to be commercially viable for TAFE to share or provide facilities to you." If we could see some examples of what's taking place—

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, and into the future, as the Minister mentioned, being able to be more flexible and locally innovative in some of those partnerships I think will be open to us as we move out of the contestable market.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** What percentage of the TAFE budget would be allocated for capital works and property maintenance? To get an understanding of what some of those costs are relating to infrastructure—

**CHLOE READ:** The TAFE budget for capital is \$300.6 million this year. Within that there are capital components for asset renewal for minor works. Then there is also a maintenance allocation, some of which is recurrent. So nearly \$40 million—so \$37.2 million additional for maintenance, which is in the opex bucket, and then, as I said, some \$90 million for asset renewal and another \$35 million for minor works.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** If I could look at international students studying at NSW TAFE, how many international students came to New South Wales to undergo TAFE studies? I was looking at 2019 to 2024 if that might be available, or take it on notice.

**CHLOE READ:** So you'd like from between that period of 2019 to 2024?

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Yes, I was looking at every year from 2019 to 2024, if available.

**CHLOE READ:** We would need to take that on notice to go back.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** In terms of the economic benefit to New South Wales from international students studying here at New South Wales, would there be any sort of—

**MURAT DIZDAR:** I can maybe help you, Ms Merton. International education is the State's second largest export provider. It's worth \$19.3 billion in the 2023-24 financial year and accounts for supporting more than 95,000 equivalent jobs.

**CHLOE READ:** I think Ms McPhee might have more if—

**REBECCA MCPHEE:** No, those are the figures I was going to give. Thank you, Secretary.

**CHLOE READ:** They were the figures she was going to give.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Under Smart and Skilled, the Minister has suggested some possible changes in terms of TAFE leaving that funding model—which I think, Ms Read, you have said—then TAFE would no longer be competing with the not-for-profit private training providers for funding and TAFE would have a more predictable or set annual budget. Would that be a consequence of that change?

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, that was one of the key recommendations in the NSW VET Review—was that both that element of competition that you've called out can sometimes limit the way that TAFE partners with others but also that surety of a forward budget is really important for TAFE. I think when we talk about some of the community provision that we've touched on in these discussions before about courses running in certain places and whether they're viable, having a forward view of what TAFE's budget will look like that is more than year on year will let us do some of that planning in a way that is really different to how we can do that now.

Then the Smart and Skilled funding that currently comes from the department to TAFE is largely, for most of it, predicated on a particular course in a particular place. That reduces our flexibility to prioritise across and to say things like, "We might need to run courses with slightly fewer students in some places but we can offset that in other places."

We don't really have that flexibility because the model is looking for a certain number of enrolments in certain courses.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Who from TAFE would lead the engagement or the discussion with the not-for-profit registered training organisations relating to the use of possible shared facilities?

**CHLOE READ:** That's a good question. In the first instance, if you're looking for a contact point I would send them to me. It'll depend on whether they're looking for a partnership in delivery, in terms of Ms Schorer and her area, where we might be doing delivery together, versus, say, a leasing arrangement for facilities, where we might go to somewhere else.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** I guess it's use of facilities. That's right—underutilised government-funded TAFE facilities where we've got the not-for-profit training organisations trying to meet the skills need, looking to whether they could utilise these facilities.

**CHLOE READ:** Send them my way and we'll have those discussions regularly.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I was actually replaying some of what I asked the Minister earlier in the day about the tender—that's the ROI tender for relocating Bankstown TAFE, as we await the building of the new hospital at the TAFE site. Can I just ask you—and I'm sorry; I must have missed it earlier, but as I replayed it I heard that you said that you are already in discussions with a proponent. You're already doing due diligence?

**CHLOE READ:** Due diligence, that's right.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Are we at this stage now that there's actually been a particular site, or a particular group, that's been identified? We're now at that stage? I'm just trying to understand, because I think the Minister wasn't clear about that.

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, so we wouldn't be saying we'd identified a particular respondent or premise until due diligence had occurred. We're in that part of the procurement process where we—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** You seem to have come down to identifying where you're going; is that right? Can I ask you some general questions in relation to that, without being very specific about that tender? I'll put some questions to you and you can see how you go.

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, let's see how I go.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** What I want to know—the Minister mentioned the 5,400 students. We don't know what the current figure is. It may be less; it may be more; it might be the same. I think you took it on notice that you'll get me a more accurate figure, because I think that was the end of 2023 figure. Is that right—5,400?



**CHLOE READ:** Yes, that's correct.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** At that time, you also indicated 80 courses. Is that right? I believe from my memory of what was raised this morning it was 80 courses.

**CHLOE READ:** I believe that sounds about right.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I'd like to know if the whole full 80 courses are going to be accommodated in the relocation.

**CHLOE READ:** Obviously, as we talked about this morning, the courses that relate to animal care will be moving.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** There's not many of them, though, at Bankstown.

**CHLOE READ:** No, but just to be precise.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I think there's only one or two.

**CHLOE READ:** Then we can take on notice about the remainder of the 80, because obviously the 80 is the figure at the end of 2023. So what we could do is come back on notice with the courses that are currently being—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** If you can take on notice what changed in 2024, in terms of what courses are enrolled at Bankstown—it may be different from 2023. Then I'd like to know what courses are available in 2025, this year, at Bankstown, and what you expect will be moving forward into the relocated TAFE site.

**CHLOE READ:** Very happy to, noting that there's a process that pretty much annual that reviews that course profile.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** As long as it doesn't affect any commercial in confidence, but I can imagine the courses themselves may not. Can I also ask, then, in relation to the relocated TAFE site—or not so much the site but the proposal of having the site relocated for a number of years—have we got a specific number of how long we think the relocation will be for?

**CHLOE READ:** That's a good question. I believe that the request for a premises was for five years.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Do we know if that five years has any kind of possibility for an extension beyond the five years? It's a five-year minimum; is that what it is?

**CHLOE READ:** That would depend on the procurement itself, so I couldn't comment on the specifics. It would be fairly—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** If you can find out whether you can comment—if you can clarify whether that is public knowledge that it's five. I believe it is for five years. I've seen that somewhere.

**CHLOE READ:** I'm happy to clarify that. It would be fairly standard in an arrangement to have some options for extension, but I don't know that I'll be able to comment specifically on those at this point.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can you comment on whether you're looking at different sites, or is it just one site, to accommodate the relocation?

**CHLOE READ:** My understanding of the request for proposal is that it went out to more than one site, but I can confirm that.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** So whoever is the final respondent, or whoever finally is given this tender, they can provide several sites? That's what I'm asking.

**CHLOE READ:** I see.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** They may have a building on one site and a building somewhere else. Is that an option that is being considered?

**CHLOE READ:** I believe we're looking for a single location.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Was that specified in the public documentation?

**CHLOE READ:** I'd need to take that on notice.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I don't think it was. Can you take that on notice and let me know?

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, I'll take that on notice.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Whether it was very specific—whether it was a single site or there was a possibility of multi-site use for the TAFE.

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, I'll take that on notice.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can you also take on notice—and I think I asked it earlier but I just want to double-check—what aspects of the cost that we can have made publicly available in relation to this relocation?

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, happy to.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** And the tender itself—the costs associated with doing that process up to date.

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, happy to take that on notice too.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** What area of TAFE has carriage of this? Which department within your—is it under you specifically?

**CHLOE READ:** Our facilities area. I'm in discussions with our Health Infrastructure counterparts, but obviously we have an assets and facilities area that manages things like leases and properties.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** That's their particular domain, in terms of this ROI?

**CHLOE READ:** Yes. Then Ms Schorer's area, in terms of the planning with faculties for course delivery and those kind of things.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Has there been any discussion about how many current teachers will stay on, or will that depend on the courses?

**CHLOE READ:** That would depend on the courses, but I'm not expecting there to be a reduction in the number of teachers.

**JANET SCHORER:** We're not anticipating there would be any changes to the number of teachers for the site, no.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Do teachers have the option, if they don't want to relocate—can they ask to go to a different TAFE?

**JANET SCHORER:** I think we'd have to think about that down the track. Our teachers have that option at any time.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** At any stage, anyway. Right.

**JANET SCHORER:** Yes. We would also want to make best use of our teachers across the course that they're delivering, so a number of our teachers already will teach across a number of campuses.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Do teachers currently have access to parking at the current site?

**JANET SCHORER:** As far as I'm aware, yes.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Will they have parking in the relocated site?

**CHLOE READ:** I'll need to take that on notice and come back.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Because that could be a factor, if that affects their—an inconvenience like that. There's no parking in Bankstown CBD, I know that, and I don't think the relocated site will offer too much parking, either. You can take it on notice.

**CHLOE READ:** Yes.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** If I could just touch back on the Smart and Skilled program, I'm getting feedback from industry and the not-for-profit training providers that the funding levels under Smart and Skilled are not meeting the rising material costs that industry are facing. I'm just checking whether you may be aware of these concerns.

**CHLOE READ:** I'm going to refer you to my colleagues in the department, who run the program.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** I might start and Mr Kurucz can add to it. Ms Merton, the funding under the skills budget for Smart and Skilled consists of \$3.2 billion. We do work with IPART to make sure we keep assessing the costs of course provision in line with those priority skill areas. Have you got a specific that's a concern for you, that you want to raise?

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** I have. The industry are saying that material costs have risen 30 per cent. It's public information, in terms of meeting some of the challenges of housing costs. It's in light of that cost that they're then asking about the Smart and Skilled funding level.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** I'll get Mr Kurucz to tell you how we examine the pricing provisions we give and how we update that.

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** Ms Merton, I'm happy to take the details on notice and provide them to you. We undertake regular pricing reviews, which is essentially the level of funding that the department provides to individual providers, whether TAFE or private providers, for particular qualifications. Last year we did increase the price for a number of qualifications. Providers—TAFE or otherwise—that are delivering qualifications under Smart and Skilled received additional funding from government. I'm happy to take on notice what those particular qualifications are. We are constantly looking at whether or not the qualification, funding and the price that we have reflects the cost of delivery because we do often get that feedback from industry as well.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** In terms of consultation with industry bodies and stakeholders—with this being an example of feedback from the sector—what arrangements are in place?

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** We have what is called industry trade association bodies—or ITABs—which are reflective of industries. We meet with them regularly. Ms Lawrence meets with them, and the training services team does regularly as well. We get information from industry directly. Our independent providers also regularly engage in with our training services regional office staff as well. We obviously hear it through various other channels. We have formal engagement that happens, I think, on a quarterly basis with our ITABs, which is our formal industry engagement bodies.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** Can I also add that the Skills Board, in its current composition—I want to get the count right—has seven members that represent key skill areas as well. Apart from what Mr Kurucz covered, the Skills Board also has very eminent people in industry that give us good advice.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Would I be able to obtain some minutes, an agenda or how this engagement works? When was the last industry trade meeting held, who attended and what was discussed?

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** I'm happy to take that on notice. We met with the NSW Skills Board last week, and we had some good conversations in relation to the implementation of the skills plan. We also discussed the areas of expertise where the board themselves can add their best advice and insights to the board, which is chaired, as the secretary referred to before, by the CEO of Microsoft Australia. We had a good conversation about balancing the needs of employers and industries against the skills and capabilities that vocational education and training can provide as different to higher education. We also had a good conversation about disability care and a range of other industries under the skills plan. I'm very happy to take the details of the specific industry engagement on notice. As recently as last week, we were having good engagement with the Skills Board about industry needs.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** Would you like me to give you the—

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** The construction industry would be my first area of interest, if possible.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** On the Skills Board, I'm delighted to say that Annabel Crookes is a member of that board. She is the director of Laing O'Rourke so she brings great construction expertise. If you want me to keep going, Mr Kurucz mentioned that Steve Worrall, the CEO of Microsoft Australia, is the chair. We have Robyn Delander, who is from Health and Safety Advisory Service Pty Ltd. We have Jillian Kilby, the managing director of the Stable Group; Alan Lipman, who's the CEO of Romar Engineering; Arnie Selvarajah, the CEO and executive director of Bell Direct; Annabel Crookes, who I mentioned, director of Laing O'Rourke; Jordan O'Reilly, who's the co-founder and executive director of Hireup; and our good colleague Jeremy Kurucz, who's our Relieving Deputy Secretary for Education and Skills Reform. There's great expertise on that group that we tap into regularly.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** If there was anything further in terms of the construction industry, I'd be pleased.

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** Yes, Ms Merton. We did speak about the construction industry, particularly in the challenge of the renewable energy zones that the Minister spoke about earlier and how we get the balance right about local, on-the-ground skills development versus the speed and pace at which that renewable energy transition is happening. We also did talk about housing as well. Under the skills plan, there's a commitment to do workforce development plans under each critical skills industry. We had the very first conversation about where the board can best offer its skills and expertise as we go about that work.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I have some questions in relation to workforce and the move to make more teachers permanent. Ms Tickle, I'm not sure if that's for you. The Minister announced in the middle of last year an \$83 million odd package aimed at helping to make more teachers permanent. The media release said about 48 per cent of TAFE's teaching workforce does not have permanent employment. Do you have any updated figures in terms of that percentage or where you're up to with that conversion?

**CHLOE READ:** We do. I will hand to Ms Tickle. Her area has led a lot of this work for TAFE. Before I do that, I'll say that we had a target in 2024 to increase permanent employment. We transitioned 446 casual teachers to permanent roles and also just attracted another 153 new permanent teachers. The real step change comes at the beginning of this semester, with more than 1,700 casual temporary teachers, assessors and education support officers transitioning into permanent roles. I will now hand to Ms Tickle to talk about the percentages and other features of that initiative, because it's really great work.

**JULIE TICKLE:** Obviously our workforce figures aren't finalised, so I'll give you approximate if that's okay, Ms Mitchell. There's approximately 80 per cent permanent and temporary employees between those three roles—teachers, assessors and ESOs—now, and 20 per cent casual. I will say that we expect to always have a complement of casual teachers in our workforce. Many of our teachers work back in industry a couple of days a week and with us a couple of days a week. Many people prefer to stay casual. In fact, some of our casual teachers opted not to seek permanency.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That was going to be my next question. The media release said 48 per cent not permanent, therefore 52 per cent were; you've gone up to about 80 per cent?

**JULIE TICKLE:** Yes, 80, approximately. That's right.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In terms of why anyone would choose not to—people did that just as a personal decision to remain as a casual.

**JULIE TICKLE:** Yes, that's right. I was a casual for a long time, and that was by choice. We've got a lot of teachers. I was talking to a teacher in the north region where I'm from. His preference is to stay—he works two days a week in his own organisation, or building company, and then he teaches. He likes to give back and see the apprentices coming through. We've actually got quite a lot of teachers who have chosen to stay casual. However, we do have a number who have put forward that they would like to be converted this semester, so we're looking at all those numbers now.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In terms of raw numbers—Ms Read, you just said that there were some new permanent teachers that came in. I think there was 1,700. The overall headcount, changes in terms of numbers—do you have any updates on those figures?

**JULIE TICKLE:** Overall headcount—and these are June 2024 numbers. We had an 8.4 increase overall. That's 907 FTEs—full-time equivalent—which is 11,748. In terms of teaching FTE, that was a 5.1 per cent increase on 2023—6,299. But, again, these numbers were June 2024. With the additional changes this semester, we've got a lot more permanent rather than casual. But the headcount stayed about the same.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** The \$83.1 million allocation—can you break down how that was spent? I'm a bit unsure. The Minister kind of put a figure on it: \$83.1 million over four years to retain expert TAFE teachers. Is that separate to the temporary to permanent?

**CHLOE READ:** I would need to see what particular release—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I only have one copy of the press release, sorry. On 16 June—I'm happy for you to take it on notice.

**CHLOE READ:** I might take that on notice because there's been a range of workforce-related announcements. There are some that relate to the work under the National Skills Agreement. There are some that relate to this casual conversion. I might take that on notice to make sure we give you the right information.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** The 2024-25 budget includes \$83.1 million to support the conversion of teachers to permanent employment. The media release was on 16 June last year from the Minister. I'm happy for you to take it on notice. I'm curious as to what is the funding breakdown and what that money has gone to.

**CHLOE READ:** I might just take that one on notice.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That's fine. I don't expect you to know the intimate detail of every press release put out by your Minister. We spoke before about staff who work across campuses. If someone has been given a permanent role, has that changed in terms of working across campuses and how that's being accommodated? Or no—it's just you've got the permanency of the role.

**CHLOE READ:** I think that might be quite variable. I'll ask Ms Tickle to talk about the processes.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Does that make sense? Sorry, I'm trying to read my personal handwritten notes.

**JULIE TICKLE:** It's a really good question. We obviously have teachers that work across numerous campuses. Last year, in semester two, we were very proactive and went out to the business areas in Ms Schorer's areas and talked to our directors and head teachers around what the teachers were doing. We then let our teachers know what their complement of hours was and what campuses they were working across, and then they requested to be converted or not. Once they requested to be converted, we did a series of conversations with them and their head teacher around what campuses they taught across. The teachers fill in their hours in what we call a teacher program diary and that actually has codes according to the campus. For example, Taree campus is code 60—I remember that one—and Great Lakes is 73. You put where you teach into the TPD. If a teacher's been converted and they are working across those two campuses—and they still most of the time would be, it's just that the hours that they're converted and are now permanent are across those two campuses. Some teachers, particularly in Sydney where it's closer, work across numerous campuses.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I guess in an operational sense, that hasn't really changed.

**JULIE TICKLE:** No. Sometimes there might have been a change where it made more sense for a teacher to do all of their hours in one campus, but that was done in consultation with the teachers and the head teachers and the sections last year.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I have a couple of questions on the employee survey from last year and am happy for either or both of you to comment. I think about 45 per cent of staff responded, which was down 13 per cent on the previous year. Any sort of indication as to why there was less uptake from your staff on this year's survey?

**CHLOE READ:** Obviously I wasn't with TAFE at that time, so Ms Tickle might want to jump in, but I do think that the survey timing coincided with the consultation that was being run on the operating model that we've just moved to. We know, when there's overlapping survey or consultation exercises, people get a bit tired of those things. I think that's one of the reasons we might point to. Do you have any other thoughts on the reduction?

**JULIE TICKLE:** Yes, I do, but it's related to that. It did go down. It was 58 per cent in 2023 and 45 per cent last year, but it was at exactly the time when we were consulting on the operating model. We actually didn't advertise that it was out as much as we had in previous years because we really wanted to hear from people on this new operating model and hear from as many people as we could. We had lots and lots and lots of sessions and a lot of people engaged. I think that probably led to a downturn in the number of responses. However, 45 per cent is still statistically very valuable, so we still got a lot of great insights from the people.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I understand your point around consultation fatigue when there is change happening. Would you look to promote it again this year to get that dataset back up, if you can?

**JULIE TICKLE:** Yes, definitely.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Notwithstanding it's still a significant number of survey respondents.

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, definitely. It's a really valuable insight for teams and agencies and the whole of TAFE on how people are feeling. You can see sometimes the responses to things you put in place in response to last year's survey. We can see it in some of these results, but we really want to make sure that, as we get that information from staff, we understand what it means and then we start to address it, and they can see and feel that. It's really important to me.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Following on from that, what stood out to me when I was having a look at it were issues around wellbeing and burnout—and, again, they are not unique to TAFE; I know that from time to time all agencies deal with those issues. To your point, Ms Read, about how you take the data and learn from it or improve the issues, particularly around wellbeing and burnout, what do you anticipate to be some of the tangible steps around that space, particularly based on the survey data?

**CHLOE READ:** Wellbeing is a good call-out because the score improved 10 percentage points in the last year. It's still only 64 per cent positive, so you'd want to continue to work on that, but I know that there has been a range of initiatives put in place by TAFE in the last year in response to that. I think also what's really important is our two focus areas for this year are going to be teamwork and collaboration, and role clarity and support, given that we've just moved into this new operating model and that sense of people potentially reporting burnout because their role is not clear, because they find it difficult to work with others because they've got different expectations—

that's one of those things. There's also a range of other wellbeing measures that I think we're going to continue and potentially increase. Do you want to talk about those, Ms Tickle?

**JULIE TICKLE:** Yes, there's some really valuable insights because the PMES not only has the scores but it has verbatim comments. We review those verbatim comments and a lot of those comments went into the creation of our four-year employee wellbeing plan that was launched early last year. We've got a number of wellbeing programs that have been quite successful. For example, I think I've said before in evidence we have an annual campaign through Safety Week that's run through October and we concentrate, in terms of National Safe Work Month, on wellbeing. For R U OK? Day we also do a couple of days where people can come to sessions and a lot of our teachers run those sessions. Some of our counsellors run those sessions. All of the employees are invited and the campuses join in. We also have campus-based wellbeing campaigns that the campuses run. I think the thing about wellbeing is a lot of it is so individual. We also encourage people to utilise all of the things that we have available on our capability central portal. We also had some really fantastic success with our Festival of Learning and Teaching. We did that twice last year.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I think you might have mentioned that last time we were here.

**JULIE TICKLE:** Yes, I did, and I know you're specifically asking about wellbeing, but a lot of wellbeing is feeling included in your campus and understanding what your role is in TAFE—so that role clarity stuff. I think that the Festival of Learning and Teaching is something that we really saw a lot of people happy to attend, happy to be with their colleagues on campuses. We also have things like Wellbeing Wednesday. Every Wednesday we have sessions and they just rotate based on how people view them.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I want to move to the Government's commitment or election promise of 1,000 apprentices. I think it was \$93.5 million for 1,000 new trainees or apprentices, and I think that is separate from the local government one that we talked about last time. Are there any updates in terms of how many applications or how many apprentices have been recruited? What is the status of that?

**MURAT DIZDAR:** I can help you there, Ms Mitchell. We're well on track for that. It's 1,000 additional apprentices and trainees across government agencies by 2026. I want to commend all the agencies that have come to the table with us. We spoke about round one last time. For round two, we gave funding approval for up to 450 additional roles, which was above what we were looking at by way of 400. Mr Kurucz might have further details, but we're well on track and I can add that we're looking at round three in May this year.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** How many came in round one? Do you have that data?

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** Ms Lawrence can provide that.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** Do you want to dive in on that one, Ms Lawrence?

**AMANDA LAWRENCE:** Yes, I'm happy to provide that info. Under round one, which opened in November 2023 and closed in July 2024, there were 251 funded roles available and 221 candidates commenced in those roles. Thirty couldn't be filled before that round closed and they were returned, so they'll be used in the round that's underway at the moment, which is round two. That opened in June last year and will close in June this year. As the secretary said, there are 450 funded roles available and, as at last week, 305 apprentices and trainees had commenced in those roles.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Do you have any retention of the 221 that were part of round one? Are they all still going or have you had any kind of dropout for whatever reason?

**AMANDA LAWRENCE:** Yes, we've got a 94 per cent retention rate from round one apprentices and trainees, which is great.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In terms of monitoring—and I appreciate what you said, Mr Dizdar, about it being a Government commitment—what sort of KPIs are there, or how are you monitoring the success as you go through particular rounds? Do you learn things from round one that you will apply to round two and round three? How's that happening in practice?

**AMANDA LAWRENCE:** We've got a range of wraparound supports in place for those apprentices and trainees. We do a lot of site visits and monitoring in that way. They also get peer support from each other and their post-placement support officers, who work really closely with them and with their agencies as they progress through.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In terms of the actual training for the apprentices, is it all being delivered through TAFE or is it happening through RTOs as well?

**AMANDA LAWRENCE:** I understand the majority is through TAFE, but I would take on notice to give you a breakdown.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That would be good, thank you. I'll find the next bit of my notes and hand over to Rachel.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** If I could just touch on the Bankstown TAFE, just in the current environment as to the temporary relocation of the TAFE. I'm just wondering if there's been any studies or surveys conducted amongst the student body there at Bankstown TAFE, in terms of the impact on them having to relocate to an interim campus. If I could just clarify, the location of the interim campus still remains unknown?

**CHLOE READ:** Yes. I'm not aware of any specific studies or surveys to do with students particularly, but students have been kept up to date with information on the relocation. And I think, at the point of announcing the location that we will be at, at that point we would definitely be engaging with students on the types of supports that they might be interested in and their perspectives on what will make that transition most easy for them at that time.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Ms Read, just in terms of the timing of this, given we're dealing with students here—and I guess the question's going to be, "Where am I going to relocate to? How will I know if I can get there? What will be the cost of this to me? Will I be able to meet the new facility?" What time frame are we giving students here, in terms of notification of where they're going to be relocated to and when?

**CHLOE READ:** We'll be giving them as much notice as possible, as we said earlier. We'll be relocating from the start of delivery for 2026. As we've just started for 2025, we do have a reasonable lead time there, noting, of course, that it's absolutely 100 per cent in our plan to communicate as early as we can with students, to make sure they understand any implications for them, that they can seek support from us and that they know what's happening. I think they'll be excited by the proposition when we're able to talk to them about it.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Ms Read, I think you've answered my question. In terms of the current student cohort at Bankstown, when will they finish their studies at that campus as it is today?

**CHLOE READ:** Some students will finish their courses during this year, just because they naturally would. Those who would be continuing into 2026 would be doing so from the relocated premises. Is that what you're asking?

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Yes. So for the remainder of this calendar year students will continue in enrolled courses and participating at the Bankstown TAFE campus as it is.

**CHLOE READ:** That's right.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Ms Read, you touched on surveys or studies of this current student cohort. Do we know anything about the mode of transport or what their current transport arrangements are?

**CHLOE READ:** I'm going to need to take that on notice. I'm not aware that we do. But, obviously, I am still fairly new, so I might just take that on notice.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Ms Read, in light of the conversion of the metro, in terms of a transport taking longer than originally planned, would these issues be taken into consideration, in terms of the impact on the student cohort and travelling?

**CHLOE READ:** I'm not across the metro piece specifically, so I might also just take that on notice and make sure I understand the intersections between them.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Ms Read, I think my colleague the Hon. Tania Mihailuk may have touched on this, but I guess we're just interested in terms of the current course offering at Bankstown TAFE. People are asking where will accounting, business and finance courses be relocated to.

**CHLOE READ:** To the new site.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Where will business skills courses be relocated to?

**CHLOE READ:** To the new site. I might shortcut and say that, aside from the animal studies piece that we've identified, going to Padstow, our intention will be that courses that are offered currently at Bankstown, that are continuing, would be in the new site.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Ms Read, in terms of the current offering at Bankstown and where they'll be relocated to, which remains unknown, that would also include students currently enrolled that would want to continue on in career pathways, educational pathways, employability skills courses, community services,

early childhood education and care courses, English language courses, hairdressing and beauty, travel and tourism courses—all of these above to be relocated.

**CHLOE READ:** Yes. And, in fact, those last three that you mentioned—I went to Bankstown on Tuesday and had some good conversations with the head teachers and teachers in those areas. Many of them asked me exactly the same question—"Are we going to be in Bankstown?"—and I said yes. They were all delighted to have the confirmation, though they've previously received that advice. And they were enthusiastic, obviously, to find out where they'd be going and to continue the delivery that they do so well already.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** I appreciate the earlier discussion about animal care relocating to Padstow, and the view is Padstow could provide a better campus and environment for that course. So that's an improvement there. Is there any other thinking around some of these other courses—that they may not return if a better location is found?

**CHLOE READ:** None that I'm aware of, though, obviously, if it was a better location, we should be open to that as we move through planning. But the process of designing the facilities in the relocated space and in the eventual final new TAFE is one that we'll be engaging with teachers and head teachers on, to make sure that the facilities that we design entirely meet their needs and are the best facilities for them. And so it's unlikely, given we'll be designing those spaces with them, that we would say, "Actually, there's a different alternative that is better."

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Ms Read, I've previously raised this—given that the relocation budget remains unknown, the relocation and the reinstatement of a course pertaining to hairdressing and beauty. Like yourself, I've been to the college, I've seen the facilities; they're really quite outstanding. In terms of what the cost is going to be to reinstate such infrastructure like that—

**CHLOE READ:** I will need to take that on notice. As you say, they're great facilities. There's that glass window with all the heads with different hairstyles and things on as you walk into that area, which was very cool. We obviously want to make sure that we minimise the cost of the relocation, noting that it's part of the project design, and to make sure that they have the facilities that they need. So I'll take on notice anything about the cost and see what we can come back with.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** I think the students proudly told me, if you go on a Thursday, the trainee hairdressers are always looking for clients.

**CHLOE READ:** I know. They offered me that, too.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** I wasn't there on a Thursday—but, yes.

**CHLOE READ:** There is a moment when you walk into any hair and beauty facility where you wonder whether you should have done a better job of your own hair that morning and whether they're going to be having a look. But they were all very polite. They did offer me the opportunity to come and pay for their services, as they do in so many of our campuses.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'll just keep you on the Bankstown TAFE thing just for a minute—and I appreciate what you've said in terms of working through the process with Health and the eventual build of the new campus et cetera. But, in a macro term, when would have been the last time that a new TAFE campus was built? What's the anticipated cost? I appreciate commercial in confidence, but I guess I'm curious because my understanding is that a lot of the TAFE facilities would be upgraded over time, but I don't think a new relocated one has happened for a while. Are there any kind of similar projects that you look at in terms of scope and budgets?

**CHLOE READ:** I guess we've done fairly significant construction on the Institute of Applied Technology at Meadowbank and Kingswood relatively recently. Of course, part of the process of going through any of these sorts of developments is engagement across government, particularly with Infrastructure NSW, on the gateway assurance process. As you move through the process of design and planning, they're partnering with you and reviewing that and assisting. And so they'll be giving—in fact, they have been giving advice on the scope and scale of the project. Obviously, the variable factor is where you are on the site and the specification of the facilities. That can be extremely different depending on what you're building.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** To use, say, Meadowbank as an example, what was the overall—I can't remember. It was not my role.

**CHLOE READ:** I shouldn't have raised it without having the—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I'm just trying to get a ballpark. I am prompted by Mr Dizdar sitting there. While they vary, you can kind of have a rough idea of an envelope for, say, a primary school build or a high



school build, give or take the site. I am just curious as to whether there is a TAFE equivalent. There would not have been many standalone new ones built.

**CHLOE READ:** I don't know that we have that. Most of Mr Dizdar's delivery is in the general purpose classroom. There is obviously quite some variation to that, before he gets offended, whereas ours is a mixture of that general learning space and more specialist facilities probably than in a school. I wouldn't say that we have a small one, a medium one and a big one or that kind of thing.

**JANET SCHORER:** The comparator with the IAT and those two buildings there—the predominant delivery mode in those is multi-trade. They were designed and have been built, perhaps, you could argue, more costly because you've had to build in heights and sandpits and rigging and all those sorts of things that take a lot more. What we're anticipating at Bankstown is much like we have now at that location. It's generalist teaching facilities. It would be remiss of us to miss the opportunity to not try and include health delivery on that location, given the proximity to a new hospital. Those are the sorts of costs. But, in general terms, what we have at Bankstown, apart from animals, is more of those traditional classrooms, with some change. We don't have the big multi-trade hub. It's similar but different.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That was probably my expectation when asking the question. But I just wondered whether there are others that you look at. It's very individual, depending on what you need to put there, more so even than, say, a high school delivery as well. I'll move on to a couple of other issues in terms of community engagement. Part of it ties into the TAFE Charter, which I'm going to ask a couple more questions on because I think I'll have time, given that we've got plenty of time to the Opposition. I noticed recently there was a community survey that went out via social media asking about whether TAFE meets the community's needs and just getting some training feedback. First of all, in terms of that specific survey, what was the reach for that? What were the results? What were the indications that you have been getting back from the community at large?

**CHLOE READ:** That's a great topic. The survey that you're referring to is called TAFE Connects Digital. It was part of a process last year that was both the survey itself but also community workshops. In 2024 TAFE Connects Digital was open—actually, from just at the end of 2023 until 11 February 2024. That got 1,721 contributions, which is just over 1,500 survey submissions, but also 120 ideas and 23 stories. And then, as I mentioned, there were 20 community workshops attended by 352 business and community leaders. It was really across the State in regional, rural metropolitan areas.

The insights from those pieces in 2024 have been fed into the training portfolio strategy and our educational delivery plan, but also into some of the consideration of the operating model and the way that people are telling us they want to engage with TAFE, both at the local level but also at the statewide level. Ms Tickle is handily reminding me that the operating model that I assume everyone knows about has a dedicated group that's looking at student support and community engagement. That's a really important part for us because the VET Review points to the idea that not everywhere but in some places TAFE might seem more distant from the local community than maybe it did in the past. TAFE Connects Digital is open now, so it's great that you've mentioned it. People have until—

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Again, for all our viewers, I'm sure. You will have an influx.

**CHLOE READ:** That's right, yes. Everyone should now jump online to TAFE Connects. It closes on 31 March and then we have, I think, another set of workshops—50 workshops this time—planned across the State.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Is it an annual thing that you do?

**CHLOE READ:** Yes, and that group that I mentioned before—the student support and community group—will be building on TAFE Connects in terms of what does it tell us both, as I said, statewide and locally about what we need to do differently, how we can engage better and the types of activities that we might engage in. To give you very small examples, community have told us that our website was not great to engage with and find information, so we've updated the website and the navigation of that based on that feedback. In terms of, say, the training opportunities, we've added or expanded offerings in certain places based on local feedback from TAFE Connects in 2024.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** With TAFE Connects obviously using digital advertising, do you do any advertising in newspapers as well for that, or not specifically?

**CHLOE READ:** That's an excellent question and one I do not have an answer for.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** You can take it on notice. More broadly, in the advertising space for TAFE, for courses and for, again, digital spend versus newspaper, I'm specifically thinking about a lot of regional communities with community-run newspapers, which are very well read and usually the source of truth for a lot

of communities. I'm just curious if there's an advertising spend breakdown, if you've got it, or you can take it on notice.

**CHLOE READ:** I think we should take that on notice and also see if we can get you anything on the differences in metro versus other places in the State. We'll see what we can get for you.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That would be great. You talked a few times about Paid to Learn and bringing in some new staff under that. Going back, because I'm just interested in it in general, how many of those positions are there currently? Or is that a newer initiative? Where do you work out which courses and which locations you do? I wouldn't mind having a bit more background on that.

**CHLOE READ:** Paid to Learn has been around for a little while now, she said vaguely. I think it's 2023 and 2024. I think we did a pilot or an initial foray into that in 2023. We've had 278 students go through that course, with 269 of them now employed. The completion rate of the course but also the retention rate of the course is really high in terms of people doing that course and then becoming teachers with TAFE. That's really important. Ms Tickle, do you want to talk a bit more about Paid to Learn? It's one of our really good initiatives.

**JULIE TICKLE:** There was actually a pilot right at the end of 2022 out at Kingswood and it was 15 scholars just in construction, and then the program has built in size over the cohort. I think the sixth cohort just started last week with 45. Your question was: How do we determine where they are needed? My team works very closely with Ms Schorer's team in the sections to understand what teachers they need where and what mix of units they need to teach, because—remembering our teachers are double hatted so they must be current in their industry area as well as in vocational education and training.

What we were finding was that the certificate IV was a bit of a barrier, particularly for tradespeople, because it is quite an academic course. This program has allowed us to fast-track the certificate IV. Generally that might have taken a year, or people were doing it in six months. These scholars complete the program in 14 weeks. The program is built around doing the coursework a couple of days a week but, really importantly, being in classrooms. They shadow a current teacher and they get some wraparound support from our capability development team or professional development team. That's why the completion rates are so high, at 97 per cent. And a lot of them are in regional areas, about half. It's a really successful program. As the Minister said earlier, we've secured matched funding from the Commonwealth to continue that.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Hopefully that's looking to fill your workforce shortages in high demand areas as well a pathway.

**JULIE TICKLE:** Yes, definitely. Some of them we have to go out a couple of times, because even with Paid to Learn they're harder to fill. But it has definitely made a difference. What we've seen is actually a lot of reduction in the excess hours that some of our full-time teachers were teaching. Our teachers teach 720 hours a year, and some of them in those areas like construction and electrotech were teaching much more than the optimum complement of hours. By bringing more teachers in, the hours are shared. That's really good for wellbeing as well.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** As I said, it was interesting to hear it. I didn't know much about it. It will be good to see how that goes. I hope you get some good outcomes from it. It sounds like it's tracking along pretty well.

**CHLOE READ:** I was going to say I met a teacher at Ingleburn, which is our carpentry skills site, and he said to me that he was one of the really early Paid to Learn teachers. I said, "Okay. What made you want to make the switch?" He said, "The program was just there at the perfect time for me. I was too old to be walking around on roofs, but seeing the young apprentices come through the program is really rewarding. It's a great thing for me to be able to do those kinds of things." The stories of people who otherwise might not be able to consider or afford to come up to be a TAFE teacher, having had a long career or some of a career in the trades, is really important.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That's great. I think any of those sorts of pathway programs that keep skill and expertise in your industry and in your sector is what you want. That's great. That's maybe not a bad segue into—I've got a few specifics about the TAFE Charter. Obviously I asked the Minister about a couple of the items in it this morning. In light of the universities joining us shortly as well, I was interested in the mention in here about the partnerships with industry and with universities around microcredentials and how that's going to play out. I know that there has been work done in that space in the past. Often, sometimes individuals will go between uni and TAFE, and I think that has always been encouraged. But, stemming from this new charter, what are some of the tangible changes or improvements you want to see with the university sector, in terms of microcredentials, microskilling and industry partnerships?

**CHLOE READ:** I might ask Ms Schorer to talk a bit about the Centres of Excellence approach and maybe also what we've done at IAT—the Institute of Applied Technology, digital and construction. I think the thing that

people are pretty well wrestling with across the tertiary sector is the relationship between the different elements of the tertiary sector and, as you said, people moving between organisations like TAFE and university and back again and where is that appropriate co-delivery. It seems to me that it's less of a linear pathway than, "I'm going to do a certificate III, and then I'm going to do a degree at a uni." It's more suited in some places, particularly maybe renewable energy, to people who might have been degree-trained and who are working in the energy sector, who need to upskill themselves on some particular aspect of renewables, say, where they can do a microskill or microcredential with TAFE, which gives them that practical experience from what might have been a career in electrical in some other way or as an electrical engineer. Those kinds of pieces where you're taking people with existing experience and being able to give them skills that are either deeply practical for the workforce or in an emerging technology is a really solid use of that. Ms Schorer, do you want to talk a bit about the pieces we have underway, particularly in the Centres of Excellence, perhaps?

**JANET SCHORER:** I'm happy to. The work we're doing at the Centres of Excellence is an area that we've learnt from. We're basing our learnings from the institutes of applied technology as well. I think one of the biggest themes that the accord picks up on, that we're trying to work through, is the recognition of prior learning and whether that's through some of these micro skill or microcredential areas and how an employer acknowledges those as legitimate learning or how they're recognised as part of what we would call a foundation program.

What we heard through the consultations in the early days of the Centres of Excellence was really wanting to make sure that we continued to do what we do around those foundation courses that we deliver that are really important for apprentices to learn their craft, but to provide opportunities for these sorts of uplift or for them to explore and learn in these more emerging areas. But how do we acknowledge that and allow that to be recognised either for continued learning—for example, in higher apprenticeships, which we mentioned before as a qualification that we're exploring and will implement in the coming year around the Centres of Excellence? How do they then go on to recognition in the university pathways, if that's where students choose to continue their learning?

That's a big factor for us, but having the universities in close partnership with us. In the institutes of applied technology, they're active partners. We're proposing a slightly different model, a panel model, for the Centres of Excellence, which is how do we unravel some of those technical parts of recognising learning, but how do we also utilise their expertise and their research? Universities are predominantly about research. How do we access some of the research that they have that we are not as equipped to do, to inform our course development? They've been very valuable contributors and partners in that aspect.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I might try you in a bit, Ms McPhee. I'm just interested, I guess, in terms of Investment NSW and how that partners with the work you're doing, Ms Schorer—the university collaboration with which microcredentials and which industry. I'm assuming that's cross-agency collaboration. I don't know if there's anything you wanted to add on that.

**REBECCA MCPHEE:** Yes, absolutely. The work we've done recently in Investment NSW around the industry policy speaks very closely to the skills plan and those key priority areas in representing those key areas—those key missions for the economy around housing, net zero and the energy transition, and local manufacturing—where we really see there's an opportunity for the economy to grow and prosper in those areas. That links very closely with the skill plans and also the net migration work that we do as well.

**JEREMY KURUCZ:** Ms Mitchell, I'd just add Jobs and Skills Australia, which is a national research and advisory body to the Federal Government, and States and Territories governments as well, recently released a report on tertiary harmonisation that directly went to aspects such as credit transfer. Ms Schorer and Ms Read talked to some of the work that's happening at TAFE, but that's individual partnerships with individual providers within States and Territories. There's recognition that actually needs to be done nationally going forward to have some consistency, because you do find in different circumstances there's different recognition of prior learning between different higher education institutions. That report called out that and the need for us to, if we're going to do this, actually bring some national consistency to it to really get the benefits out of it.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** To loop you in, Mr Dizdar, in terms of the microcredentialing with the universities—that's something I want to ask them about too—and opportunities for high school students who might be higher performing to be able to tap into some of those micro courses or start earlier than when they finish their HSC, is there any update or movement in that space that you're aware of?

**MURAT DIZDAR:** I think there can be stronger collaboration and movement here. You'll remember in your time as Minister, we've had accelerated students for HSC, but that's a small proportion of the entire student body. We've had a freeing up of the number of VET subjects you can do and still attain a HSC and the ATAR. I think that's the impetus, to come off the back of that and have credentialing at universities. I think it's a good

line of questioning this afternoon. It's something that we certainly discuss, but I still think we're fairly embryonic in what microcredentialing looks like.

I think universities are getting stronger and better at course composition. When you and I went through, it was very traditional pathways, whereas you can choose more so across all the universities, across all the discipline areas, and come up with a degree fit for purpose for yourself. But, having said that, I think we've got space to move on in microcredentialing, particularly for students who are still with us in year 11 and 12, when we're chasing high-potential and gifted to get them accredited in some university offerings so that when they jump into university, those going that way have already met some requirements, prior knowledge recognised, and their courses can look a lot different.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I suppose in that pathways context, really from the senior years of high school into either TAFE or university or whatever pathway young people take, to your point, Mr Dizdar, how you can give options for young people that complement their skills and strength and how you can start that as early as possible to keep that engagement—

**MURAT DIZDAR:** Just one other debate and discussion that I want to add is that we still have a long way to go as a State and a country around the debate to be had between skills and university.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I agree.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** I mean, if you look at—we're all discussing the skills shortages. Some of the earnings capacities and employment opportunities far exceed some of your traditional disciplines at university. Yet the mentality—and I'm a parent in the system—is that we all sort of chase and push our kids towards uni. We've got to value the skills and pathways just as highly, and I think that VET Review and skills plan gives us an opportunity. If you asked the close-to-5,000 teachers I have who teach VET—and they're exceptional at it—how passionate they are about their subject and how important it is, and they'll tell you that people like me and the vice-chancellors this afternoon have got to get better at pushing the message around pathways and that it's an equal pecking order; that one is not any less than the other.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** And as you know, I think that was part of the reason why we did make those changes with the ATAR during my time as Minister, so that you weren't kind of making students at the end of year 10 pick either vocational or academic. You're trying to increase that opportunity.

**MURAT DIZDAR:** I think they were good changes because it was almost like you were wheeled into one pathway or another. How do we get some of our most academically gifted kids to also dive in and get VET qualifications? We've got tons of students who are just driven by work placements and hands-on learning and VET really suits, and now they've got no restrictions on how many they can do, and still they want the HSC and attain the HSC. That can lead to, like I said earlier, 19 per cent growth in SBATs. It should not be sneezed at, because that's a lot of work to achieve. They are some of our most skilled and qualified kids. They're some of our most disciplined kids. They're working to attain an HSC at school while also walking out with qualifications at cert III level, possibly, and they've knocked over a year or two of an apprenticeship. They're way, way more advanced than the traditional pathways that you and I adopted.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Following on from that, I know you said before when we were talking about TAFE Connects, Ms Read, about trying to get more accessible information out—again, this is called out in the TAFE Charter as well—about courses. I appreciate the Minister saying earlier that sometimes things will change in terms of numbers, but what is the plan in terms of predictability around course offerings, as best as you can, and how are you going to improve that piece?

**CHLOE READ:** It's a great question. As we said, the more that TAFE can engage in some multi-year planning and better engagement with local communities, the better. I might ask Ms Schorer to talk a bit about the training portfolio strategy and the educational delivery plan that goes with it, because that's really the piece of work, I think, that will give us a sense of statewide delivery but also local certainty. Ms Schorer, do you want to talk a bit about that?

**JANET SCHORER:** Sure, thank you. What we try to obviously look at, from a statewide perspective, is what the Skills Plan sets out for us in terms of where the skills needs are for the State. But how do we interpret that information to help us to plan what we're going to deliver each year as TAFE NSW? We've had a delivery planning process in place for some years, an annual process. What we really heard from the VET Review in particular was the need for more predictability about what is delivered when, particularly in smaller communities.

The opportunity that we have in the near future to not have the same parameters around the contestable market and how we're funded really gives us an opportunity to think about a three-year horizon for that planning, and also to think about where there are some opportunities in those more regional and remote locations to have

educational delivery present all the time and educational support available all the time, to give students in those sorts of locations the opportunity to take up some form of learning and be connected to a location that is a reasonable distance from home to be able to start their learning sooner.

It is really about trying to think about what we've learned from the sorts of programs we've been talking about today around pathways programs. But how do we facilitate those with a view to, if something is available in your community in 12 months, that we can engage with you earlier and give you a pathway to get ready so that when you start that, you're the most successful? The other part of that is it helps us, obviously, to make best use of the physical assets that we have but also our most important asset, our teachers. How do we make best use of their expertise statewide? I think that gives us a real opportunity to continue to hear what we do, through TAFE Connects, about where community needs us to do better or different and how we translate that into being the best provider we can in terms of assurance about what we're going to deliver and how it's going to be delivered for students into the future.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** When you were speaking, it reminded me of some media recently in Inverell, at the hospital there. I don't know if you're familiar with the specifics, but they're offering for year 11 and 12 students health service assistance roles in partnership, I think, with Hunter New England and TAFE as well. Is that the kind of example when you talk about that service planning and delivery? Again, it kind of links back to year 11 and 12 students as well, working with health in this instance—finding students who already live in that community and giving them training opportunities while they're school based. I read about that because it's obviously not far from where I live. I know it's not the first time that those sorts of things have been done, but I just think those kinds of programs really make a difference in terms of your workforce. Using the Inverell one as an example, how do you determine where you run these sorts of courses? Is it based on demand from local community? Do you work with other agencies in terms of choosing the locations? How does that work in practice?

**JANET SCHORER:** Well, yes to both, as well as some population information: where do we know that there might be a little bump of young people coming through that might be looking for opportunities; if we're thinking we really know that there's an Aboriginal community in this part of the world that we want to work with and have a different pathway for. It gives us those sorts of opportunities, with a different profile of workforce too. That helps us enormously to plan where our workforce might be as well. Having 80 per cent of our workforce be permanent teachers, that gives us a great opportunity to also think about how we best utilise and give—I know many teachers have said to me they would go and work in a regional area for a period of time to take the opportunity to teach a different cohort, have a different experience. I think we've got so many of these things that are now set differently for us that give us that kind of opportunity to plan differently.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** In terms of how that picks up the Closing the Gap targets again, which is also talked about in the TAFE Charter, are there any new initiatives that you're looking at in that space, particularly for Aboriginal students or programs that you're looking to roll out?

**CHLOE READ:** In a general sense, as we talk about better regional planning, I think one of the things that I've heard people from the Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations say to me is "We don't just need more training." They will say, "Lots of certificate IIIs, but it's not translating into jobs." There is a broad piece, I would say, under the response to the VET Review with that regional skills planning lens which is about making sure that the training offered in different places aligns well with actual jobs and transitions into jobs—making sure that kind of work-enabled training occurs. We do have a range of quite specific programs that work, particularly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. On day one of semester I was at our Eora campus in Redfern, and there were some students who were day one of the IPROWD Program, which is Indigenous police recruitment.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I know of IPROWD, yes. I know the person who founded that.

**CHLOE READ:** There you go. Let me tell you about it. The excitement and the sense of possibility in that room for their studies and for the careers that they might be able to have was really palpable. Then, obviously, you would understand the joining of that with an aspect of cultural safety for those students and their sense of achievement. I was on day six at the time—they were on day one, I was on day six—and I said I would go back for their graduation. Ms Tickle, did you want to talk about other pieces of support in terms of Aboriginal students?

**JULIE TICKLE:** Interestingly, there's obviously a correlation between Aboriginal student outcomes and Aboriginal teachers because we see those things improving when they see themselves teaching. We're really proud to say that our Aboriginal employment numbers have grown 20 per cent since the implementation of our Aboriginal Employment Strategy.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** When was that?

**JULIE TICKLE:** The Aboriginal Employment Strategy has been in place for two years; I'll check that. We're over 400 Aboriginal employees now, which is an increase. But I think, again, in terms of having Aboriginal

teachers coming through our pathway program, that Paid to Learn program, this cohort's got 15 per cent Aboriginal teachers. All the way through the program it's averaged around 6 per cent, which is more than double our Aboriginal employment percentage overall. Our target is 3 per cent; it's currently sitting at 2.4, so we've got a way to go. But I think, in terms of having teachers in classrooms, that Aboriginal students can see it's really important.

I think it's important to mention that Closing the Gap was elevated in our strategic plan for it to have its own steering committee, which is chaired by the managing director, because Closing the Gap is all of our business, of course. One of the things that we're looking at is greater access to quality education for Aboriginal students and looking at completions, and that covers targets five, six and seven. But that kind of seeing Aboriginal teachers in classrooms for Aboriginal students, we're seeing that's making a difference, and we hope it continues too.

**The CHAIR:** That brings us to the end of the session before tea. I confirm that we're happy to now excuse Ms Meredith-Sotiris, Ms Tickle, Ms Schorer, Mr Arambatzis and Ms Rankin—but we'll hold on to you, Ms Read.

**(Kerryn Meredith-Sotiris, Julie Tickle, Janet Schorer, Peter Arambatzis and Fiona Rankin withdrew.)**

**(Short adjournment)**

**Professor MARK SCOTT, AO**, Vice-Chancellor and President, University of Sydney, on former affirmation

**Professor ANNAMARIE JAGOSE**, Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Sydney, on former affirmation

**Professor EILEEN McLAUGHLIN**, Interim Vice-Chancellor and President, University of Wollongong, sworn and examined

**Professor S. BRUCE DOWTON**, Vice-Chancellor and President, Macquarie University, affirmed and examined

**Professor ATTILA BRUNGS**, Vice-Chancellor and President, University of New South Wales, affirmed and examined

**Mr DAVID CROSS**, Chief of Staff, University of New South Wales, affirmed and examined

**Professor ANDREW PARFITT**, Vice-Chancellor and President, University of Technology Sydney, sworn and examined

**Professor GEORGE WILLIAMS, AO**, Vice-Chancellor and President, Western Sydney University, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Welcome and thank you for giving your time this afternoon to be witnesses. I am going to remind Professor Scott and Professor Jagose that you do not need to be sworn as you've already been sworn before this Committee during this inquiry. I note that we do have witnesses in the overflow seating area. I remind you, if you come forward to answer a question, to please bring your nameplate with you and place it in front of you at the table because it assists Hansard in ensuring the correct witness is identified. I will now go to questions from the crossbench.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** My questioning is going to be specifically to Western Sydney University. That's for you, Professor George Williams. Can I just ask you about Bankstown—sorry, how long have you had the position for, just so I can have an idea?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Seven months.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Specifically when did you start last year?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** It was 22 July last year.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** So you missed the article that I'm going to refer to by about three weeks, but I'm pretty sure you're going to be on top of this issue. I'm going to ask you about Bankstown campus. How many students are currently enrolled at Bankstown campus?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I'll need to take that on notice and give you that information. We have about nine different campuses so I can give you a breakdown.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Not a problem. I should have started by saying you're welcome to take it on notice if you don't know the answer. I'll ask you then, if you can let me know, how many are enrolled, how many are overseas students and how many are local students.

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** We can supply that information.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I'd like to also know if you have data specifically in relation to where students reside. Is that data that perhaps the campus may keep?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I can check that. Often we won't because we might have email and other information. But, again, I can check.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** If you know their residential details, and you may have some data about that and it's publicly available, if you could take that on notice as well, that would be great.

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Happy to.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** The article I want to refer you to is called, "A very curious deal: The \$340m uni campus with a \$1.8b price tag". It was in the Herald and it was 5 July 2024. Were you aware of this article?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I read the article before I started, yes.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I think you will be on top of some of the issues I might ask and that is the deal specifically that has happened at Bankstown. For the benefit of the Committee, there is an 18-storey tower now at Bankstown. Half of it is university campus and half of it is a commercial leased arrangement. Is that right?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Again, I'd need to check the percentages as to use. I don't know that off the top of my head.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can you take that on notice?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Happy to.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I'd like to know what the arrangement is on the 18-storey tower there. How much of it is the university? The article is reporting half-half. But if you can clarify specifically how much of the tower or the building site is used for university purposes—and I'll say purposes broadly. If you can specify how much of those purposes are academic related and how much of that might be administrative, as opposed to academic use. Then the remainder, what is the percentage that has been allocated for commercial office lease arrangements onsite.

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Sure.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can I just clarify, Walker Corporation is the landlord of the building. Is that right? It is no longer the university. What is the current arrangement?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Again, I'll need to take that on notice because I was not involved in any of those negotiations nor the set-up at that time. That occurred prior to my time. I've not had any direct dealings with them over this matter.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** You've had no dealings?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** No, I haven't had any dealings. I was aware of the article. I got a briefing about the article at the time.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Have you been briefed, though, on the commercial arrangements of the building itself, the fact that the university has a sublease arrangement with Walker Corporation? It originally had a leasing arrangement with Bankstown council. It then took on an arrangement with Walker Corporation in order for Walker Corporation to build the \$340 million site and it now has some long-term 40-year leasing arrangement with Walker Corporation, where in effect they've become the landlord and every year the university has to pay a certain amount.

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I'm aware in general terms of the arrangement, but it's not something I've familiarised myself with in recent times. Again, I'm happy to take it on notice and come back with the information.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can you take it on notice because my questions were relating to that arrangement, so it might make it a little bit difficult for me, but I'll still proceed with some of the questions that I want to ask. What I wanted to ask specifically is precisely what Walker Corporation agreed to pay for, and that is for the entire redevelopment. Was that amount \$340 million? You can take that on notice.

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Will do.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** What was the actual leasing arrangement with Bankstown council? I understand it's a peppercorn rent at a dollar a year plus there was an initial fee of \$12 million, if you could clarify precisely what that fee was.

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Yes.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** In coming to the position, had you done your own due diligence check on the arrangement that was—

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Yes, I did ask for a briefing after I'd started in light of that article. In particular, I sought information about whether all government checks had been received. I also asked for a probity analysis as well to satisfy myself as to what had occurred and I had a number of discussions. This would have been shortly after I arrived in July last year. The information I received satisfied me that at all stages the relevant government approvals had been received and in fact that there was nothing identified at that point that I felt needed to be taken further. But I'm happy to supply you the same information to help you understand what I was briefed on at that time.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can you make that probity analysis then publicly available? Is that what you're saying?



**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** By probity analysis, that was an oral conversation I had at that time talking to the relevant people, asking questions about government agencies involved and satisfying myself that, in light of the article, all relevant processes had occurred. I was satisfied at that time that that had occurred and it meant that there were no further steps I thought needed to be taken at that point. But I'm equally happy to provide you with the same information.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Were you concerned with what the former Valuer General said in the article? I'll quote:

"Over the life of the loan, they would pay an awful lot less than \$1.8 billion,"

So right now the university is going to pay \$1.8 billion over the next 40 years. He said:

"It's a lot like somebody who can't afford to buy a new car and does one of those hire-purchase lending deals and ends up paying five times what the car would have cost."

Parker estimates the uni could have saved up to \$1 billion on the project.

Did you take the opportunity to speak to the former NSW Valuer General who made these comments?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** No, I didn't speak to the former Valuer General, but I do recall that article. I haven't looked at it since July of last year, but I do recall also quotes in the article indicating that it was a deal that made sense for both parties. When I did make my own inquiries, on a commercial basis it was a good deal for the university. It was a deal that actually delivered the teaching and other outcomes that we needed. It was also an arrangement that, critically, the costs reflected the allocation of risk. As a university, we're far less able to take some commercial risks that other people would. Hence the pricing has reflected that. All of the indications were that it was a good outcome for the university consistent with our mission.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** When you did your probity analysis or oral conversations, was that just with your internal staff? Did you take any advice externally?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** It was just with my internal staff and I was sufficiently satisfied at that point. It was just a newspaper article. I recall in the article there were people at that point, even in the article itself, who identified that this was a sensible outcome.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Who does that? In the article, it only talks to a gentleman by the name of Michael Cook, who was a long-time executive at Investa Property Group and was a real estate agent. He gives it a good tick.

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** That's right. It was enough for me that I felt I needed to ask questions. Again, these are matters that occurred before I started, so I was really satisfying myself—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** I know, but you're overseeing this now.

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Correct.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** You're overseeing this lengthy lease arrangement to Walker Corporation. I want to know what questions you've posed to your staff that were perhaps involved in this and whether you've sought any independent external examination of this contractual arrangement. You've answered that as no. Is that right?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I didn't feel the need, given the answers I received at that time, noting also that the processes we have at Western Sydney University build in external assurance processes for all of our major developments. So, in fact, those things had occurred during the process. But, as I say, I was at that point acting on the basis of a media article. I sought advice. I was satisfied by what I was told in light of that, in particular, that all approvals had been received and that there had been no flags at any point raised by government in light of any of those matters. That was sufficient for me to believe it was an article I read but there was no more that I saw at that point that needed an investigation.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Why would government flag anything if this was a private arrangement between university and a developer? Where would they have needed to seek government advice or guidance?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** It's a good question. Whenever I start with these inquiries, I always start with, "Have we complied with all relevant rules and regulations? Have we made sure, consistent with our own legislation, that we've complied with our obligations?" The answer was clearly yes. That took us into commercial territory, as you say. The discussions I had were why this was a commercially appropriate deal for the university, given the allocation of risk, particularly developer risk, and that's risk that the universities would not bear.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** What about this \$1 billion that you've got to pay back over the next 40 years. That'll be a burden on the university in terms of student fees and ensuring that you have the money every year to pay the developer. Is that not an issue?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Again, I'm happy to give you more information because—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can you give me the exact amount that you have to pay every year to fulfil this contractual arrangement?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I don't know that off the top of my head, so I'm happy to take that on notice.

**The CHAIR:** I might start with you, Professor McLaughlin. I understand that the University of Wollongong went through a restructure called Transformation back in—sorry, it's now called Transformation. The one that you had in 2019-20 was called One-UOW. I understand you've just started the new restructure called Transformation, which comes with an admission that the previous restructure was a bit of a failure. Can you confirm how many staff were lost in that restructure?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** You're talking about the first restructure?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** I can't confirm that. I can take that on notice.

**The CHAIR:** Do you know whether a consultancy firm was used to develop One-UOW?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** Not to my knowledge, but I can check to make sure and obviously provide that information on notice.

**The CHAIR:** Do you report in your annual report—apologies, I normally have one with me—what your consultants spend? I've got a total of your consulting spend somewhere, at around \$14 million for the previous financial year. Do you report on breaking down that expenditure in your annual report?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** I can check the annual report, which I have with me, if you want. I can't confirm that at the moment.

**The CHAIR:** I don't think you do. On the basis that I don't think you do, could you maybe take it on notice to come back to us with what that spend looks like, particularly for anything that's over \$50,000, which is something that government agencies need to report against? I think some of you do this in your annual report and others don't, but I believe that you don't.

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** I understand that there are cuts to the University of Wollongong in its overall costs being contemplated right now, including these potential staff redundancies. Why hasn't the University of Wollongong looked to its investments in real estate to liquidate rather than cutting jobs?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** As part of the university's overall portfolio, it's currently looking across all of its actual investments and real estate as part of the whole process of the transformation.

**The CHAIR:** Will you be liquidating some of those real estate investments?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** That is under consideration at the moment. I can't tell you what the answer to that will be, but it is certainly part of the transformation process that we're undertaking at the moment.

**The CHAIR:** I probably should have started with where Transformation is up to, then. When did this project start?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** The initial started in September. We have a pre-consultation period as part of our enterprise agreement where we consult with staff and then we develop a change process over two different stages. The eventual part of stage one and stage two was then concluded early in January. We are now in the next part of the transformation process.

**The CHAIR:** Have some jobs already been cut as part of that?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** There have been 91.6 FTE that have left the university, of which two-thirds—I think 67 of them—are actually voluntary redundancies.

**The CHAIR:** I understand this is a bit of a theme with a lot of the universities, where we have redundancies and then we are hiring back into the same positions and then having redundancies again a few years later. On notice, are you able to come back to me, of those redundancies from the 2019 and 2020 cut, how many of those positions were then refilled in between? Also, how many of those are now being lost again? If there's any data

you can give me for that, it would be very helpful. I understand there was a deal that was done—Lendlease loans were taken out for student accommodation during COVID at the beginning of 2020. Quite a lot of money was paid out by University of Wollongong as part of that student accommodation lease. Can you confirm how much was lost as part of that deal?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** I was not at the university. I didn't join the university until 2021, so that is before my time as a member of staff. I will take that on notice and provide you with the information.

**The CHAIR:** When those sorts of transactions go wrong—or, being generous, if we're looking back, we can say that probably wasn't a very smart financial decision—I'm interested in what are the consequences for the council and the university governance as a whole? Is any action taken in those circumstances?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** For those particular circumstances, I am not aware, because I was not actually at the university when that occurred. I will take that on notice. We do have a complete governance system in place which oversees the actions of our council and our university.

**The CHAIR:** I'm being informed that University of Wollongong management is placing restrictions on research grant expenditures as a cost-saving measure. Are you aware of that?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** The university has deemed review of all spending across the entire institution, for discretionary travel, then there is review whether or not that aligns with the conditions of the grant that's actually in place.

**The CHAIR:** I understand that it's not being implemented necessarily in that way and that what this is doing is effectively impeding the conduct of research at University of Wollongong. Have you had those complaints made to you?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** No, there has been no complaint to me that has been around "unable to do research" as a result of any financial restriction. In fact, if it's externally funded research, it gets undertaken.

**The CHAIR:** I'm also told that in some cases, because a researcher takes their research grant with them if they move to another university, University of Wollongong is basically seeking out third parties not involved in the research to join the research so that then the research grants stays with University of Wollongong if the primary researcher was to leave. Have you had that complaint raised to you?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** That hasn't been raised to me, but I can take that on notice and make inquiries.

**The CHAIR:** That would be very useful. I understand that in relation to the current job losses staff provided quite extensive feedback on the inaccuracies and systemic bias in the data used—things like saying that a course that hadn't even run the year before didn't have enough enrolments, and that data then being used to justify a teacher not to be needed there anymore, to make the case for their redundancy. Are you aware of the feedback that staff gave in relation to the data that was used?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** I'm certainly aware of quite a lot of feedback. We had two processes where data was released and staff were asked to confirm. There was a dialogue that went on for some weeks while data was verified. I know that, in some cases, corrections were actually made to the data.

**The CHAIR:** I understand that the union had to go to the Fair Work Commission in order to release the data on all of the disciplines. Why wasn't that data made available in the first place?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** In the first stage of the consultation, only a small part of the university's portfolio was actually impacted and the data was released for that. The request was for the data for all of the other disciplines, which were not impacted. That data was released later.

**The CHAIR:** There was a well-publicised case where the recent interim vice-chancellor, John Dewar, was working for a consulting firm called KordaMentha. At the same time, KordaMentha was paid \$600,000 by the university to conduct operational reviews. That has caused a lot of controversy around the University of Wollongong's conflict of interest management processes. Has anything been done after that publicity to tighten up on conflicts of interest?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** I am aware that the council has undertaken a self-review. That will form part of that self-review.

**The CHAIR:** I understand that management often consults with the Student Advisory Council, which is the group that has been set up by management, rather than the Wollongong Undergraduate Student Association, which is the student-elected body. In what circumstances do you choose to use the Student Advisory Council instead of the WUSA?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** The Student Advisory Council is used extensively to consult on a whole range of matters across the entire university, largely because they represent groups of people across the entire diversity of the university. There are matters that affect the student body for which the Student Advisory Council is routinely consulted.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Professor Dowton, perhaps I can start with you, if I may. If female students reported feeling unsafe on your campus, would you respond by setting aside one room in the university where you could assure their safety?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** No. I thank you for that question. We have a dedicated process available 24/7 to students at the university to raise concerns if they have concerns about their safety. We would not be dedicating a specific room to a single student, if that is the question.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Yet you appear to have responded to concerns raised by Jewish students by creating one safe space. Why not a whole safe campus for Jewish students?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** Our campus, I believe, is a safe campus. The use of the words "safe space" is a construct of the Sydney media. It is not a phrase that has ever been used by the university. What we have done is respond to a request from a student organisation, which we receive a number of over time. They requested a space specifically for the preparation and storage of kosher food and to gather as students. That is no different than any other space that we provide to other student groups. The notion of a safe space is a construct of the media.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** So you're confident that the entirety of your campus is a safe space for Jewish students?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** We work very hard to maintain a safe and welcoming space for all students who come to the campus, including our Jewish students, yes.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Are you aware that there are reports of Jewish students feeling concerned about attending lectures at Macquarie?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** I am aware of those concerns being raised in the media. We have had very little complaint from our own students. I have personally met with the student groups involved a number of times during the last year to year and a half. We have not had those concerns brought to us in a concerted way. They asked for a space, as I said before, to store and prepare kosher food.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Do you have modules that students complete about a range of matters, including Indigenous heritage, sustainability and academic honesty, before students can access assignments and learning materials on myLearn?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** I thank you for that question. We do have those modules. They do not have to complete those modules before they can access learning materials. That again is a construct. I know not where it comes from. Students can access the learning materials before those modules are completed.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** When are students required to complete those modules?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** During the course of their studies.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** And is every student required to complete a certain set of core modules?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** There are the four modules that you mentioned, at the moment: academic integrity, a safe campus for Macquarie University, sustainability, and the Indigenous heritage and culture module. Those four modules are currently mandatory for students. In response to concerns that have been raised, as we do for all courses, we are regularly reviewing those courses' content and their nature.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** So currently all four of those modules are compulsory for students during the course of their studies.

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** They are now, yes.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** And for how long have they been compulsory?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** I'd have to take that on notice. I don't have that.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** If you could, that would be great. The safer communities module, which students complete, does this deal with antisemitism?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** Again I'd have to look at that in detail to see if there is specific content about that. It certainly, I believe, deals with discrimination in general. I would have to take that on notice. I would add that we have been in regular communication with both our staff and student bodies, where specifically

antisemitism and Islamophobia have been raised, including by me personally, in written and oral communications with the university community.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Thank you. And the Manawari module that's compulsory, does this include material that non-Indigenous students are taught that they are visitors and settlers in their own land?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** Those words were in the introduction to this module. When that was raised with me—as we do regularly for any course, it was raised with me—I asked that that be reviewed. Those words have now been removed.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** And for how long were those words and that instruction present in that module before your review?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** I'd have to take that on notice and check when it went up.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** If you could, that would be good. And what are the processes for regular review of these compulsory modules?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** These modules fit under the purview of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic). And there is a process of review in accordance with our usual academic review of courses.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** If it hadn't been raised in the media, would it have been reviewed and removed?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** It would have been reviewed, yes.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Would it have been removed, Professor?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** I can't speak to that. That's a delegated responsibility to those who develop the materials and those who review them.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** You would agree that informing non-Indigenous students that they are visitors and settlers does not really build a culture of inclusion, which is one of Macquarie's core values?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** That's why I asked for the review to be done.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Thank you. Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah is a researcher in your department of sociology, I believe.

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** Correct.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** And she was a presenter at the anti-racism symposium convened at the Queensland University of Technology earlier this year.

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** Yes.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** And that, I believe, was the symposium at which the trope "Dutton's Jew" was presented.

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** I don't know specifically whether that's true or not.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Thank you. Have you been asked by the Australian Research Council to provide video or a transcript of Dr Abdel-Fattah's speech in which she, allegedly, has said that she refused an ARC requirement to stage a traditional academic conference and instead invited women to contribute revolutionary quotes and declared, "I refuse to cite anybody who has remained silent over Gaza. No matter how authoritative and big they are in their fields, they are deficient human beings"? Have you been asked to provide video or transcript?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** Macquarie University does not have a copy of that video or a transcript. That is the—

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** But you were asked by the ARC to provide that material?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** I would have to check with the deputy vice-chancellor. I'm not aware that we have been asked to provide that, but I have to take that on notice.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** If you could, because Dr Richard Johnson, the acting chief executive of the ARC, told Senate estimates that he had been engaging with your university for a year over this matter, and I wondered why it was taking so long to engage with the ARC.

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** For clarification, the QUT matter was just earlier this year, I believe. It hasn't been going on for a year. The matters related to Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah have been going for some time, and we have been in touch with the ARC about a range of matters.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** How much of the \$870,000 research grant awarded to Dr Abdel-Fattah does the university currently retain?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** Again, I don't have that information here.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Can you provide it on notice, Professor?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** I can provide that, I believe, yes.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Thank you. Of the research grant, how much goes to the university and how much goes to fund the expenses of the research conducted by the researcher?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** All of the funds allocated by the ARC are spent for the purposes of the research.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Have you received a notice of suspension in relation to that grant?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** We have.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** You would be familiar, I'm sure, with the Macquarie University Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research, which provides, inter alia, at section 2 part A that your researchers:

Treat fellow researchers and others involved in the research fairly and with respect.

Do you have any concerns that Dr Abdel-Fattah is not complying with this code?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** I think that we have to be very careful that we are not getting into any territory which potentially abuts up against the privacy or confidentiality of individual staff members when there may be matters of investigation being proceeded with. And so I would politely suggest that it's not appropriate for me to respond to specific questions about that particular staff member.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Because you believe there's an investigation in process about that staff member?

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** Point of order: I think it's a bit unfair, in light of the preceding answer, to then try to verbal a particular fact, which, clearly, the professor's doing his best to avoid, I would suggest. I think on quite proper grounds he's doing so.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** To the point of order: I was not seeking to verbal; I was really seeking clarification of exactly what the preceding answer was.

**The CHAIR:** If you could perhaps reframe the question.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** What would be the process if you were concerned that there had been a breach by a researcher of the code of responsible conduct? What would be the process for an investigation of that possible breach of that researcher?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** For any concern raised about a matter of research conduct for any academic staff member in the university, we would apply Macquarie's own Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research, which closely mirrors, as I believe do most universities, the Australian code. That would provide for the initial establishment of whether there's a prima facie case to be answered or not and if there is, there would be an investigation process launched out of that. That would apply to any concern raised about an academic staff member and their research.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** I understand that one of the four compulsory modules is an academic honesty module, which would deal with referencing. Assuming that Dr Abdel-Fattah has been quoted correctly, and there's been no contest of the quote, that she refuses to cite anybody who's remained silent over Gaza because "they are deficient human beings," how does that sit with what Macquarie teaches its students about academic honesty and appropriate referencing and use of resources?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** Thank you, again, for that question. First of all I would reiterate that we have not seen the full transcript of what Dr Abdel-Fattah said at that meeting. I would again reiterate I don't think it's appropriate for me to be responding to questions about a specific academic staff member when there may be matters ultimately adjudicated through other processes. Our academic integrity model directed at students firmly emboldens a set of standards about a whole range of matters in relation to conduct of academic integrity, not just in relation to citation. It's a very wide set of issues around not using contract cheating services and the like.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** I may have some questions for you later but thank you for that. Professor Scott, perhaps if I could come to you. You acknowledge publicly that you and, I think, the broader university failed Jewish students and staff. Do you also acknowledge that by allowing the encampment to continue for some months, the university inadvertently helped to foster the current climate of antisemitism, as behaving in that way was seen to be tacitly endorsed by a leading academic institution?

**MARK SCOTT:** Last time I was here you asked me questions on the encampment and I believe I answered them comprehensively and thoroughly. The encampment started the best part of nine months ago now and has been completed for a full semester, and now we've got another semester underway. We made a number of steps that I believe were very constructive on the back of the end of the encampment, which I think has significantly improved the tone in and around campus. I note with interest that student complaints have reduced 80 per cent to 90 per cent in the second semester on the back of the campus access policy that we introduced, and we have a revised campus access policy for this semester.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** That's very interesting, Professor Scott, but it doesn't actually go to the question that I asked you. What was the cultural impact of that encampment and allowing it to proceed for as long as you did? Did it have an impact on the culture of antisemitism that we sadly have not really seen very productive diminutions of in Sydney recently?

**MARK SCOTT:** I would refer you back to comments that I made when I was last here that the university is a microcosm of broader society. As you'll have seen from comments by the authorities, levels of antisemitism have significantly increased across our society, particularly since 7 October. Universities that had protests and protest activities, as a number of our universities have, reflect that microcosm. But I reject the broader assertion that you put forward.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** You gave evidence that you declined an offer from the New South Wales police to move the protesters on and close down the encampment. When was that offer made by the New South Wales police?

**MARK SCOTT:** I spoke to that when I was last here.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** With respect, Professor Scott, you spoke to that at the Senate inquiry; you didn't speak to that here.

**MARK SCOTT:** What I will simply say about our engagement with the police is that we were in constant discussion with the police through the time of the encampment. Our security team had constant discussions, and at times daily discussions, with the authorities and close contacts with the police. The Bruce Hodgkinson review that was commissioned by the university paid tribute to the work of our security team and endorsed their close connection and engagement with New South Wales police. Part of those discussions were discussions that went to how best we manage the complexity of the encampment and how we dealt with some of the complexities of the legal interpretation around enforceability and the inclosed lands Act, which is something that I've raised previously in this Parliament. These were all questions that were part of ongoing discussions with New South Wales police.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** I'll have further questions for you later. Perhaps you could take on notice when exactly the police offered to close the encampment. I believe my colleague has some questions.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Professor Dowton, I will direct this one to you. Are you aware of recent commentary concerning Macquarie University and its requirement that a student who was enrolled in a Master of Creative Writing undertake what has been reported as a Manawari student training unit about Aboriginal and cultural awareness as well as sustainability modules based on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** Yes, I'm aware of that.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Professor, university vice-chancellors, from my experience, have had a long history of forcing students to undertake actions in terms of compulsory, mandatory activities like this as a condition of enrolment. We saw this for years with compulsory student unionism in place at campuses. For many decades, university VCs and administrators opposed the freedom of association. Students were forced to join these unions, often not representing their best interest or their choice not to join these unions. Back to the issue, as a graduate of Macquarie Uni, I'm interested in this, Professor Dowton: Is there a requirement for the completion of compulsory union units in Aboriginal cultural awareness, sustainability or anything of a similar nature as part of enrolment now generally for all courses at Macquarie University?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** As I've testified earlier, yes, we have those units in place. I would, with respect, take issue with the comparison between compulsory student unionism and educational programs, particularly in the vein of campus safety, for argument's sake, which is very strongly focused on ensuring a safe campus,

particularly around sexual conduct matters, and also the academic integrity unit, which is about facilitating students' successful passage through the university by making them aware of the concerns about academic integrity matters so they don't fall short.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Thank you. I respect that. I just direct that my question was specific to the Manawari student training unit about Aboriginal cultural awareness in terms of being a compulsory, mandatory study module as part of enrolment and graduation at Macquarie University.

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** Yes, it is. And, as I referenced earlier as well, those programs and that nature is under review.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Sorry, Professor. Those—

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** Whether those programs are mandatory or not is being reviewed by the university now that I've asked for that review to be done.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** If I could draw to your attention—I'm happy to table this—a communication from Macquarie University. It has got the Macquarie University email and standard on the top of it. It says, "Completion of student Manawari training is compulsory." The information for students is that the unit will take one hour to complete. The advice is that students will only be required to complete this once. Upon completion, study sessions will not be hidden. Professor Dowton, is access to enrolled studies not available before completion of these courses?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** I thank you for raising that and I certainly appreciate that concern. When that concern was brought to me, that information has now been amended. As I referenced earlier, it is not a prevention of access to course materials to complete these programs.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Professor, if I could also draw your attention that this is a Macquarie University post on Instagram. This remained live as of last night. It's advice to new students "preparing for your studies at Macquarie". It says, "You'll need to complete four introductory modules to understand some of our policies, values and responsibilities." The four areas are listed, the fourth being student Manawari training. "You will find you have been automatically enrolled to the modules." The post goes on to say, "We encourage you to complete this as soon as possible to ensure you have full access to your unit content online." Access to study and content is not available, as represented by this post, until completion of these of these modules.

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** I'm happy to take that on notice and look into that Instagram post.

**The Hon. RACHEL MERTON:** Professor, are there any plans to introduce further requirements at the university that students must undertake further units of study relating to a—

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** No.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Back to Professor George Williams in relation to Bankstown, I think I asked you earlier about the exact numbers of domestic local students enrolled and, separately, overseas students. Can I also ask what's the breakdown of how many students are enrolled in face-to-face lectures and classes as opposed to online learning? Is there a separation? Do you have that in some of the courses?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Of course what often happens is there's a blended approach to those. We have a number of students who do both aspects of those. I can give you a breakdown both as to solely online, solely in person and the blend, if you like. I can take that on notice and get you that information.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** That'd be great if you can take that on notice. If I can have that breakdown, that would be appreciated. Have you or any of your staff had any discussions with either NSW Health or TAFE NSW about the redevelopment taking place at Bankstown TAFE in relation to a new hospital there? Have you or any of your staff been briefed at all?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I have not had those discussions myself, but I can't speak for my staff about those things. Again, I can take that further on notice. The answer is no, I have not, but I can't answer for every other person.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can you take it on notice? I'd just like to know whether you or any of the appropriate University of Western Sydney staff have had briefings from NSW Health or TAFE NSW about any potential arrangements or partnerships in the future moving forward. Also, does or will Bankstown campus offer any health-related courses? Are you aware if it does?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Again, I'll need to check exactly what programs we offer there. Let me take that on notice as to what specifically we offer there. I don't recall that, but I don't want to confirm it until I check.



**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Back to the \$1.8 billion Walker Corporation deal, I understand you had your own discussions on coming into the position. Are you aware of any independent audit of the actual contractual arrangement? Has there been any independent audit or assessment of it?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I would need to check that, because you're testing my memory from a conversation I had last July. Let me get back to you on that. I was satisfied at the time that all relevant processes had been completed, but as to whether there was an independent and who completed it, I don't know off the top of my head.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Do you know if they undertook any assessment as to actually taking up the loan themselves directly, the University of Western Sydney—

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I don't know—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** —as opposed to having an arrangement with Walker Corporation?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I don't know. It was before my time. I'm not aware.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Is there any information provided in relation to that, what kinds of assessments were undertaken?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** The assessments I took at the time were to check that it was on a viable commercial basis, and I was satisfied as to that at the time. I remember I was also informed at the time that the article did not contain a lot of further information that made it clear this was not only a viable but a sensible arrangement for the university to enter into. In terms of the specifics, I don't have them before me, but I'm happy to supply you with what I can.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Professor, they had an opportunity to respond to the article; they chose not to. That's okay. I can understand why they didn't comment; you don't necessarily have to comment. But has there been any—was there a public comment or a comment from the university to its students and to the community in response at all, perhaps that they could have done in their own social media?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Not that I'm aware of. Again, the article was before I had started, so I don't know for sure. But I do also know that it may assist you that, of course, some of these matters are in confidential commercial arrangements as well, which no doubt the newspaper did not have access to, which may tell a larger part of the story. But, again, I was not part of those negotiations at the time.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** If that wasn't true, wouldn't the university take the opportunity to refute some of the claims there, particularly that \$1.8 billion price tag that they're referring to? They're saying that the university has to pay \$45 million a year to Walker Corporation for the next 40 years. I mean, if that's not—

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Again, it's possible that the university did. I don't know. I wasn't in the chair at that point.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Do you know if they are or not, or you don't know?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Know if they are?

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Going to be paying \$45 million. Are you going to be paying \$45 million every year?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Again, I'll need to take that on notice, because—I'm happy to look at that information, but I don't have it before me.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Okay. Could you clarify what the arrangement is?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Yes, I'm happy to get further information on notice.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can you clarify what sort of Federal funding the university receives? Is that something that can be publicly—

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Yes. I mean, in terms of our total budget, about 60 per cent of our funding is provided by the Commonwealth through an arrangement of Commonwealth-supported places, through student fees and the like. Of course, there's a much more sophisticated breakdown, but, again, it would depend on what sort of Commonwealth funding for what project you're interested in. We also receive specific funding for things like an agri tech precinct at our Hawkesbury campus. That was a recent announcement, and there are a lot of particular arrangements that many universities might have where particular programs are funded.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Do you know if the university went to actual tender for this, or was this a private arrangement?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Again, I just wasn't involved in those matters at the time, and I can't tell you off the top of my head what occurred in that regard.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Can you take that on notice?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I'm happy to.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** Okay. Quickly, just on the TAFE, on the redeveloped site, you're going to come back to me on whether any staff has had any discussions and there has been no interest from the University of Western Sydney to take up—there has been an ROI for tender for relocation of the TAFE. The university has not been involved in that at all?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I haven't, and not to my knowledge. But, again, sometimes these arrangements go back many years. I can simply say I'm not aware of it.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** It's a recent tender. I'm just wondering whether the university has taken any interest. You've answered my question in the context that perhaps you haven't had an interest in the ROI itself, but whether you've had any discussions with either Canterbury Bankstown council or TAFE NSW into any of the university's facilities being used or utilised for the purposes of this relocation.

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I mean, I can say—not specifically for that, but I can say generally, yes, we would like to have some discussions. In fact, I wrote to the acting head of TAFE. I said that I'd like to have a meeting to discuss how, in fact, as part of the harmonisation—

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** She's just here.

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I know, that's right. We haven't had our meeting yet.

**The Hon. TANIA MIHAILUK:** You guys can talk in the break.

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I think as a university we actually need to do much more with TAFE, and we have many campuses next to TAFE facilities. There has been a recent report talking about harmonisation. At my end, I've spoken to many students who have expressed concern about their inability to articulate TAFE qualifications into university. So, actually, I'd like to do much more in this area, and I would like to work with TAFE on that, but that hasn't yet happened. There's actually a meeting we'll hopefully be having soon to discuss those matters.

**The CHAIR:** Professor Dowton, I'll start with you. Just in relation to Dr Abdel-Fattah, who I had the pleasure of listening to speak at an event last week—actually, I hadn't heard her speak before. I put on record my admiration for her bravery and courage in the face of what she's experienced recently. I guess my question for you is—and all of you have had a bit of this, I think—but when you have significant attacks from the Murdoch press and from some in the Liberal Party, how do you react to that in a way that maintains your duty of care to staff and the pressure that this sort of thing can put on staff, particularly in this case, yet another case where it's largely unfounded, as far as I can tell. How do you respond politically while also maintaining academic freedom, due process, duty of care to staff and academic independence as well?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** I'll generalise my response, if I might. We take a number of approaches towards that, both for the individual staff member as well as for the community at large. For the individual staff member, those in a direct reporting line would be meeting with the staff member and offering support. We would draw upon the expertise of our employee relations group in the human resources part of the university. We would be offering support from independent external providers that we make available to all of our staff, an employee assistance program we have on contract to be available to provide arms-length psychological support and counselling. We work very hard to try to provide support for any staff member who might be under duress for whatever circumstance, whether it be personal health reasons, media issues or whatever.

We also reach out more broadly into our own staff and try to be clear around our policies and procedures. Again, as you've referenced earlier, Chair, at the difficult intersection between academic freedom, freedom of speech and maintaining a safe environment for everyone, that is an awkward space for universities in Australia at this time. We work hard to try to provide clarity in the complexity of that to our staff around what the standards expected are. We do that in a variety of ways through written communications. For instance, I sent an email out to all staff members at the start of the new year this year to welcome them back and to elucidate some of my stand and the university's stand on these matters. I referenced this just as recently as last week in a university-wide town hall that was attended by well over a thousand staff members, and do the same thing for our student body as well. We try to approach this in a multilateral way with due regard for, on the one hand, a safe, welcoming and supportive environment for all of our staff members and students as well as protecting and adhering to the tenets around freedom of speech and academic inquiry.

**The CHAIR:** Professor Scott, how much money was spent on the Hodgkinson external review of campus accessibility?

**MARK SCOTT:** I'll have to take that on notice.

**The CHAIR:** Since the university implemented its new policy—when was that? June last year, wasn't it?

**MARK SCOTT:** Yes, that's right.

**The CHAIR:** How many notices of alleged misconduct have been issued?

**MARK SCOTT:** Again, I'll take that on notice if I can.

**The CHAIR:** Could you come back to me with how many were to staff, how many to students, how many to visitors?

**MARK SCOTT:** Sure.

**The CHAIR:** And then, within that category, to the extent you know, how many identify as First Nations people, how many identify as people of colour and how many international students, in the case of students. That would be very useful.

**MARK SCOTT:** I'll take that on notice.

**The CHAIR:** Professor Williams, I understand that Western Sydney is partnering or in some sort of a research agreement with the Israeli medical technology company Syqe. Are you aware of this?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I actually became aware of it yesterday. A student mentioned it to me. Actually, this afternoon I asked my deputy vice-chancellor of research to look into that to give me a briefing on it.

**The CHAIR:** Okay, that's great. I understand it's something to help IDF soldiers to sleep, something along those lines. It's been brought to my attention that the company is, I believe, owned by a tobacco company, or there's a significant investment by a tobacco company in that Syqe company, which would breach the university's investment rules. Is that something that you are looking into as well?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** It's certainly something I'm interested in, yes. A student gave me a flyer mentioning these things. I received the flyer. I gave it to my lead in this today and said, "Please look into this. This looks important to get across and see if there are any breaches or concerns." But obviously I've only just received it so it needs to be looked into so I can get the information.

**The CHAIR:** Are you aware of the petition that is circulating for this?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** The student mentioned there was a petition too. In fact, that same student separately mentioned to me last week that there was a petition and then today gave me the flyer so I actually had the information needed to follow up.

**The CHAIR:** I like this student. I think we should recruit this student. I will wait for you to get your briefing and come back to us on notice then on those points. Are you aware of concerns by the Bangladeshi community regarding artwork—it is the Parramatta campus—which includes a bust of former Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's late father?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Are you aware of the concerns the Bangladeshi community has with that bust?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Yes, I am, particularly given recent events in Bangladesh. I was written to by a community group. I asked my team to review it and to consult widely with the community to understand the concerns. My understanding is we're going to be sensitively responding to that. We have not yet informed the students, but we are looking at change, shall we say, in that area in light of that. But we want to make sure we continue the consultation with our Bangladeshi community so it's done in the right way.

**The CHAIR:** Especially given the numbers of students killed in Bangladesh in the recent uprising, I'm glad to hear that you're taking that seriously.

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Yes, we are.

**The CHAIR:** I come back to you, Professor McLaughlin. You may need to take this on notice as well. In terms of the debt refinancing that was undertaken, I've tried to make sense of this in the annual report and I understand there was some finance given at quite a low interest rate and it had to be refinanced at a more normal interest rate. Are you in a position to tell me what the financial impact of that refinancing has been?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** No, I'll have to take that on notice.

**The CHAIR:** There has been a lot made of the impact of the potential cap on international students and the financial impact that that will have on universities. In the case of the University of Wollongong, I understand that Ministerial Direction 111, if I've got that right, is effectively reducing a lot of the impact of Ministerial Direction 107, but the university is still saying, as part of the transformation blurb that's on the website, that that will have a significant impact on student numbers going forward and on finances. Can you explain the quantum of that impact? My understanding is that, under the new direction, there is an 80 per cent limit on how many visas get fast-tracked. But, in the case of the University of Wollongong, I was led to understand that you weren't historically meeting those large numbers of international students anyway. Are you able to tell me what the actual impact is?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** I can't give you the exact numbers. I can give you the context. The context is that, after Ministerial Direction 107 was actually put in place, there was a very significant downturn in the numbers of students who were actually coming through to the university. That has impacted the whole of the pipeline that we actually have of students and, though Ministerial Direction 111 has been put in place, there hasn't been a significant rebound of the numbers during that time period. I can get you the exact numbers and the proportions of those, which I don't actually have to hand at the moment, but I can certainly supply those.

**The CHAIR:** I'm just curious as to how it works in practice. When you look at the University of Sydney or other metro-based universities, if they then max out on their effective cap—whether that benefits the University of Wollongong that has historically had lower numbers of international students where those international students then come in to go to the University of Wollongong instead. I'm just curious on seeing whether the financial claims are over-inflated when it comes to the impact of international student numbers.

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** That's a future event because that hasn't actually happened yet. So I would be speculating to do that, but I can certainly go back and look at the numbers for you and where the situation is at the moment.

**The CHAIR:** I think the issue is that when you look at the transformation project, it talks a lot about these student numbers as being the reason why there need to be staff cuts. As you say, we don't really know, and you're using best guesses. But I'd like to know how that came about, particularly whether the assumptions you were working on last year have changed now that we've had this new ministerial direction.

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** I can say at the moment that we have not had refilling of the pipeline of students. It takes 18 months, perhaps, to recruit a student before they actually arrive at the university, so there's quite a long time lag before a student actually arrives.

**The CHAIR:** From mid-2023 to today, I understand that most of the senior executive positions at the University of Wollongong are held in an acting or interim capacity. Do you agree that that introduces a level of risk in decision-making and accountability? What is the university doing to firm up those positions?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** As you're aware, the interim position was a very senior and experienced vice-chancellor who came to the university in July and literally left last week. A new vice-chancellor is arriving on 28 May. I think that we've taken as many steps as possible to have experienced people around us and the new experienced vice-chancellor coming.

**The CHAIR:** I understand that there's a huge number of deputy vice-chancellors and executive deans that are held in this interim capacity. Once the non-interim vice-chancellor comes in, the idea is to firm up those?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** Absolutely.

**The CHAIR:** I understand. Why did the interim vice-chancellor leave just last week? What was the reason for the timing?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** This was his arrangement with council. He was originally to stay for six months. He extended that for two more months but, due to personal reasons, he stood down at the end of February.

**The CHAIR:** I feel like I could ask 200,000 other questions or none. I'm going to go with none, but thank you. I may come back in the last bit.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Thank you all for being here today. I wanted to ask about a slightly different issue. I'm interested in a response from all of you, noting that there's not a lot of time, but even just a couple of minutes each. I might start with you, Professor Brungs from UNSW, seeing as you haven't had a chance yet. It won't be a surprise to many of you who I know that I'm interested in opportunities for rural and regional students, particularly to access universities and the pathways that are available. I'm wondering if each of you could give us a brief oversight of what your university is doing specifically to engage students from more disadvantaged

backgrounds, including those from rural and regional communities. I think UNSW has a gateway program but I'm interested in what you're doing in that space and if you're seeing an uptake in students from those communities coming to study at your universities.

**ATTILA BRUNGS:** I'll be very quick—two overviews. One is a whole totality. The University of New South Wales has quite an ambitious target to increase the number of regional, remote, Indigenous and low-SES students as part of our student cohort. It not just accessibility but an accessibility and success program. While we had the highest of the Go8 for a number of years, we want to go from about 13 per cent or 14 per cent up to 25 per cent over a five-year period. I think the 2025 numbers are 22 per cent. So we've had significant growth in those.

The key is reaching out in schools. Again, we adhere to—education in New South Wales is excellent but sometimes a little bit disaggregated. How do we make sure that all students have equal access to the material that they need to be successful at university? Providing scholarships, providing accommodation and providing a whole lot of support. We find if students get through first year, they're successful all the way through. A thing we're very proud of at UNSW is the success rate. Take, for example, regional and remote students. They succeed at 93 per cent at UNSW, which is almost 15 per cent higher than the university average and quite significant in society. It's not just about accessibility; it's about accessibility and success, and we've got a number of programs on that.

Maybe if I drill down specifically on regional students. Again, UNSW is very proud that we teach so many doctors on the ground right across—I'll be blunt here, I often say this: we're actually the university for all of New South Wales. We actually have hundreds of students on the ground in Wagga, Albury Wodonga, Port Macquarie and Coffs Harbour. I think there's 100 at Wagga now with our new building there; there's 100 at Port Macquarie. You can do medicine in the regions from first year all the way through to sixth year. If you look at the numbers—because we've been in Wagga for the longest, over 25 years—47 per cent of the medical practitioners there were trained at UNSW. Particularly given that, say, general practice is so important now, we've got a new professor of general practice there to really boost those numbers as well. That just gives you an indication of some of the things we're doing and their success.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** That was going to be my second question, about medical. You've done two in one for me, thank you. Professor Dowton?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** A number of similar programs that Professor Brungs has already indicated but to amplify our view, the really key thing is school partnerships. It's not the way we would necessarily acquire students in the metropolitan area as concentratedly on school partnerships. We have an outreach program into developing relationships with the schools at the leadership level, as well as with the careers advisers. I personally make trips into regional and even remote New South Wales. I went back to my hometown where I was born of Ivanhoe in the Far West.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I know it well. We were talking about the Central School there at estimates with Mr Dizdar the other day. They need a bus. If you can help with that, I'm sure they'd appreciate it. But we'll leave that aside.

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** I'm proud to say that through our first robotics program we had the first robotics team, which is a program to teach simple robot construction and computer programming in schools, where our engineering students go out into schools not only in metropolitan Sydney but also into regional and remote Australia. I actually went with the first robotics team to Ivanhoe some years ago to the first robotics episode. We brought those students down to Sydney at our expense to take part in the regional competition, to give them a sense of what it was like to be in the university and to make them feel welcome. I'm delighted to hear from my colleague to the right of the success of the UNSW medicine program, a program—which I launched when I was Dean of Medicine at the University of New South Wales with Dr Michael Wooldridge, the Federal health Minister—offering a substantial grant to launch Australia's first regional rural clinical school. So well done to my colleague.

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** I might come at this from a different angle. Our students are largely equity students. Two-thirds of our students are first in family, and we've got the largest number of low-SES students in the country. One in two of our students do not speak English at home. In particular, we do look to attract regional and rural students. I'd have to say, the system is really stacked against them. If you're not coming from a wealthy family from those areas, you might get a youth allowance of \$47 a day—median rent is over \$100 a day. We also see the fact that many of our students from those areas can't afford a device other than a phone. Try writing an English essay on a mobile phone. They're the sort of things our students are dealing with.

The most pressing issues are often the most basic. One in two of our students have identified they have food insecurity, so any of our discretionary money actually goes to our food pantry where we're literally feeding our students rice, oats and the like, including from those areas, because we've identified that's one of the main reasons they do not continue study. They're just hungry, and they can't study without adequate food. Where international caps have hit us very hard, for example, is that cross-subsidised Aussie kids trying to stay in study. We no longer have the money we did to, frankly, buy them food to keep them in study. So we would say the system is badly stacked against young people who might want to come either from within Western Sydney or outside of Western Sydney. Sadly, being a student today, unless you're from a wealthy family, is often a recipe for poverty. It's no wonder many drop out and don't survive through their studies.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Thank you for that. It's quite sobering to hear. Professor Scott?

**MARK SCOTT:** Many of the issues are covered by my colleagues—great success with our four-year medicine program at Dubbo; terrific engagement, too, at Broken Hill, Lismore and other regional centres. We've significantly expanded our scholarship program for students from low-SES backgrounds—the MySydney Scholarship. In effect 1,500 students are studying at the university on that scholarship scheme now, which we only started a little over two years ago. There's a critical question, though, which I think members of Parliament could help us with here. The real issue that you're focusing on for regional and rural students is the accommodation question in Sydney. It's expensive to live in and around the campus.

We have, over the last decade, significantly expanded the accommodation available for students in and around the University of Sydney. One policy setting that holds us back is that currently university student accommodation is not recognised and categorised as affordable housing, which provides a fast track through planning and development provisions and other incentives for the university and developers to be able to develop that program. One of the reasons it's not counted as affordable housing is that it's really only available and there for students, so it doesn't meet that criteria.

But some of the accommodation we offer at the University of Sydney, with its weekly rent, is as cheap as any accommodation that is available in and around the area. How do we get more not just accommodation but affordable accommodation close to the universities? That would be a significant help for us to have university student accommodation classified as affordable housing with all the benefits that accrue on the back of that. We have taken that up with the planning Minister and also the Minister for Housing, and Minister for Homelessness. We would hope to get some support there. Also, it's a Federal Government issue as well.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** I am interested to hear from the other two witnesses but, just to follow on from that, the demand is there from students outside of Sydney, but the capacity to provide accommodation is part of the challenge? I see Professor Brungs nodding as well.

**MARK SCOTT:** When I speak to students, it is interesting, the MySydney Scholarship offering provides good living support for students while they're studying. But if you are travelling and you actually have to live in Sydney as part of that, and if you're coming from a rural or remote area, it's the accommodation cost that is crippling on top of the other living expenses. Our question is how do you make more accommodation available at an affordable cost? There have been very significant advancements. There are now something like 10,000 beds in and around the University of Sydney provided by the university or provided by private providers. But you want to get the cost level right for students. That is where affordable housing recognition could help us meet that market need.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Professor McLaughlin, going back to the original question around regional and remote—you are obviously in Wollongong and not Sydney—how do you capture that market and provide opportunities for students?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** The university itself has multiple campuses across the region. About 40 per cent of our students come from equity backgrounds. We have campuses in Eurobodalla, the Bega Valley, Shoalhaven and Moss Vale. Those campuses are there to provide as much of the university's portfolio as we can provide in those areas. We also have a number of scholarships. Our one is called the Country to Coast Scholarship. It comes with guarantees of accommodation or access to accommodation that we actually have at Wollongong. We have also recently been able to obtain funding through the rural medical training program. For that, we have set up two additional rural medical schools for training. That came with sufficient funding, which we bid for, in order to provide more accommodation so that students can actually live locally to the campuses that they are in.

We obviously take great care of students who come from a whole range of backgrounds. We start that by having pathway programs right down in the schools that encourage them to come onto campus and undertake, prior to them beginning their studies, effectively small courses that they can use for credit. Those are actually usually done with their parents, particularly for younger students, so that they are safely transported onto the

campus. For students coming from far rural backgrounds and rural backgrounds, that is very important, particularly for First Nations students.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Last but not least, Professor Parfitt?

**ANDREW PARFITT:** UTS, unlike my colleagues here, has no regional campuses. We sit right in the middle of the city. In contrast, what we do have is the widest Greater Sydney region catchment of students of any university. To address the issues of participation and so forth, we have been widening our programs, specifically our engagement with schools and the like across the Sydney area. Our U@Uni program in particular has been able to be expanded out with the introduction of some new enabling places from the Commonwealth. We have got a small number. If the State can advocate for even more to provide those pathways, that would be a good outcome.

Probably our biggest contribution—just to take a slightly different tack from the others—is in the post-graduate and professional development area. Areas such as working with regional businesses and so forth around microcredentials and around expanding out professional learning and post-graduate study for career development and career transition—some of which is offered online, particularly leveraging the regional study hub network—provide opportunities for universities like UTS and our particular remit to make a contribution to development in regional areas. But, as I said, we have no assets in the region. So our reach is digital and engagement through schools and so forth.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** Professor Scott, you're talking about the housing, and I just wondered if anyone else wants to comment in relation—we've got the housing Minister coming before estimates on Friday, so it's quite timely—to your campuses. I know that it's been a challenge in the eastern suburbs for a little while, too. Happy if any of you three gentlemen wanted to talk about those challenges, if that's something you see, as well.

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** I'd certainly respond by amplifying the comments around affordability. Certainly, as we are currently right now planning expansion of student housing, we are very much planning and designing that around affordability because that's what our students really say to us—as Professor Scott has said, that the affordability of accommodation in Sydney is a significant issue. And so, unlike some of the design of the traditional commercial providers, we are working very hard around a low-cost model to try to assist students, both regional, rural and remote students, as well as international students—often who don't come from huge means—to be able to afford to live in Sydney. I suspect we all share the issues around food security. We certainly have a food bank at Macquarie University, certainly not as large as University of Western Sydney. But even in the affluent northern suburbs of Sydney students express these concerns. Affordability of a university education is a real issue, and accommodation is right up there as the major one.

**ATTILA BRUNGS:** Exactly as my colleague said—looking for the New South Wales State support, I suppose fast-tracking that around affordable housing, which is where Mark started off this conversation. We see lots of demand for affordable housing. We provide lots of scholarships. There's actually quite a lot of accommodation now going up around UNSW, which is great for students in general, but it's ones that we develop and we control, as it were, where we can look after the welfare of the students and we can really drive the prices down to make sure that they're very affordable. And that's the challenge that we have at the moment—is just getting them done fast enough that we can provide significant amount of really highly affordable accommodation, because the demand is quite strong.

I think George said it before. If you look at factors which prevent success from students of all backgrounds at university—are things like secure, affordable housing and food and other things, as well as all the academics which we put support around them, are absolutely critical in supporting them to succeed. The biggest worry I have is—there's always a drive around accessibility, which is great. Don't get me wrong. But, if you have accessibility without success, without providing that success support—I worry about that as well.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Professor Scott, if I could just come back to you—and thank you for the evidence that you gave about the extensive consultations between the university and the police. In estimates last time you told us that you had received notice in May about the presence of Hizb ut-Tahrir on campus and that that had been passed on to the security service to discuss with the police. I'm just confused because, in an answer to a question on notice put by my colleague the Hon. Chris Rath, the New South Wales police say that they never received any notification from the University of Sydney about the presence of Hizb ut-Tahrir on campus. So can you help me understand how this communication breakdown occurred?

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** Point of order: It's my memory of the evidence last time that the witness never confirmed the presence of that group on campus. And I think, if that's going to be put in a way that suggests that he did do that, it should be made clear that perhaps he didn't, because it was a long time ago.

**The CHAIR:** By "the witness", do you mean Professor Scott?

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** So perhaps if we could allow Professor Scott to confirm or deny.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** To the point of order: I've got a quote from the transcript, which says:

In early May, we received a phone call after a rally suggesting that Hizb ut-Tahrir may have been a presence on campus. This was referred to our security team that is in constant contact with the police.

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** Yes, and I think he came back to it and it was confirmed that it was never confirmed they were present, but perhaps he can answer, given that he's heard the exchange.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Perhaps I can reframe the question. You acknowledged that you had received communications that Hizb ut-Tahrir may be present on campus. You have told us about the extensive and ongoing communication between campus security and the police. The evidence said, "This was referred to our security team that is in constant contact with the police." But the police, apparently, according to the answer given to a question on notice, didn't ever receive any information from your security team that Hizb ut-Tahrir may be present on campus. I'm hoping you can explain this for us.

**MARK SCOTT:** No, I've really got nothing to add to what I said last time. Our security team were in touch with the police on a regular basis—constantly. We have records of phone conversations and other messages that went forth as well as more formal, structured meetings. We were assured by the police that they would keep us informed about any concerns they had, and no concerns were raised with us by the police or any other government agencies around Hizb ut-Tahrir at any point. I can only tell you what we did. I'm not sure about record keeping and where conversations went to at the other end, but I can simply affirm what I said to you in previous evidence.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** But you don't find it surprising that something that reported the possibility of Hizb ut-Tahrir on campus, passed on to the security service, wasn't passed through to the New South Wales police?

**MARK SCOTT:** No, what I am saying is that we were in constant discussion with the New South Wales police around security matters and evidence that we had heard constantly throughout the time of the encampment. The police gave undertakings to me that if they had concerns around the security on campus and groups on campus, they would let us know. We have canvassed this extensively and I have nothing further to add to my previous evidence.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Yet the police say that they never receive information about the possibility of Hizb ut-Tahrir on campus from the university.

**MARK SCOTT:** I think the question would be there are lots of lines of conversations with different groups. We had counterintelligence. I was in a briefing at one point with senior members of New South Wales police. There was engagement with local police. It's quite a broad engagement. I've nothing further to add to what is on the record.

**The CHAIR:** I'm going to turn to something totally different. I'm going to start with you, Professor Parfitt, because you've not, to my knowledge, answered any questions yet.

**The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL:** He got one from me.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, you did. I'm very interested—after this Committee's inquiry into the experiences of children with disability in the education system, there was a lot of talk about how people with disability have access to reasonable adjustments within the school system but then when they get to university, things aren't as clear. In your university—and I'll be asking all of you—do you have oversight of how those reasonable adjustments are provided? How does it work?

**ANDREW PARFITT:** Yes, we do. It works on an application process, obviously, and part of those adjustments are assessed by people with expertise in what's necessary. There's a plan put in place. That plan is communicated to the relevant areas and lecturers. It often involves adjustments for things like assessments and so forth, and it's systemised and tailored to the individual. So that process is there; it's made available to all students to apply for. It's handled on a semester-by-semester basis in relation to the nature of the study.

**The CHAIR:** So it's university wide?

**ANDREW PARFITT:** It's university wide.

**The CHAIR:** And not at the discretion of each teacher to—



**ANDREW PARFITT:** Indeed.

**The CHAIR:** Okay, that's good. Professor McLaughlin?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** Identical, practically. We have exactly the same: It's university wide, it's tailored to the individual student, it goes through an application process, and it's assessed and facilitated by a number of people who operate separately. There are people who sit within the schools and within the disciplines whose job it is also to keep abreast of the developments and to look after the students.

**The CHAIR:** For both of you, is there a complaints mechanism?

**EILEEN McLAUGHLIN:** There is a complaints mechanism, yes.

**The CHAIR:** And for you as well?

**ANDREW PARFITT:** Yes, correct.

**The CHAIR:** Professor Scott, we had a brief conversation about this last time.

**MARK SCOTT:** Yes, very similar. Students with disabilities are encouraged to register for academic support. Individual academic plans are developed with them. Reasonable adjustments are also put in place and all academic plans are communicated to academic and professional staff who are providing support for the student.

**The CHAIR:** Is there any monitoring to this complaints process? Is there any monitoring of how that goes?

**MARK SCOTT:** Yes, there will be a complaints process and a review process if requested by the students.

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** It's a very similar approach. Of course, it stems from an overriding legal obligation, which means that there needs to be consistency.

**The CHAIR:** I was hoping you would tell me that.

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Again, we have a similar set of processes to ensure it's not subject to individual discretion but is actually enlivening a right of the person, irrespective of what subject or program they're taking.

**The CHAIR:** Does your university have that governance structure in place to ensure that that is working well?

**GEORGE WILLIAMS:** Yes. For example, one of the things we're looking at at the moment is, where we are potentially seeing inconsistencies, why? It shouldn't be inconsistent. It enables us to pick that up. That's a warning sign, in fact, if we're not getting consistency, that we've got to go back and make sure that it's applied fairly across the board.

**The CHAIR:** We were hearing a lot of that in our inquiry from people saying it was applied inconsistently. Professor Dowton, is there anything different at your university or anything additional that you do?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** No, the same sort of systems are in place, being dealt with at a central agency level and not at the local level. We've undergone a review of our complaints procedures a couple of years ago and they were too complex. We've simplified those. A significant proportion of our students with disability have neurodiversity and so we've actually made specific spaces available, particularly in the library, for neurodiverse students to be able to have access. That's another example of a specific space at the request of students, no different than the one we referenced earlier, being provided for students. Otherwise, the same as my colleagues.

**ATTILA BRUNGS:** Similar to my colleagues, the only thing that I would say—and I'm sure my colleagues are the same—is that we have a disciplinary action plan to ensure that we support people for all aspects of university life. A lot of what you've been talking about is the academic but, if you remember, university life is beyond. There are lots of experiences at university to make sure you've got what I call a complete package of what a university experience is. There are lots of activities we do to make sure it's the full aspect, not just the academic ones that we were talking about.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Professor Scott, when you were here last time you detailed communications you had received from Jewish staff and students and you indicated in evidence that "some of the complaints were quite generalised and students were unhappy the encampment was there". Some 16 days later, you made an opening statement to the Senate inquiry into antisemitism at universities. You said, "The testimonials from students are heartbreaking and unacceptable. And for that, I am sorry." What happened in the 16 days that you moved from unhappy to heartbreaking?

**MARK SCOTT:** With respect, I think that's a curious question. There were, in the submissions to the Senate inquiry, hundreds of submissions that were made and testimonies of students. I read all of those

submissions. That anyone would testify that they did not feel welcome or part of our community was upsetting and of great concern to us. On that occasion, I apologised on my own behalf and on behalf of the university for the students and those experiences. But I think they were also the sentiments I was expressing here to you, framed in a different way and drawing particularly from the experience of the testimonies of those students by the hundreds, not just at the University of Sydney, of course, but universities all across Australia.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** Indeed, many of those testimonies had been contained in letters and emails and communications that had been sent to the University of Sydney. How many of the complaints from Jewish students and staff had you personally read before you testified at the estimates hearing here last year?

**MARK SCOTT:** I had read many of those, but I can't document that for you. What I could say to you, though, is that the evidence produced by the antisemitism envoy and the documentation of so many of those complaints online allowed me and other vice-chancellors who were testifying on that occasion to spend a weekend reading them all together. As I said at the time, it was very sobering to hear their testimony. That is why the University of Sydney clearly—and, as I've articulated to you, we have put in place significant changes to the operations of our university through the campus access policy. I'm delighted that complaints from students have dropped 80 to 90 per cent in second semester on the back of that campus access plan, which attempts to do something quite challenging: Respect academic freedom and freedom of speech whilst creating a safe and welcoming environment for all our students. I'm very pleased with the progress that we've made. That progress has been made in part through the testimony of the experience of students.

**The Hon. SUSAN CARTER:** I think you point to the nub of the issue, which is that it is very difficult to reconcile academic freedom and freedom of speech, and when there may need to be limits on academic freedom and freedom of speech. In that regard, I'm sure you're aware of the comments of Mr Justice French in his testimony to the joint standing committee on human rights, where he notes that:

Before considering the limits on freedom of speech and academic freedom, it's necessary to consider what is not within the scope of freedom of speech. If some expressive activity does not get to first base as part of the freedom ...

The example he gives is encampments. Would you treat an encampment differently now in light of Justice French's comments about what academic freedom has to be understood as?

**MARK SCOTT:** I read Justice French's testimony in full. I can tell you that the first step in our campus access policy and the first of the 15 recommendations of the Hodgkinson review was for us to determine that encampments would no longer be permissible at the University of Sydney. As I think I may have said to you last time, encampments were not a tactic that had been widely experienced across Australian universities. In 175 years, we hadn't had encampments at Sydney. Having been through that experience, with our campus access policy fully endorsed by the university senate, we have said that encampments are no longer a permissible form of protest at the university.

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** Professor Brungs, can you please tell us what UNSW is doing to increase the number of students from low SES and other under-represented groups enrolling in and succeeding at university?

**ATTILA BRUNGS:** As I said to the other honourable member, we've got a plan for about five key pillars to try to increase our access to—the target is 25 per cent low SES, regional, remote and Indigenous students at UNSW. We're a long way down the target.<sup>1</sup> I think this year we're hitting somewhere between 21 and 23, but I can give you the number on notice. The key to all those steps is not just to increase accessibility but to make sure all those students succeed, because we've got a very proud record at UNSW in that all of our students—and even those low-SES, regional, remote and Indigenous students—have essentially the same success rate and the same employability rate as all of our students, which is amongst the highest in the country. So it's not just about the access; it's about the success as well.

The whole part of that as well is that, from the university's perspective, it's not just about equity; it's about equity and excellence. If we enable all segments of society to access university education, both the university itself and society will be more excellent. Some of the things we're doing, for example, as you've heard from my other colleagues, is partnerships with schools. I'll take the number on notice, but we have in excess of 300 partnerships across the State and across the Greater Sydney area, where we go back into schools—back into year 11, 10, even 9—to make sure that we can both build capacity, appreciation and understanding of university so that the students have choice. From my perspective, it's choice. I'd love them to all come to UNSW, but I don't

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<sup>1</sup> In [correspondence](#) to the committee received 10 April 2025, the University of New South Wales, provided a clarification to their evidence.

care if they go to UNSW or any of my colleagues or they go to TAFE—whatever they wish their lives and aspirations to be. Part of all our outreach is to build aspiration and then build the confidence that they can go to those aspirations.

The second part of that is making sure we've got preparatory courses so that, again, everyone is prepared for the rigours of study at university. The third is, when they get there—particularly in first year—we have a whole lot of support services around them to make sure that they succeed, not just all the way through. We have found often that, if you nail first year, then students generally tend to go through the whole of university reasonably well. The fourth one is around a dramatic increase in scholarships. You've already heard testimony, I think, from all of us on the importance of scholarships for students. Then the last one is around housing affordability.

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** Secondly, for you, Professor Brungs, how can UNSW's research activities support New South Wales and national priorities?

**ATTILA BRUNGS:** Let me start with the New South Wales strategy. A couple of big things for the New South Wales State strategy at the moment is around looking at housing affordability, for example. UNSW has big research centres for over many years around what we call the Cities Institute, looking at how cities are done and also understanding how both the policy and the underpinning research that enables cities not just to be affordable, but they also have the infrastructure that enables you to develop and be liveable.

The second part that the UNSW does in terms of supporting anywhere is providing education. For example, the New South Wales State's priorities around affordability, local manufacturing, advanced manufacturing and health is providing a workforce into all of those areas with the skills that they need to do that, both undergraduate and postgraduate, but increasingly what we call lifelong learning skills. That is, the workforce of New South Wales right across all the sectors that the New South Wales Government is focusing on, how to make sure that their skills keep being upgraded because, as I'm sure you're aware, we have a lot of technological change, and there's a lot of change in all the key industries. It's how to make sure that everybody continues with their skills being relevant and, once again, driving productivity. If you look at productivity, that drives the key measure of, I suppose, prosperity for all Australians.

Maybe another one, if you think through the focus on zero emissions and a zero carbon economy, New South Wales university has a lot of work in removing carbon from—it's called decarbonisation of infrastructure. Plus, we do a lot of work in renewables. I'm sure you've been aware that about 90 per cent of solar cells around the world are all based on UNSW technology. That's batteries and so forth, and those are technologies. The last one is in the area of health. Again, of all the universities here, we provide both the health workforce, be they nurses or doctors or allied health. But also trying to work out what I think is one of the key questions, particularly for the State Government, given the focus on health—and the thing that worries me—is how do we make sure that health care is as affordable and as excellent today for our children as it is for us. If you think about the portion of health spend on all State budgets, that's something we really need to tackle to make sure that Australians get increasing excellence in health care but at what I call an affordable rate for the State.

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** Thanks, Professor. Going to Macquarie University, Professor Downton, can you please provide an update on the progress of the \$96 million RNA research and pilot manufacturing facility, which I understand is currently under construction at Macquarie University?

**S. BRUCE DOWTON:** Thank you very much for that question. As you indicate, the RNA pilot and test manufacturing facility is under active construction right now, a project being run by Health Infrastructure under the New South Wales chief scientist. The university has provided the land for that facility, and it is certainly on track, as far as I'm aware, and provides incredible potential to build a whole ecosystem, not only about the faster access to vaccines, for argument's sake, in the event of a further pandemic, but cancer treatments, and also the development of a new workforce in relevant STEM fields. It is ultimately about economic prosperity of building a whole new industry.

Macquarie University is fortunate to sit right beside the Macquarie Park Innovation District. I would say members probably realise that Macquarie University and the innovation district were created out of this Parliament just over 60 years ago as a maverick construct, never done in Australia before. Having the RNA facility on the university campus adjacent to a business park with 300 companies in there—and a number of them are biotechnology companies, and a number of them are major multinational pharmaceutical companies—provides an incredible additional puzzle piece to an ecosystem that is going to provide a lot for the State of New South Wales and for Australia.

**The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE:** Those are the Government questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Apologies for not realising you had some questions. That was foolish of me. I will now say that that is the end of our hearing. To the extent that there were questions taken on notice or there

are supplementary questions, which I know I have a few, the Committee secretariat will be in touch. That concludes our hearing for today. Thank you all very, very much.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**

**The Committee proceeded to deliberate.**