

Amended

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO. 5

**INQUIRY INTO MURRUMBIDGEE COLLEGE OF
AGRICULTURE**

At Yanco on Monday 21 June 2004

The Committee met at 10.00 a.m.

PRESENT

Mr I. Cohen (Chair)
The Hon. R. H. Colless
The Hon. C. J. S. Lynn
The Hon. I. W. West
The Hon. Tony Catanzariti
Ms Sylvia Hale

Mr IAN COHEN: I welcome everyone to today's hearing, the first of General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5's inquiry into the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture. The inquiry is examining the closure of residential training at Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture, which is of particular significance for the people of the Leeton and Yanco communities and district. That is why we are holding this hearing in Yanco today.

Today we will be hearing from a number of people representing the local community. The committee will be holding a second hearing on Monday 5 July at Parliament house. The witness schedule for that hearing should be available on the Committee web site soon. The transcript of today's evidence will be placed on the Committee's web site for public and media access, so anyone who misses something said today will be able to read the transcript on the web site. It will take up to two weeks before the transcript is available.

As with all parliamentary hearings, I need to remind any members of the media present that the usual broadcasting guidelines apply. Copies of this are available at the table, as are copies of the terms of reference for this inquiry. It is important that the media have regard to the provisions of not filming the public gallery during the hearing. You may see an officer of the Committee taking some photographs for the official committee record. However, for the rest of the audience, with the exception of the media, I need to let you know that you are not permitted to take photographs during the hearing.

I emphasise that although this is a public hearing, it is not an open forum for comment from the floor. While the Committee welcomes members of the public here today, the purpose of the hearing is to have the Committee hear evidence on oath from the people appearing as witnesses. Members of the public are asked to give the Committee's selected witnesses the opportunity to present their evidence without interruption. Only the questions from the Committee and the evidence of the witnesses are recorded on the transcript. Also, you cannot directly approach Committee members or witnesses during the hearing. Evidence given to the Committee today by witnesses is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that witnesses are given broad protection from any action arising as a result of what they say, and that Parliament has the power to protect them from any action that disadvantages them on account of the evidence given before the Committee. I also remind you that the giving of false or misleading evidence before the Committee may constitute a contempt of Parliament. The Committee prefers to conduct its hearings in public. However, the Committee can decide to hear certain evidence in private if there is a need to do so. If such a need arises, I will ask the public and media to leave the room for a short period.

Finally, I ask all people in the room to turn off their mobile phones as they interfere with the equipment used to record the evidence. I now welcome our first witnesses, who are ex-students of Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture who, I understand, have been personally affected by the decision to close residential training at the college.

DANIEL IAN SLENNETT, student, Stratford, Condobolin, New South Wales, and

CLAIRE DOROTY BUTLER, student, Post Office Box 2, Weethalle, sworn and examined:

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

Mr SLENNETT: Yes.

Ms BUTLER: Yes, I guess so.

CHAIR: If you should consider at any stage that certain evidence you wish to give or documents you may wish to tender should be heard or seen only by the Committee, please indicate that fact and the Committee will consider your request. Before members of the Committee ask you questions, if either or both of you have a short statement to make that is relevant to the investigation, please feel free to go ahead.

Mr SLENNETT: I thank you for the opportunity to submit to this inquiry. I was directly affected by the closure of Murrumbidgee Agricultural College as I was a full-time student doing certificate 3 and 4. I left my boarding school in year 10 in Sydney only to do two years at Murrumbidgee. It had the course that suited me for the position I was in as it was close to home and it had the course outlines I was interested in. Having checked out other places, it was the only one that suited me. I came here expecting to do two years but unfortunately it was cut short. The closure of Murrumbidgee Agricultural College has caused me be trouble as I had to find another place to go, another college, and it affects my family as well. I found another college up in Queensland which is 10½ hours a way from home. It costs quite a bit to get up there whether I go by bus or travel up personally, with the accommodation. I close by thanking you very much again for having me and for having this inquiry and trying to keep Murrumbidgee open.

CHAIR: Ms Butler?

Ms BUTLER: I thank you for giving us this chance to speak. It is not us ex-students who will be affected; it is the students who are coming up and who want to do agriculture. Where are they going to go?

CHAIR: Thank you. Before I ask other members to commence questions, could you describe to the Committee from your perspective the differences or the special courses that are offered at this particular site for the work that you intend to do?

Mr SLENNETT: As I said, I am up in Queensland. It is a different climate and a different place to be. Yanco has the same average annual rainfall and it offers the courses I want. Dalby was the closest college I could find to home. It is ten and a half hours drive from home, but it offers almost the equivalent courses. Even though I am up there, I am still appealing and getting credit transfers for subjects that I have already done at Yanco. The boarding life is okay, but the food is not crash hot.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Some things never change.

Mr SLENNETT: I have met a lot of great fellows, but it does not feel like home. Yanco is close to home and it is the right place for me to be. Everyone else from this area would agree with that. It is one of a kind and it offers what we want in this area.

CHAIR: What do you mean by "one of a kind"?

Mr SLENNETT: Yanco offers the course outline and structure we need.

CHAIR: Why is this institution of value to people who need residential status?

Mr SLENNETT: Not many people will travel ten and a half hours to go to an agricultural college. This college is in great surroundings and it has great people. We had great lecturers and they have lost their jobs. The course was one of a kind and offered what we need to know. This is flat

country and there is room for irrigation. We can run stock and have irrigation crops. Tocal is a good place. I looked into it, but I decided that Yanco was the right place for me.

CHAIR: I understand that you gave up a position at boarding school to come here. You had to move from here and you are now unable to access the boarding school.

Mr SLENNETT: I left the Kings School in Sydney in year 10 in 2002 because I wanted to pursue a career in agriculture. We looked at different colleges in New South Wales, and even in Queensland, and that found Yanco was the right one. I could go back to the school but I do not need the HSC.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Can you describe the courses you were doing here at Yanco, the courses you are required to do at Dalby and how they differ? Will what you are learning at Dalby be applicable when you go back to the farm at Condoblin?

Mr SLENNETT: Yanco offered two TAFE courses. I could do welding and wool classing, and I did both.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I meant when you were at MCA. What courses were you doing here, what courses are you doing at Dalby and how do they differ?

Mr SLENNETT: Down here we were doing courses on chainsaws and diesel engines, electives, stockmanship and so on. At Dalby there are RPL courses, but I did them last year. They are doing them in the certificate IV course. They are similar. I can relate them to what I do at home. They offer knowledge that I can take home, such as courses on diesel engines, maintenance, stockmanship and so on. I did welding and TAFE courses here last year that they have in the course outline up there. In other words, I am wasting some time because I have already done it here.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: When you were here did you do any training in crop management, tractor operation, time of sowing and so on? Was that going to be in your second year?

Mr SLENNETT: Certificate III had an outline of what we would do in the second year. We could do pastoral property management. You go up to Katherine for two months and work on a station or do an agriculture course in which you sow your own crop, spray, fertilise, harvest—that is, everything from start to finish. We do harvesting, planting, sowing and spraying at Dalby. I got a massive dose of anhydrous ammonia, which is nasty stuff. We are doing there what we have done here already. It is not the same outline, but we have done that stuff already.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Are the crop management techniques learnt here and those learnt in Dalby the same sort of procedures or are they different?

Mr SLENNETT: We call it sowing down here and they call it planting. I am always being corrected. They have different terminology. There are different areas and it is a different State. I have lived two and a half hours from here, whereas at Dalby I am ten and a half hours away. They sow and harvest at different times.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What crops are grown here and on your farm compared to up there?

Mr SLENNETT: They grow wheat, barley, cotton, sorghum and sunflowers.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: A lot of summer crops.

Mr SLENNETT: Yes. We can do that at home.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Do you do much summer cropping on your home farm?

Mr SLENNETT: We do a bit.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Is it more opportunity cropping than planned rotation?

Mr SLENNETT: My father passed away a couple of years ago. The only way I can pursue my career in agriculture is by going to an agricultural college. We have people leasing the place and they have put in tritecale, oats, barley and wheat. They tried mung beans, but they failed. They went pretty well with sorghum. We have crop rotations and we give paddocks a rest. They sow perennial grasses to replace the nutrients in the soil. They have stock as well.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: How did you feel when it was announced that MCA intended to close its residential facilities? It must have come as a surprise given that you were nine months into a two-year course?

Mr SLENNETT: Yes. I was out at Darlington Point at Cooper Station doing work experience at the time with a co-student, Bradley Arnold. I was working out there, we were talking and we just decided to call the college to see what was happening down here. We got the news saying that the college was shutting down and it was probably an hour something later from Darlington Point, I am not too sure, and we were sitting there thinking, "Oh dear, what are we going to do next year?" At the time we came here, we enrolled in a two-year course. We had the expectation or we were looking forward to doing a two-year course here, and instead of that we got cut short and we were doing a year or 12 months. That is how it was.

CHAIR: Just on that point, is the course still available for day students? Is there any alternative accommodation, or any way that you could have managed to complete here, if that availability remained for day-student activity?

Mr SLENNETT: Here at Yanco?

CHAIR: Yes.

Mr SLENNETT: Yes. They cater for day students. There is a girl from Narrandera and she was here. She is with me at Dalby now. She was probably the only day student. There were other people who lived off college. I am pretty sure they came here for a couple of months and were full-time residential students and then they moved off. They do allow that. In Dalby, they do the same thing, too, except that there are more people who are living off college than there are day students.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: So it is fair to say that the full-time courses have been cancelled, have they not? There is no full-time residential day course here now?

Mr SLENNETT: There is no full-time residential—you cannot stay here at all.

CHAIR: But in terms of full-time day courses, to actually get the equivalent education opportunity by way of a day course, is that still a possibility here?

Mr SLENNETT: They still do it. They still run short courses. I turned up before and saw a whole bunch of fellows pile out of a ute who are obviously here on short courses, but then again when I was up here for a certificate day a couple of months ago there were course outlines of what you can do in short courses. Some of them go up to \$500 whereas a full year here was probably about \$9,500 where you get catering, food, accommodation and plus you learn in a good atmosphere with good people. But, yes, they are open to short courses.

CHAIR: Can those people still get their certificates III and IV here now?

Mr SLENNETT: Probably. I am pretty sure they could do it, yes, but I am not too sure. But then again they have to go through the hassles of trying to find places to stay because they cannot stay here. They have to book a motel or stay at the pub or something.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Even for the short courses?

Mr SLENNETT: Even for the short courses, yes. They have to find accommodation in town or live with someone else.

CHAIR: If you are not sure, perhaps we can go onto something else.

Mr SLENNETT: I am not too sure whether they can still get certificates for short courses. They can do it through TAFE. They can get certificates III and IV through TAFE, but as I said, they have to find accommodation if they are going to do short courses here. They cannot stay at the college and they have to pay for their own food.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I direct this question to both of you. Did you find it surprising that there was no consultation either with you as students or with your parents or with the community generally prior to the announcement being made?

Ms BUTLER: Yes. There was just nothing.

Mr SLENNETT: It just came out of the blue.

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

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What are you going to do? I see from your submission that you are doing TAFE at West Wyalong.

Ms BUTLER: I want to be an agronomist, so I am trying to get a traineeship with Elders or something as an agronomist.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Is that a reality, do you think, to be able to get a traineeship position where you can work as an agronomist in that training role? Do they have those sorts of jobs available?

Ms BUTLER: Yes, they do, but it is just, like, getting it, and because of the past year, it is going to be pretty tough. Yes, it is starting to be pretty tough on them and me because I was going to go over to the Wagga university after I finished my two-year course, but I cannot do that now.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: So you could do your two-year course here and that would give you entrance into the Wagga course?

Ms BUTLER: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: But that is not an option now for you?

Ms BUTLER: No.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Can you do a similar course at TAFE which will get you that entrance into the Charles Sturt University [CSU]?

Ms BUTLER: I was going to do my higher school certificate [HSC] through TAFE and do agriculture, but they have pulled that out too, so I could not do that either.

CHAIR: When you say that they pulled on that out too, there is no TAFE facility?

Ms BUTLER: No. They were not taking any first-year agriculture students for HSC any more, so that just pulled that one, too. There was sort of nothing else really to do, so I am studying business studies—like, business administration at TAFE here—to get me into Elders.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Ms Butler, how many of your fellow students were there who were doing the same sorts of courses that you were doing?

Ms BUTLER: None.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: But there were 39 people who enrolled on a residential basis.

Ms BUTLER: Yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: What has happened to most of those people? Do you know what impact it has had on their future careers?

Ms BUTLER: Yes. I have a friend over the mountains and she is going to TAFE too, but she is doing a diploma. She still has to travel to Goulburn from out near Newbelle. She still has to travel to go to TAFE every week and it is hard on her, but at least when she was down here, she had people around her she knew and all of that. But down there, she still does not know what she is going to do next year. It is hard on her to lose all her friends and that.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: You do two hours a day to the college, do you? Is it two hours one way and two hours the other?

Ms BUTLER: No, it is one hour going in and one hour coming back, and it is a pretty long day.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: How do you do that? Do you drive your own vehicle?

Ms BUTLER: No, I travel in on the bus, but it is still a very long day.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: What impact has this had on your family environment?

Mr SLENNETT: I had to find another college to go to. I was too young to work. I do not have a vehicle so I could not travel to wherever I was going to go. I am 10½ hours away from home. I can only get home on the holidays and it puts quite a few miles on the car and it does get quite expensive to travel up there, taking into account the fuel costs and public transport and accommodation if I am driving up.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: So how do you get there?

Mr SLENNETT: I usually go up in the bus. I flew down for these holidays to attend a year 12 reunion in Moss Vale for Tudor House. I flew down to there and my mother and sister drove from Condobolin to Tudor House and then we went to Wagga last night and then over here today.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Would most of the students who started the course have had their driver's licence, or would they have been too young?

Mr SLENNETT: No. I have a driver's licence but I do not have a car to drive. A few fellows came here who had their licence. A few fellows who were 19 or 20 had their licence and they had their own vehicle and they were coming here, so we could always get into town for football training and all over the place if we needed to. There are six others who went to Murrumbidgee but who are now up at Dalby with me, and the rest of them have got jobs contracting or something or are just travelling around with people who have got a vehicle, hitchhiking.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: So doing that sort of work means that their formal education, as it were, has come to a halt?

Mr SLENNETT: Yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: And they are just getting jobs wherever they can?

Mr SLENNETT: Yes. I am pretty sure that most of them had expectations to do a two-year course here and then halfway through last year we found out that the college was shutting down and most of the fellows said that they did not know what they were going to do. There was a big frantic rush to run around and try to get into another college if you wanted to go, or to find work.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: Is there a message that you would like us to pass back to the Minister, such as what you would say to him if he were here, or is there a question?

Mr SLENNETT: "Why?" The college heard rumours that the college would shut down because of a lack of funds or interest. They were the only two things we heard. We are not too sure why he shut it down and I just want to know why he did, why he decided to shut it down. It was a good course and a great place to be. I think most of us pretty much enjoyed it.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: What was the reason that you did not go to Tocal?

Mr SLENNETT: We looked into Tocal and decided that it was not the place to be. It has a 40-inch rainfall average, I think, and at home it is 17, so there is a big difference. Down in Maitland, it is quite hilly country. Where we live at home, it is flat. We have irrigation and we want to do crops with flood irrigation and I am pretty sure that they could not cater for it. I am not having a go at Tocal but it is all hilly. They have got chickens, horses, dairy and I think they have half an acre or something dedicated to cropping. I am not too keen on chickens and dairy and stuff but we have crops and stock at home with, as I said, flood irrigation, and that is the reason I chose Yanco. It offered what I wanted.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Are you aware that Tocal offers scholarships as far as travel is concerned?

Mr SLENNETT: I was told last night by my mother that if we enrolled there after Yanco shut down, they would send us to places where we could do irrigation and work, yes.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: The consultation back in 2000, were you aware that there was consultation with the advisory council and with the parents about the declining numbers?

Mr SLENNETT: In 2000?

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Yes.

Mr SLENNETT: No, I was not aware of that at all. I was in year 8 then.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Did you hear that there was consultation?

Mr SLENNETT: No. This is the first time.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: But you are aware that there is now an increase?

Mr SLENNETT: Yes, I am aware now, yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: You talked about short courses. They are predominantly one or two-day courses?

Mr SLENNETT: Yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: They would not give you the depth of tuition that you might have received if you were here on a full-time basis?

Mr SLENNETT: No. Here on a full-time basis I am pretty sure you get more out of it for your money than you would in short-time courses. You are here and they were lecturers who actually lived on the college and you could go and see them if you had any troubles.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: I suppose in short courses, they are fractured and spread over a period rather than being intensive?

Mr SLENNETT: Yes. There were fellows who came here last year doing trainee courses once a month for a week. They would come here and they went to a week of chainsaws, fire brigade, motorbikes, stockmanship or whatever they were enrolled in. Short-time courses here today, I am not too sure whether they were to come here once a month and do it for a week. As full-time students, you do it throughout the year until a holiday or a long weekend or something.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Presumably, if they were going to do a course that was a week long, they would need some accommodation to be provided, but that was no longer provided?

Mr SLENNETT: That is not provided, no. You have to find your own accommodation in town, or sleep on a bench or something.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Is the college well provided with public transport?

Mr SLENNETT: When we were here, we had two duty officers who would driver us into town whenever we wanted. We would just give them a call and they were run us in, whether we needed to go into town to do some shopping or whether we were crook or we had an injury from footy. For anything that we needed, they would run us into town. They would pick us up from town or they would drop us in and they would come back here and then we would give them another call and they would come and pick us up. They would run you in whenever you wanted to go in.

CHAIR: I understand that there is a concept or a belief that the Murrumbidgee Agricultural College [MAC] is mindful of the age factor. Can you describe to the Committee what you mean—you have spoken about being given adequate transport and such like—by other issues that indicate that this institution was supportive of students, particularly of those who were under 18 and who did not have transport as well as generally supportive in terms of other support systems that you found you had here?

Mr SLENNETT: The students who did have a vehicle and had their licence, they would run us into town for football training, to the Bachelors and Spinsters Balls, to rodeos, ute shows and races, pretty much anywhere throughout the Yanco-Leeton district. We would see if we could get a lift with one of the fellows who had a vehicle.

CHAIR: What about the institution itself? How did it look after its students?

Mr SLENNETT: They gave us a place to sleep. We did not have to go into town to find accommodation. The duty officers would run us into town if we did not have a vehicle. Even if we did, they would still run us in. If we did not have a licence, we were still able to drive college vehicles, I think—I am pretty sure we were. They did accommodate us and enable us to get around the college.

CHAIR: What about medical support and such like, given that you were in residence here?

Mr SLENNETT: If we lived on college we could still drive college vehicles. If we lived off college, we could still drive college vehicles. I think that is only if you had a licence.

CHAIR: I am just asking about medical support, other types of support that you got if you were in residence here?

Mr SLENNETT: If you were in full-time residence, if you lived in college here in the dorms, and we were mucking around and dislocated your shoulder or something, they would run him into hospital. If you were crook, if you woke up at whatever time of the night, 11 o'clock or something—I think they knocked off at 12—saying you had a real bad gut ache and you were throwing up and all that stuff, they would run you in to the hospital.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: If you were having difficulty with any of the courses, would you be able to get help out of hours, as it were?

Mr SLENNETT: Yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Ms Butler, how many women were doing the course who were residential students?

Ms BUTLER: About eight—eight or nine.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Did you find they were supportive of the women who were here?

Ms BUTLER: Yes. We were pretty close, we all had to live together.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: And the staff were?

Ms BUTLER: Yes, they were helpful and everything. They were never biased because we were girls or anything. We were always given the chances that the boys were given.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: When did you start here, what year was it?

Mr SLENNETT: Last year, 2003.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: When you were at the classes, did you ever talk to the other students with regard to the decline in numbers here?

Mr SLENNETT: No. We had no thought. We thought it was a small amount of people here. We had no suspicion of why there were so little people.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: So you have no reason as to why students were not coming?

Mr SLENNETT: No.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: No thoughts?

Mr SLENNETT: We had no thoughts. We did not really raise an eye to it. After we heard the college was shutting down we thought—our year was probably the biggest year in the past 10 years or something and the next year—this year, if the college was open this year—it probably would have doubled pretty much what our year was last year. We were going to get more people.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Why you say that?

Mr SLENNETT: That is just what we heard. We heard that the enrolments for this year were going to be larger than last year.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Do you know of other students who would have been here this year?

Mr SLENNETT: When I came here, the people at Condobolin came up and asked what Yanco was like, should I send my son or my daughter there? I encouraged them to send them here. I had a good time.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Do you know of any who expressed their interest in writing, or who made contact with the lecturers or the principal here?

Mr SLENNETT: No. When the college shut down my mother wrote a letter to the *Land*—the letter of the week.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: No, I mean other students who showed their interest, who wanted to attend the school here.

Mr SLENNETT: I do not think so.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Ms Butler, can I ask you to elaborate on the last paragraph of your submission where you indicated that you decided if the college reopened that you would not be back?

Ms BUTLER: Yes. It is too late for me to come back now. I have been a year out of agriculture already, and that is going to affect me. But I want it to be open for people out there who want to do agriculture. They do not want to go to Tocal because they do not have Broadacre cropping up there. We do. It is just not fair for them.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: There were 39 students in your year, is that correct? So, six have gone to Dalby, one to Tocal, and the others have opted out altogether of their education?

Ms BUTLER: Yes. A couple have gone to TAFE and that, but most of them have found jobs. They were lucky enough to find jobs.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: So a couple have transferred to the TAFE system, but the rest basically have got jobs or are still looking for jobs?

Ms BUTLER: Yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: That would be 10 out of the 39 that went on with their education in some respect?

Mr SLENNETT: Yes.

Ms BUTLER: Yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: So, 75 per cent of those people have been deprived of the opportunity to continue with their education?

Mr SLENNETT: Yes.

(The witnesses withdrew)

DINO ZAPPACOSTA, Winemaker and Acting Mayor, Griffith City Council, Farm 132 Hanwood, sworn and examined, and

ANDREW HEREWARD CRAKATHORP, Assistant General Manager, Griffith City Council, 67 Nelson Drive, Griffith, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: You are conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: Yes, I am.

Mr CRAKANTHORP: I am.

CHAIR: If either of you should consider at any stage that certain evidence you wish to give or documents you might wish to tender should be heard or seen only by the Committee, please indicate that fact and the Committee will consider your request. If you would like to commence by making a should statement before you receive questions from the Committee?

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: It gives me great pleasure on behalf of the people of Griffith and the Griffith City Council to address this very important hearing. Griffith is a vibrant city. It is very close to Yanco. Griffith has a population of some 24,000 people. It is a regional city and it has regional responsibilities as well as providing many regional facilities. Griffith has an annual gross farm value output of just over half a million dollars a year, and that figure is growing almost every minute. We have a very big multicultural-base population. Because of its ethnic composition, certain demands are placed on the city and certain demands—that I will elaborate on in a moment and bring forward for your information—on how we see this college.

The city has a number of industries and there is not one industry that is failing at the moment. They are all quite prosperous and all doing exceptionally well. The people of Griffith have supported this college in the past and from my indication—the people I have spoken to and from indications to the council—they want to continue supporting the MCA. I have been to many graduations here of students and have been thoroughly impressed with the standard and level of output from the college. I am also conscious that there are many very successful business people in the Griffith area who have served on the board of this college, some even being chairpersons of the board. So, whilst this college is not in the Griffith City Council area it is very dear to the people of Griffith and we certainly do not want to see the demise or particularly the downgrading of the college, whatever.

I referred earlier to our ethnic population. There is a culture amongst a lot of the Italian people and the Indian people, who are the predominant ethnic groups who are in properties in the Griffith area—and I will say the Australians as well—where you want to retain your sons and daughters as close as you possibly can to your own home, to your own business. It is even more so with the Indian and the Italian populations in that mum and dad can have their son or daughter trained, educated, locally, They will do so and will go to every expense needed. I am aware of a few cases where sons and daughters have not been allowed to leave the area, not even to go to Wagga Wagga, for further education for it is almost a must for all these families, it is a cultural habit that they have, that they do not want to lose their young sons or daughters for fear that they may not come back. Yanco has been what they regard as the ideal position for them. It is just up the road and they would see their sons and daughters regularly.

We have a culture at the moment with irrigation that we have to conserve and preserve as much water as we can. We have more pressure on the farmer than a townsperson has regarding the use of town water. With the conservation and efficient use of water, there has been a conscious effort to go into drip irrigation or water-saving devices. Murrumbidgee Irrigation is spending up to \$80-odd million in piping the irrigation system, encouraging farmers to go into water-saving methods such as drip irrigation. All of this requires a lot of training and education of the young people who want to go on to the land. One of our strongest submissions to the hearing today is that we want you to keep in mind where else can young farmers go to learn the latest information on irrigation practices? Tocal seems to be an area that we feel cannot supply this sort of information. We are in the middle of an irrigation system and we certainly want to retain this particular facility, which was basically set up because of irrigation.

With the pressures from Murrumbidgee Irrigation to be more careful with our water, farmers have to know more about the technical advances in drip irrigation, and where better to send your sons and daughters than to the college nearby and keep them at home in the long term. Apart from that, Griffith has traditionally been a city that has grown with a huge family set up. Some of our biggest companies are companies set up by family processes as family companies. We want to encourage the family businesses to prosper. We want to encourage families to try to give their sons and daughters jobs in the area. We will do everything possible to retain a culture here that it is quite okay to live in the country.

The Riverina college campus of TAFE and the CSU recently started a Bachelor of Business course in Griffith, and this has been oversubscribed, and they will be looking at an extension of this course. To me, this indicates there is a great desire for further education locally. If CSU can come into Griffith and put up a course and it is taken up, what does that say regarding the services here in Yanco? I feel, and the council feels, that if the MCA continues to operate, continues to have nothing but the best teachers—and we all know what happens if you do not provide the best teachers, the services start to get downgraded—and continues to do what this college has done in the past, there will be huge support from the Griffith people. We are fundamentally very selfish. We love being here in the country. We love the Griffith area. We want the MCA. We want Leeton to prosper, and the people of Griffith will do everything they can to assist and support the Leeton council and this MCA to stay where it is.

CHAIR: Was Griffith City Council consulted about the closure?

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: Not at all.

CHAIR: There were no meetings, mentions or warnings?

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: No.

CHAIR: Mr Crakanthorp, you mentioned the Government's five-point plan for the Riverina in your submission. Can you explain what that was, when it was made public and how this decision runs contrary to that plan?

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: I was present when the five-point plan was presented to council by the State Government. Our mayor at the time was given the plan by a representative of the Premier. We were anxious. The Premier had only just come into office and he was keen for Griffith to progress. We had a number of problems with attracting labour, subdivision rezoning, transport and so on. One way of overcoming them was through the Department of State and Regional Development and the Premier's Department coming up with a proposal whereby the State Government could assist Griffith in moving on and certainly progressing. The plan covered areas such as the critical housing issue, infrastructure, transport—

CHAIR: What particular housing issue?

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: Griffith had, and still has, a critical shortage of housing—sustainable housing, low-income housing—to attract all types of people, from professionals right through to skilled and semi-skilled workers. There was a huge demand from the labour force and we were not able to keep up the supply of houses. We needed State Government assistance. The Department of Lands was releasing 20 blocks a year until that time. That was not enough to cater for the huge demand. We urged the Government to come up with a long-term plan to release many more blocks. The Government owns all the crown land in the Griffith area and the council could not open it up for housing development. The State Government was releasing it in bits and pieces. The plan included the opening of a greater parcel of land. That encouraged council to rezone its land to attract private developers. They were three of the areas covered by the plan. It was an economic development plan.

Mr CRAKANTHROP: That was prior to my employment with the council. However, the Western Riverina Living Centres Program, which was a three-year funded State Government initiative, in its latter days produced plans to address regional housing and transport issues. In terms of relevance to this inquiry, the point the council would like to make is the critical need for infrastructure, in particular education infrastructure, to provide a balanced lifestyle for people to

relocate to Griffith and for their children to have educational opportunities in the region. That is part of the overall growth need of what we term the Western Riverina. The Riverina Regional Organisation of Councils supports the points the council made in its correspondence to the committee.

CHAIR: In the council's submission mention is made of a 1998 undertaking by Premier Carr that socioeconomic impact studies would be carried out if State services were to be relocated from regional areas of New South Wales. Has that commitment been adhered to, both on this or any other issue? What level of consultation has occurred in terms of those socioeconomic impact studies?

Mr CRAKANTHORP: The short answer to that is that, no, the Griffith City Council is not aware of any consultation, as you alluded to earlier, that occurred prior to the announcement regarding this facility and certainly in regard to socioeconomic impact studies. Unfortunately, as one who has lived in the western Riverina region for some time now, it would appear that, across the State, there has been little regard paid by the State Government to these proposals for consultation and socioeconomic impact studies. All too often we see that the decisions are made and previous commitments to such processes are simply overlooked, and it is very disappointing.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Councillor Zappacosta, are you aware that the college has not closed?

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: Quite frankly, I am aware that the college is still open but it is intended to be closed towards the end of the year.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: No.

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: It is not? Okay, so there are mixed messages going out.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Are you also aware that there is a working party which is at the moment investigating the possibility of a long-term sustainable future for the college?

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: Yes, I am aware of that, and I am certainly very interested in that working party and what is a possible alternative for the site, sure. Of course, the council itself would love to have some input into that and to put in some ideas of what we think should go into the site.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: There has been a review that has taken place in the past with regard to the investigation into the college and other Department of Agriculture facilities to see what is sustainable and what is not.

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: Yes.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Had you been notified by anybody such as the advisory council of this college or the principals or anybody about the declining numbers?

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: No. That was a surprise, but it does not surprise me that there has been a decline in numbers. We have been through an awful drought and we are still going through a drought. Hopefully it will end this winter. But with the drought, I am involved also with a State body known as the Riverina Regional Communities Consultative Council. We go around the countryside and we are conscious and aware of the impact that the drought has had on the communities in the country and the possible effect and impact that that has had on the enrolment at the college here. I am not aware that there has been a decline in numbers—not officially as a council. I have heard down the line through the grapevine that there has been a decline in numbers, but I do not think that information has really been coming through publicly.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: I direct the same question to Mr Crakanthorp. In 1993 the college had 86 students. In 2003, there were 39. Are you aware of that? If so, what would you put that down to?

Mr CRAKANTHORP: I was not aware of those statistics. However, I share the concern. I suppose the key point I would like to express would be the lack of communication perhaps between State bodies that are administering this facility and local government. That has been poor in the past,

although it is improving. The Griffith City Council certainly to my knowledge was not aware of the decline in numbers at that point. In terms of suggesting why there has been that decline, it would depend certainly on people like the previous person who made submissions on where they see the college. There would be a multitude of reasons.

I would perhaps like to suggest, though, that the outcome from this process should be a stronger partnership between local government, State and the Department of State and Regional Development, and the State Governments could bolster interest in courses offered by this facility, whether they are residential or non-residential courses. As Councillor Zappacosta has said, a lot of the growth that is occurring within the region is from money and families that have a strong association with the western Riverina. If there was the opportunity for the community and businesses to support ongoing initiatives that would enhance this facility on behalf of anyone in the State who wants to attend to learn irrigated agriculture or simply agriculture, this is a fantastic facility to continue to be used.

I would also like to suggest, though, that given the recent interest in the Bachelor of Business course being offered through the Riverina Institute of TAFE, the increasing growth rates that we are seeing in the Griffith local government area [LGA], which is approximately 550 babies a year, and the increased investment that is coming into the western Riverina primarily in Leeton and Griffith, the opportunities to have places like this need to be there. We could quite easily reverse the declining trend that with a bit of marketing and getting councils in particular on board to promote courses that are available through this facility, I reckon it would not take long at all to turn it around and have your enrolments turning upwards within 12 to 18 months.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: You are on the Riverina Regional Development Board?

Mr CRAKANTHORP: I am currently a member of the Riverina Area Consultative Committee—a Federal Government body that hands out regional partnership funding, among its other functions.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: The mayor is the chairman of that regional development board?

Mr CRAKANTHORP: That is correct.

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: Yes, that is right.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Did you have any knowledge of any discussions about the Murrumbidgee Agricultural College in regard to the review about declining numbers? Has there been any consultation between the advisory council of the college and the regional board?

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: To the best of my knowledge, no; not to my knowledge at all.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Are you surprised that the advisory council has not taken the opportunity to discuss this with the Riverina Regional Development Board?

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What about the Minister? Why did he not discuss it?

CHAIR: Questions should be asked one at a time.

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: As Mr Crakanthorp said, we in local government like to think that we are kept abreast of information on developments. We are certainly not pleased that things have happened without us knowing about them. When you talk about sustainability, as a council we spend millions on infrastructure for the benefit of people who want to come to a country town. If the Minister says that keeping this place open costs \$1 million a year, we spend more than that keeping our regional theatre and our library open in one year. But what is it open for? It is open so that people who want to come to the MCA can come on the weekend and get their cultural activity up the road, so that there is an attraction for them.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: With due respect, was there a consulting process?

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: None at all.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: The Griffith City Council knew that, whether it came from the advisory council or through the Riverina Regional Development Board or through the college itself.

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: The first we heard about it was in the media. It was a lovely way to hear about some problems in the area—to read about it.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Reference was made earlier to the importance of drip irrigation. Is it possible for Riverina TAFE to provide those courses? What are the alternatives available to people who need that technical knowledge?

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: It is possible to learn snippets, even to have adult learning short courses and to learn a little. TAFE could do a little. However, it is not the same if you are doing it as a full-time course and as part and parcel of a planned development. You do not learn about drip irrigation for the sake of saving water; there is more to it. There is soil composition, environmental impact and many other aspects. I am in the process of trying to introduce drip irrigation on my property. It has taken a lot of my time coming to terms with the whole issue. It can be done, but it is very difficult.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Is it an expensive operation?

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: It is hugely expensive. It is a commitment you do not make lightly. For a 50-acre parcel of land you are looking at \$130,000.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: You would need in-depth knowledge that a short course could not give you.

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: A bank manager would say, "Get out of here, you haven't done your homework." A \$100,000 loan on a property worth even \$1 million is a huge investment for a short-term small return.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: The residential facilities have been closed and no full-time residential courses are being offered. The brochure outlining the short courses held from February to July 2004 refers to grapevine pruning induction being offered at Griffith, Wagga Wagga, Gundagai, Tumbarumba, Young, Orange, Mudgee, Berry and Tenterfield. It was clear to me that when the Minister said the college would not close that the writing was on the wall and that it would close eventually. It could not survive given the current operations. If the Department of Agriculture or the Government does close the MCA as we know it, do you believe that TAFE should take it over and maintain it as a specialist agricultural college? Do you think it can survive as a specialist agricultural college?

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: If it does close and the next best thing is for TAFE to take over, I would have to support that. Mr Catanzariti mentioned a body looking into the future use of the facility. Is it sustainable? Can TAFE carry on the courses? It is a matter of how much education we can put through the TAFE system as compared to a tertiary system. Being tertiary trained, I think it is more important to look at the tertiary level rather than the TAFE level, with all due respect to TAFE. There must be more academic input into any course. It is vital to have the tertiary connection.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Agricultural education in New South Wales is not particularly well supported. Do you see that as a problem? About 25 or 30 years ago there were five or six agricultural colleges in this State. Now that this one is essentially closed in the sense of providing residential facilities, there is only one college in New South Wales, and that is Tocal. Do you believe there is a lack of commitment to agricultural education?

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: It is a chicken and egg situation. If you reduce the service, you reduce the number of customers. If you reduce the stock in a retail store you reduce your income. I am fundamentally against closing something because of economic rationalist theories. There are long-

term benefits and this place has them. When we drive up the driveway we see the splendid vision of yesteryear when people thought to plant palm trees. That is beautiful today. We are not investing in the future. As far as we are concerned, Tocal does not exist. How can we get there? Can we fly into Tocal like we can fly in here? Is it a four or five-hour trip by car? We are not looking after the interests of country people who want to stay in the country. Nor are we increasing the intellectual knowledge of country people. I have four children and they have all gone to university and only one has come back. They do not come back. It is nice to have them with you if they can train and stay locally. As to long-term TAFE courses, it depends on one's philosophy. What is the best information we can give people? Is it second-grade or first-grade information? I do not go for second-grade information.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: How should the working party have operated? Should it have made its findings public prior to the announcement being made?

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: The moment you say there is a possibility of something closing there are problems. It is very difficult to overcome public perception. It should have been done beforehand. It may have led to increased enrolments in the college if other options had been mooted. I would have supported a marketing strategy. We would have got in first and see what the options were before the chop.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: The submission mentioned that the council expressed concern that undertakings were given by Premier Carr in 1998 that consultation and socioeconomic impact studies would be carried out if State services were to be relocated from regional areas of New South Wales, and that that has not occurred. Are you aware of a group in the Government that refers to itself as Country Labor?

Mr CRAKANTHORP: I am aware of it, yes.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: Did you make representations to that group on this issue?

Mr CRAKANTHORP: No.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: Do you feel that your interests have been represented by that group on this issue?

Mr CRAKANTHORP: Given that we did not make a representation to the group to represent us, no.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: Do you think those members should have stood up for you against the Premier and made him stick to his commitment to ensure that you were consulted and—

CHAIR: I think we take the point of the question. You are putting the witness in a difficult situation.

Mr ZAPPACOSTA: I would like to answer. I appreciate the question. Mr Catanzariti's phone ran red hot when the information came out. I understand Mr Crakanthorp, being a council employee, is trying not to be political. I love being political. Mr Catanzariti knows how often I have rung him. He is a member of Country Labor. I think he copped many abusive phone calls. He was told he had to help us. I know the people of Leeton and the council gave him a rough time. I agree that when you belong to a group that group should help you out. You have to cop it sweet. It is a good question.

CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the committee.

(Witnesses withdrew)

JEANETTE MARY RODHAM, Primary Producer, Glencoin, Uranquinty, sworn and examined:

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

Ms RODHAM: I suppose I am both. I am a mother of an ex-student and I was sort of nominated as Leeton Shire Council's parent representative.

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

Ms RODHAM: Yes.

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

Ms RODHAM: Thank you.

CHAIR: Before the Committee questions you on this matter, would you like to make a short statement on any of the issues that you hold as important?

Ms RODHAM: First of all, thank you for coming to MCA. It is great to think you can come down here to where the hub of it all happened. As a parent of a student who was here last year, the day that it was announced and we found out through the media, I thought somebody was having a joke, I really did. It devastated us at home on the farm. Our son was the youngest student down here. He was only 15. We sent him here because we were only 1½, two hours from here, so therefore we were close to home. The reason he was sent here was he finished in year 10 at the local high school in Wagga Wagga and the TAFE college does not cover full-time Broadacre farming as a full-time course. It is only as a traineeship. As well as that, we live three-quarters of an hour away from a TAFE institute, which would inconvenience us because I had to travel to take my son to and from, which is a three-hour round-trip or close to it each morning and each night. There is no public transport, therefore it had to be a residential course.

He was sent down here because of the Broadacre farming. We did look into Tocal, but it has beef and dairy cattle, chickens, horses, and was nowhere near relevant to what we have. Yes, we have sheep and cattle but our No. 1 is Broadacre farming and part irrigation. That is the reason. So, that means he was sent down here. The day of the announcement absolutely devastated our house. What were we going to do with our son? He was too young to bring home to run the family farm. We then looked into Dalby. Again, he is a 16-year-old. How can you send him 16 hours from home? It was not a question of yes, you will be going. He stayed at home. He has been one of the fortunate ones and has got employment since.

I still cannot get over it. He was to be down here for two years and then hopefully get a job and come home and run the family farm. It is just that a lot of the same parents are in the same position. Murrumbidgee college is everything we needed—the residential side, the courses that suited our enterprises where the children had come from. TAFE colleges do not run any courses unless there are 12 students or more in each class. Therefore, a lot of the TAFE courses did not suit our needs, especially from West Wyalong and places like that. They had to have 12 children to run a course. Out in that area it is very hard to get. That was the reason that MCA was the central place for us to bring Tristan and when it closed it was just devastating to us. We did not know where we were going to go with our young son. His education in this area has now finished completely because unless Murrumbidgee college reopens, he would come back then but other than that there is no way he will go anywhere to further his education.

CHAIR: You mentioned that your son, Tristan, has got a job subsequent to the closure?

Ms RODHAM: Yes. He was to be here today that he could not get time off work because they are busy.

CHAIR: It is good that he has found employment. That is heartening. Is he attending any other training facility?

Ms RODHAM: No, because he is out at woop woop working. He is 108 kilometres from the closest town. He is down at Moulamein on an irrigation property and there is no further education at all for him whatsoever. He sits on a tractor.

CHAIR: What impact does this have on his future in the agricultural industry and, perhaps, pertaining to your family farm?

Ms RODHAM: There is no such thing just now of coming home to the family farm. So much is involved in farming that you must have all these certificates and qualifications to get a lot of things. My husband came home to the family farm. He has no qualifications. His son is more qualified than he is. He has to go back now and do chemical courses and all that sort of thing just to be able to buy the pesticides and herbicides for the local farm. Tristan has all that because he got all that here. That was one of the reasons he got the job, because he originally started off burr spraying, and because he had the ChemSmart chemical course he got the job and is now turned into a full-time station hand's job. You have to have so much more qualification now because they are making it harder and harder. On the family farm there is no way you could walk out of school in year 10 and come home to the family farm. You have to have more qualifications. So, the idea of sending him down here was to get those qualifications.

CHAIR: So, he has partial qualifications?

Ms RODHAM: He has done certificate 3, and that is as far as he has got. I know the kids were trying to get the diploma introduced here at MCA, to continue to have three years down here, so he had the intention when he finished his diploma to come home, which would have suited us fine, but it all got cut short.

CHAIR: When it was cut short, were parents or student consulted about the proposed closure?

Ms RODHAM: No. We heard nothing whatsoever, other than on the news. Our son was not even here at that stage, he was at Trangie.

CHAIR: That is how you were informed of the proposal?

Ms RODHAM: That is how we were informed. The only way we were informed otherwise was when we wrote letters of complaint, I suppose it was, to the Government. We got letters back to say that it had been closed, and that was it. Other than that there had been no contact with any of the parents whatsoever. We had no idea what was going on at all.

CHAIR: When you mentioned you wrote or contacted the Government, what departments, who are you referring to there?

Ms RODHAM: Lucky being close enough, we heard on the news where public meetings were being held down here, so we popped in the car and came down. At those public meetings Leeton Shire Council sent out a list of names to send to parliamentary members voicing our opinions as to what we thought about closure of the college. So, letters were sent to the Department of Agriculture, to Macdonald himself, to the Premier. I have a list of them here. We just sent them all. There was up to 20 members of Parliament that letters were sent to, and of course you got your replies back saying thank you, they have been passed on to the appropriate members, et cetera. Other than that we never had anything whatsoever to say this is in the pipes. There was just no communication with anybody anywhere.

CHAIR: You mentioned in your letter to the Committee that TAFE catered for some of the same subjects but only under traineeship?

Ms RODHAM: That is right.

CHAIR: They have these facilities but you have to have the numbers. Is it not reasonable to assume that given the closure and the concern in the community and with some support from the community that those numbers could be found to run those courses through TAFE to get those relevant certificates?

Ms RODHAM: Well, again, knowing Wagga Wagga campus, Wagga Wagga North campus is the main agricultural TAFE college. It is three-quarters of an hour drive from us. It does certificate 1 and 2 through a vet course through high school doing years 11 and 12. Certificate 3 is only by a traineeship and certificate 4 is a full-time course. They do have those numbers at Wagga Wagga but it did not suit us for the simple reason the distance to have to travel. Contacted by parents from out round Burcher and places like that, their children could not do it because there were not 12 kids to do the course. So they would have to send their children to Wagga Wagga. That is private board, there is no public transport from Wagga Wagga to north campus, you have to find your own way. It is right beside the Charles Sturt University. I do not know whether you could catch the Charles Sturt University bus or not, but there is just no public transport to run those children from private boarding in Wagga Wagga out.

But you have traineeships. A lot of people are not prepared to take kids on as traineeships, especially in the drought. How can you find that extra money? And big equipment and things like that, it is dangerous putting a kid who does not know what they are doing in that line of fire. And you might be teaching them bad habits too. That is why the TAFE college system in smaller areas—I do not mean Wagga Wagga, but your smaller areas—you have to get 12 to run a course. If you do not get 12 to run a course, you might have 11, those 11 students have to go elsewhere. That is why MCA was such a great thing, because those students, there were quite a few from the West Wyalong the area that came here because they could not get into the TAFE system.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: What is going to happen to Tristan's education now? I know you said it stops. Does he consider it or do you consider it to be on hold for a while until he finds an opportunity to continue or do you think it is finished?

Ms RODHAM: Well, at the moment, while he is employed where he is employed it is stopped. But, say he was to get put off in his employment and Murrumbidgee college was to reopen, he would come back. I did speak to Cameron earlier. There are ads going around down near Swan Hill and around that area saying it is reopening next year and they are taking enrolments. A few of the parents had also heard the same ad at Dubbo. They have said to the kids that they will come back but we found out today it is not at all, but the ads are on the radio and the kids have heard them, because they have contacted me and asked what is happening, they have heard it is reopening. So, the ads are out there saying enrolments are now being taken.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: What, reopening at Swan Hill?

Ms RODHAM: No, here. The kids live in the Swan Hill area. My son is on a property with two other ex-students from here, a year-4 student and a year-3 student. The three of them are all working together.

CHAIR: Does that mean that those ads are for just short facilities?

Ms RODHAM: No. They are advertising full-time residential courses for 2005, Murrumbidgee college certificate 3 and certificate 4, because the kids did contact me and say what is going on. I said I was going to ask today, and I have asked, and I have found out the ads are wrong. But the kids' parents have also heard the same ads and they are up Narromine area.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: What do you mean the ads are wrong?

Ms RODHAM: Well, it is not reopening next year, is it?

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: Can we find out who put those ads out?

Ms RODHAM: I do not know. The kids are just hearing them on the tractor.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Are they Department of Agriculture ads?

Ms RODHAM: They just said it is on the ads, enrolments are now being taken at MCA for full-time courses, residential certificate 3 and certificate 4 in agriculture. That is all the kids know.

CHAIR: Thank you for that, Mrs Rodham. We will get the Committee staff to look into it and find out who sourced those ads.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: But you sure they are not advertisements for short courses?

Ms RODHAM: Well, I said that, and they said no. The kids' parents also heard them and they want them to come back.

CHAIR: This is on regional radio?

Ms RODHAM: On regional radio. I have not heard it, because there has been nothing here.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I heard your comments about the TAFE courses requiring so many students to run. It is interesting again looking through this MCA booklet that it also has the same requirements, it requires 12 to 15 people to run—

Ms RODHAM: Yes, that is right.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: So a lot of these courses, even though they are listed here as being available, if the students are not there—

Ms RODHAM: Well, they do not run it, do they, no.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: You mentioned there were a number of public meetings?

Ms RODHAM: Yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: How many people attended those meetings?

Ms RODHAM: On the Friday night on the local news, after the announcement was made on the Wednesday, we heard there was going to be a local meeting on Monday here at MCA for anybody who had people involved. It took me a while to find out when it was and what was what and everything, and we still only found out an hour beforehand, so we had to low fly down here.

Probably about 30 people were at the first one, and they were the Riverina Regional Organisation of Councils [RIVROC], that is, the local governments and the Leeton Shire Council. We basically were the only parents who knew anything about it. Then there was another meeting. Basically the meetings were held by the Leeton Shire Council and we were invited to go to the meetings and things like that. Then I was selected to go to Sydney with a representation from the Leeton Shire Council and the advisory council to meet with politicians—Dr Refshauge, and those in Sydney and the parents' representative. There were about four public meetings all up. The final public meeting had probably about 60 at it in the council chambers, and that is when there was a selection of people from each area.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: That would be considered a good representation because of the geographic considerations?

Ms RODHAM: I presume it was. There were people there from the Isolated Children's Parents' Association and there were locals. Whoever was involved with the MCA was there.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: You are indicating that if your son were to come home now to run the family farm, he would not be educated to the level that made that a viable proposition?

Ms RODHAM: That is right, whereas he would get that if he had another two years—another 12 months at certificate IV, and then if there was a diploma, yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: The only way he could possibly do that is by obtaining a traineeship, but they are difficult to obtain?

Ms RODHAM: The traineeships in the primary producer area are getting to the stage where they are at because of the ongoing drought, which is the biggest thing, and finding wages and things in the area where we live.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: That would have an impact on enrolments in these courses?

Ms RODHAM: Of course it would—well and truly.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: In your submission you say that you would have been liked him to potentially have continued his education to include a diploma in agriculture.

Ms RODHAM: Yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Do you think there would have been a lot of interest, rather than coming back into the courses that were being offered and the facilities that were offered—

Ms RODHAM: The students have tried.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: —if they had increased that? Do you think that that would have further encouraged enrolments?

Ms RODHAM: Definitely.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: As a much more viable form of education for students?

Ms RODHAM: Definitely. The second-year students down here had written to the department earlier in the year to ask for a diploma course to be added.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: What response did they get?

Ms RODHAM: Nothing.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Did they receive a response to their letter?

Ms RODHAM: Nothing at all, and that was the thing: They had asked for a diploma year to be added to it.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: What we seem to be getting from the inquiry is a whole pattern of people not being told things, or when they tried to make inquiries, they were not responded to.

Ms RODHAM: That is right.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: When you went as part of the delegation to Parliament, did you meet with Mr Macdonald, the Minister?

Ms RODHAM: No.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Did you apply to meet with him?

Ms RODHAM: No. I went and met with Tony Catanzariti and then we went and met with Dr Refshauge's chief of staff and we had a meeting. We basically just tried to see if we could have got it changed over to the TAFE system or the education department. That was our aim.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: What response did you get from Dr Refshauge?

Ms RODHAM: They came up here a few months ago. Just before Christmas they came up, met here, and had a bit of a meeting, but again it all comes down to money. They have not got the

money to be able to take over the facilities. As I understand it, there is still a lot going on in the pipeline that I am not involved with.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: When the announcement was made that these courses were going to close, members of the Department of Agriculture and the college personnel here actually rang the students. Did your son get a call?

Ms RODHAM: No. My son was on the work experience at the time at the Trangie research centre. There were three of them up there at the time and they had gone up with one of the office staff. I think she had taken them up and her husband worked here. That is the only way the children found out. Her husband rang her and told her, and the kids got told that we have to go back. There has been nothing whatsoever.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Did anybody from the advisory council tell you anything?

Ms RODHAM: No. They had not contacted us. As I said, Tristan was in Trangie, so I do not know what was going on down here at that time.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I want to go back to this business about the diploma in agriculture that you spoke about.

Ms RODHAM: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: A few years ago there were five agricultural colleges in New South Wales at Wagga Wagga, Hawkesbury, Orange, Tocal and Murrumbidgee. There is only one left, and that is Tocal, that offers residential courses. The others, Hawkesbury, Wagga and Orange, have all been absorbed by universities and their students now get a university education. There is no college in New South Wales—I am not sure whether TAFE does it or not—that offers a diploma in agriculture. This that the case, as far as you know?

Ms RODHAM: You can do a diploma of agriculture at TAFE.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: But not as an agricultural college?

Ms RODHAM: Not as an agricultural college, no. I think I am right in saying that they have a diploma at Tocal, but Tocal just did not suit us because it just does not have the broad acre facilities, which is what our farm runs on, whereas down here is perfect.

CHAIR: I thank you for coming along today and providing a very direct appraisal of your family's situation, your son's situation, and the relevant issues for the inquiry. That has been most helpful and we will be able to use that information in our deliberations.

Ms RODHAM: Great. Thank you.

(The witness withdrew)

JAMES ANTHONY GELTCH, Chairman, Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture Advisory Council, c/- 7 Mayfield Court, Moama, sworn and examined.

ALLAN GRANT DELVES, Member, Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture Advisory Council, Post Office Box 228, Hanwood, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: If the witnesses wish, they may have their addresses deleted from the final transcript of published evidence, upon request. Are you conversant with the terms of reference for this inquiry?

Mr GELTCH: Yes, I am.

Mr DELVES: I am.

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

Mr GELTCH: Thank you.

CHAIR: Before we commence questions from the Committee, would either of you like to make a statement that is relevant to the issue at hand?

Mr GELTCH: Yes, I would like to make a statement. I take this opportunity to thank the Committee for this opportunity to appear on behalf of the advisory council, and I thank all members who have come down. I think it is fantastic that you have taken the time out to actually come down in situ and discuss the closure of the college. Just by way of background to the advisory council and the role it plays, which I think is important for everyone to understand, I suppose in a nutshell it is very much an advisory council, as the term implies. The various members of the advisory council are listed in the submission. They cover a wide range of agribusiness across southern and western New South Wales.

Basically our role is to advise the Minister. We are actually appointed by the Minister and we advise the Minister on matters pertaining to the college. For example, if we perceive or recognise that there is a need for perhaps a revamping of a course, various members of the council who have expertise in that area—and perhaps other people—would be called in to review that course curriculum and advise on the necessary changes to be made to make it more relevant to current practice. Fundamentally, we are an advisory council. We meet three times a year or between two and four times a year, but generally about three times a year. We would also be involved, as I said, in some extra curricular activity in an advisory capacity on an individual basis.

I just want to very briefly talk about the vision that we have for rural youth education in New South Wales. I suppose that what guided me in trying to address the issues that come up at the Murrumbidgee college from time to time is that the vision I have and the role that Murrumbidgee college plays in that vision is very much a pathway for youth who either do not have the information or the wherewithal to go on to higher education. Within our system I would like to see primary school and pre-year 11 students being made aware of agriculture and its role in society. It is very much a greater awareness issue. Murrumbidgee college obviously does not have a role in doing that, but I think the education system as such, must. What happens by doing so is that at least younger people are aware of what agriculture is all about.

Our aim is that in years 11 and 12, or actually in year 10, they are made aware of the potential that is out there, if you like, in terms of jobs. They then can make some decisions on where they might want to go. I think this is where Murrumbidgee college has played a very important role, particularly in years 11 and 12, in vocational education and training for high school students. It has played an extremely important role in that area. It is very dear to my heart. I have had young boys go through and although they were not directly involved with the Murrumbidgee college, they were certainly involved in that vocational education and training in years 11 and 12. In terms of agriculture, Murrumbidgee college has played a very important role.

Further to that, as those students left—whether they left in year 10 or during years 11 or 12—they could then go into a residential agriculture-based education here, either doing a certificate III or a certificate IV, which were both basically one-year courses. From there they could either return to the home farm or into agribusiness or in fact articulate into a higher degree or a diploma program. We certainly had some strong linkages with the Charles Sturt University to be able to accommodate that. If you like, in a roundabout way if you can imagine the vision that I and the advisory council have, it is as a pathway for young people right from primary school to ultimately wherever they end up in life. The Murrumbidgee college is a really a core component of that education for vocational education and training. To that end, we were devastated by the decision that was made. Unless Grant wants to add something else at this point in time, I would hope that most of the issues will be fleshed out by the questions that are addressed to us.

CHAIR: I am wondering whether you have covered the rural traineeship and vocational education and training [VET] in schools programs that were offered in MCA and whether those programs are offered anywhere else in the region? You have described the vocational training. Can that be taken up in the TAFE system?

Mr GELTCH: There is no doubt that TAFE has the capacity. In fact, I would suggest that its charter is to do that very thing.

CHAIR: What is the difference? How do you see the substantial advantages?

Mr GELTCH: I suppose it is more the constraints that are perhaps the reason why TAFE cannot deliver it in the way that this college can. In fact I have always had a concern about TAFE. I think it does some wonderful things in terms of a rigid, structured discipline, but agriculture does not quite fit in that very rigid discipline. Welding, for example, is very much a defined process whereas agriculture is very much more than that. I think you have to be much more flexible. You have to be continually addressing new issues that come up. I think that we have a very much wider client base. We talk to people from the western division who are engaged in broad acre cereal cropping, irrigation and all those sorts of things. To be quite honest I have grave doubts whether TAFE with its current curriculum can address those issues for the youth of south and western New South Wales.

CHAIR: To what extent was the advisory council consulted prior to the closure of the courses?

Mr GELTCH: I am really glad you have asked that question. I got a phone call from Ms Helen Scott-Orr, who is an executive of the department in Orange. I got a phone call at the time the Minister was making the announcement, "The college advisory council is aware that the college was going to be closed." I think the Minister hinged that statement on the basis, if you like, of the review that was held of both the Tocal and Murrumbidgee colleges in 2001. In the submission in my notes on page 2, I outline the process whereby the advisory council was aware of the closure.

I outlined the process whereby the advisory council was aware of the closure. The review was instigated in March 2001. The program leader informed us the review was going to be held. She met the advisory council. We made it clear to her at that time that we would very much like to be involved in the process. We saw it from a positive perspective. We wanted to be involved. If something good could come out of it, that would be fantastic. Consequently, on graduation day in 2001, I had an informal meeting with the program leader. She indicated that the review had been completed and that she would come down and discuss the outcomes with us. Subsequently she did, I think it was in June 2001. I have some letters to support that.

I also have a letter I wrote to the director general after graduation day in 2001, in about April. She did not present us with the report at the meeting in June. In retrospect, she cherry-picked some of the recommendations from the report. In fact, in my letter to the director general I refer to them and some of the positive outcomes of the report. We supported those things. However, we did not get the hard copy until after the closure of the college. The Public Service Association, through a freedom of information request, was able to get a hard copy of the report. The report recommended that consideration be given to consolidating full-time residential activity to one college site by 2004 if the decline in full-time student numbers continued into 2003. I am prepared to table that document.

Document tabled.

The Minister could state that we were involved in the consultation process and that would be a fair comment. However, it was a devious way to achieve that outcome.

CHAIR: Are you saying that Ms Helen Scott-Orr was having contact with your organisation at the time the announcement was made?

Mr GELTCH: Yes.

CHAIR: Who was the Minister at that time? Was it Amery or Macdonald?

Mr GELTCH: It was Macdonald.

CHAIR: Was he the Minister at that time?

Mr GELTCH: In 2001 it was Richard Amery.

CHAIR: In your submission you stated that the Minister:

...reaffirmed the Department of Agriculture's commitment to youth education at MCA in the strongest possible terms. In fact, he appeared to be almost insulted that we were voicing concern over a non-issue.

Mr GELTCH: Mr Delves was with me at that meeting.

CHAIR: When did he say that and when was the report released?

Mr GELTCH: I may not have the exact dates.

CHAIR: Then give the committee the general time line. Perhaps you can consult your diary and provide the specific dates on notice.

Mr GELTCH: Yes. This all created a general air of uncertainty. The advisory council had concerns for several years before the review. There were staffing issues and so on. The meeting with Mr Amery was not necessarily a reaction to the review; it was a reaction to a general climate of uncertainty within the college at that time.

Mr GELTCH: In October 2000, the director general released the terms of the review. I pointed them out in my submission.

Mr GELTCH: From that, the chairman of the review team, Ms Ellen Howard—the program manager, education and training—met with the MCA advisory council shortly after the announcement. I think that was in December 2000. It would have been late November or early December 2000. She talked in a little more detail about the review process and provided the terms of the review. As I said earlier, we saw this as a positive process. Provided we were kept in the loop we were happy and wanted to be involved. The message she would have taken away was that the council wanted to be involved in the review process. We then had the graduation day. Again, I do not have the exact date, but it would have been in late March or early April 2001.

I had an informal conversation with Ms Ellen Howard. In fact, I wrote to her on 2 April reminding her that I mentioned that the advisory council was very keen to know where the review of the college was up to. I also told her that council members put a lot of their time and effort into supporting the college and it would therefore be helpful if the advisory council could receive copies of our report as well as copies of the responses she obtained from both the college principals. That would have enabled the advisory council to provide her with some informed industry comment as well. She informally told me in late March, on certificate day, that the review had been completed. We said we would love to see it. We were disappointed that we had not been involved in the process and we wanted to see the report. She met with us on 13 June. Consequently she cherry-picked some of the recommendations in the review and talked them through with us. Of course, they were the positive recommendations. The review document was not tabled at that meeting.

CHAIR: Did you question that?

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

Document tabled.

Mr GELTCH: It may be useful if I table the letter I wrote to Ms Ellen Howard on 2 April.

Document tabled.

Mr GELTCH: The director general replied in very positive terms. I mentioned in the council submission that he stated:

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

Staff shortages were the ongoing problem. It is very important that we talk about that issue at some time. From that letter the advisory council felt the college was not under threat. I do not think we ever felt it was. There was never any indication of that. Little did we know that recommendation H suggested that one of the colleges could be closed if there was not an increase in numbers by 2003. In fact, there was an increase in 2003, but we were still concerned about the numbers. To stiffen up the resolve and to make further representations, we met with the Minister in Sydney and talked through those issues about staff shortages.

CHAIR: What date was that?

Mr GELTCH: I will have to provide that information on notice.

CHAIR: Which Minister was that?

Mr GELTCH: Mr Amery.

Mr DELVES: Previous to that, Mr Hatzistergos, in his role as duty MLC for this area, had been very good. He spent a day with us here at the college. He went over the place and met with the principal. He was very supportive and came with us to that meeting with Mr Amery.

CHAIR: In your opinion, did the review form the basis of the decision to close the college MCA programs?

Mr GELTCH: Absolutely. This institution received the 1997 National Indigenous Trainer of the Year Award and was the Department of Education and Training Provider of the Year for New South Wales. This college was recognised by its peers as an excellent provider of vocational education and training, not only in agriculture but also in Aboriginal rural training as well. In retrospect, there was an emasculation of the resource base at the college. It even occurred before the review. It was starting to occur and that raised concerns: I believe the review was put in place to close down this college. We were not aware of that at that time, but I am sure that was the case. The department wanted to make the dollar savings and that was the process it used to justify it. I do not know whether it was our representation that postponed the decision-making process.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: You refer to closing the college. Do you mean the closure of the residential component or the whole college?

Mr GELTCH: No. At present it is the residential courses and vocational education and training. There is an Aboriginal training program and a short-course program still being offered.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Are you saying that they were closing the residential component of the college?

Mr GELTCH: I mean closing down the college. I have a great fear. The staff are doing a superb job under very trying circumstances. However, the Government has taken the guts of the infrastructure out of the college and now the staff are trying to run a short-course program and an Aboriginal rural training program with limited resources.

CHAIR: Can you clarify some of the problems with staff shortages. I sense that you see that as part of a campaign of attrition. The committee is looking at the removal of the residential facilities. I understand that you are afraid that that could mean the closure of the whole institution. Can you describe to the committee the problems with staff shortage and in what way that has impacted on the activities of the college?

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: What did you try to do to get those numbers up? Did you approach the local council, the Leeton council, or did you approach the community here for support to see what sort of funds could be collected to try to advertise, if the money was out there? What has been done to try to get the numbers up so that you were not in this position?

Mr GELTCH: That is a fair question. In retrospect, we all stand condemned for not doing enough. Certainly it does not sit easily with me. I have been very much heartened by the Griffith Shire Council and the Leeton Shire Council both making the same sort of the offer, if you like. They would certainly be prepared to put in resources to make sure that we get those numbers up. I think that is pretty much why it has spread. In fact we did not use those resources, whether they be commodity groups, councils or various organisations throughout rural New South Wales to be able to try to achieve that, and we stand condemned for that. Certainly within the department, in terms of talking to both the program manager, the director-general and the Minister, I think the attempts we made were as good as we could possibly do at the time. But, again, in retrospect, knowing what happened, we should have tried a bit harder.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: At the time of the review, the money that was coming from the Government, was that cut back as well? Was there some intimation that the funding for the college was being cut?

Mr GELTCH: I think it was general knowledge, not specifically for the college, but generally. I think we are all aware that there has been a reduction in funding by government departments. Treasury is out there trying to screw every last dollar it can out of the system and we are all very much aware of that. Attempts were always being made to try to make the best use of these resources, hence efforts were made to get off-campus people—non-agricultural use of these facilities. These were seen as public facilities and we decided to try to get as many people as we could to use them. Unfortunately, again the department decided that that was not a good idea. It did not want to give us the capacity to generate those dollars.

Mr DELVES: Can I also point out that it was not, and is not, the role of the advisory council to become involved in the financial situation of the college. We were more in an advisory role on the education side of it. It would be fair to say that.

Mr GELTCH: Absolutely.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: I accept that. What I am trying to get at is whether the department started cutting the funding to make it harder for you to get staffing. My information is that the college was actually given extra money to try to accommodate that situation and to try to attract people. Would that be right, or am I getting the wrong information?

Mr DELVES: I could not answer that.

Mr GELTCH: To be quite honest, as Grant has indicated, we are not involved in the administration of the college, but I would suspect that that is not correct, given the situation. If the dollars were there, we would have been employing the people.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: In relation to the number of students you had here—

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: There were 28 in 2002 and 39 in 2003.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI:—how many lecturers and staff were there at the time?

Mr GELTCH: I cannot answer that. I will take that question on notice, if you like. That is an administrative matter.

CHAIR: Certainly. If you would like to, take that question on notice.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Certainly.

Mr GELTCH: Perhaps I could enlighten the Hon. Tony Catanzariti relation to one of the questions he asked. In terms of student curriculum figures. In the year 2000, there were 179,035 student contact hours and in 2002, 135,379. They are audited student contact hours. That includes all students, whether they are from traineeships, residential courses, Aboriginal rural training, or whatever it might be.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Does it matter which way you put it?

Mr GELTCH: There is only one way. I think that within the education community, student contact hours is the benchmark that is used. Do not be fooled by any other number. All peers in Murrumbidgee college would use those sorts of numbers. And use the audited numbers. Do not use the numbers in the New South Wales Agriculture's annual report because, dare I say, I feel that they have perhaps being doctored.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Could you elaborate on that?

Mr GELTCH: I have tabled the document for you to be able to see that in black and white.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: You believe that they have been doctored?

Mr GELTCH: Yes, I do.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Mr Geltch, are you aware that the cost of providing full-time residential courses to students at Yanco was almost three times the cost of providing the same services at Tocal?

Mr GELTCH: Can I ask on what basis you have used those numbers? I think that is important because, again, I think it comes back to a question of whether you are just dividing the number of residential students by the recurrent funding or consolidated revenue number. I think that is far too simplistic. I think that what you need to do is look at the student contact hours in totality, look at the cost of supplying those student contact hours and come up with a number there. I think that is what you need to do to compare apples with apples.

The Hon. IAN WEST: You are saying that it is not three times the cost?

Mr GELTCH: Absolutely. Three times the cost of, what, Tocal?

The Hon. IAN WEST: Yes.

Mr GELTCH: I suggest that that is not correct. Again I think the numbers that I have tabled will support the case that I am putting.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Given that in 2003, there were no students from the western division of New South Wales at MCA, you have indicated to us that, objectively, even though the decline was there in 1993 when there were 86 students through to 2002 with 28 and 2003 with 39—

Mr GELTCH: Yes.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Given there were no students from the western division of New South Wales at the institute in 2003, you were not involved in any advertising campaign to promote the courses?

Mr GELTCH: I think there are three issues there. The first is that I take to task the fact that there were none from western New South Wales. Are you talking about the pastoral property management course, or are you talking about students in general? I think if you are talking about students in general—

The Hon. IAN WEST: Students in general.

Mr GELTCH:—where do you draw the line for the western division? Western New South Wales? I suggest that that is incorrect. If you are talking about pastoral property management, that is correct, and the reason for that, which is the second issue, is simply that the pastoral property management course was no longer running. If you are not running a course, then you cannot have any students. The reason that was not running was, as I indicated earlier, because of the emasculation of the human resource base which meant that we just could not run the course.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Are you aware that there were four students from Victoria attending Yanco and 5 students from the western division attending Tocal?

Mr GELTCH: I know that there were four attending in 2003 from Victoria. I am not quite sure that I could not speak for Tocal.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Well, they were five.

Mr DELVES: Doing what courses?

The Hon. IAN WEST: Why do you think that students from the western division favoured Tocal to such a degree over Yanco?

Mr GELTCH: I think it is horses for courses. I would like to say something here about Tocal. The advisory council of the Murrumbidgee college proactively, I believe, last month went up to Tocal. We actually had a joint advisory council meeting at Tocal because I personally had not been to Tocal. I think it was almost a difficult situation arising from the Murrumbidgee college being pitted, for want of a better word, against Tocal. I think that was unhealthy. As the advisory council, what we wanted to do was get up to Tocal and see what Tocal could offer and whether it could offer things to the students of south and western New South Wales.

We actually spent two days at Tocal one month ago. We arrived around about 11 o'clock in the morning and we spent some of that morning and the rest of the afternoon looking around the college facilities. Then we had an informal dinner that evening when we met with staff and students and then we had a formal advisory council meeting the next day. I think it is fair to say, or certainly it is my view, that it is a wonderful institution up there. In fact, if I was on its advisory council I would be as passionate about that as I am about this college. It is a wonderful institution. I think the department should be proud of it. The staff who actually operate there should be proud of it and I know they are proud of it, and certainly the student outcomes up there are fantastic.

But Tocal is not offering—and I know that the advisory council members and staff as well as management of the college appreciate this—the courses that are required to satisfy the youth of south and western New South Wales. There was a motion moved at that joint advisory council meeting to that end. In terms of your five people from western New South Wales, they were there doing a beef course that Tocal does superbly well and that the Murrumbidgee college was not doing. That is the answer to it. I think that highlights the folly of the Minister's decision. It is horses for courses. You had a college doing a specific and fantastic job in the Hunter and you had the Murrumbidgee college doing the same thing down here.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Am I right in saying that after the year 2000 review, the principal and staff were well aware and fully advised that enrolments would have to increase to justify the continued provision of full-time residential courses. Is that true?

Mr GELTCH: Absolutely.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Absolutely?

Mr GELTCH: Absolutely, that is right.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: They were not.

CHAIR: One member should speak at a time.

The Hon. IAN WEST: And there has been a continual decline since 1993 until the present time.

Mr GELTCH: I do not agree with that.

The Hon. IAN WEST: With a glitch from 2002 to 2003 from 28 to 39.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: It increased 30 per cent!

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: An increase is a glitch?

CHAIR: We all will have the opportunity to ask questions. Members should give the Hon. Ian West the opportunity to ask his questions, and other members can tailor their questions with the benefit of additional information when their turn comes.

The Hon. IAN WEST: I think it was 20 per cent, not 30 per cent. The budget and the staff of the college were increased, were they not, in 2002?

Mr GELTCH: I cannot answer that.

The Hon. IAN WEST: While enrolments for that dramatically declined. Is that not the fact?

Mr GELTCH: No. Let us put some reference points in there so that I can answer that question definitively. The first question was?

The Hon. IAN WEST: That the budget and staffing of the college were increased. Since the 2000 review, there has been a budget and staff increase at the college. That is a fact.

Mr GELTCH: To be quite honest, I cannot answer that because it is an administrative question. I am prepared to take it on notice and request from the department those numbers but I suspect that I would want to see the numbers and the context of those numbers.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Take it on notice.

CHAIR: Take it on notice, but the Committee will request those figures from the department.

Mr GELTCH: Yes. That is right.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Yet, enrolments for that dramatically decreased.

Mr GELTCH: No. I categorically deny that. When you say "dramatically decreased", again I reiterate that you are looking at full-time residential courses, which is not what we should be looking at. We should be looking at this institution as an educational institution for young people. How that is delivered I think is the real moot point and it is delivered in a number of different ways. If you look at the totality of the number of different ways that that is delivered, there has not been a dramatic decline in numbers.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Are you aware of the working party involved in this issue is trying to investigate it?

Mr GELTCH: I have heard of it on the grapevine.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: But you are not aware?

Mr GELTCH: Yes, of course I am aware, but the advisory council has not been formally advised by the department that there is a working party occurring between, as I understand it, Charles Sturt University and the department.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: You have not been advised.

Mr GELTCH: No.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: What confidence do you have in that working party to get some sustainable courses in here?

Mr GELTCH: I do not want to be flippant or facetious, but if the Minister thought it was an important move, why close it in the first place? If the Minister thought it was important enough and there was a need to have a working party to look at future needs of education in south western New South Wales, why did he close it in the first place? We would support any outcomes of the working party to the advantage of youth education.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: We must also look forward and not back and try to keep the college going.

Mr GELTCH: Absolutely. Some people are surprised that the advisory council is still hanging around. I am still passionate about trying to make something out of this. Whether we have some short-course programs and an Aboriginal rural training proposal, we will support them to the hilt, lobby and do whatever is necessary. To that end, we had a meeting about two weeks ago at which the principal agreed to do a survey of the Western Division to get numbers. He is trying to get the pastoral property management course up and running for next year. It may be partly based at Tocal and there may be some block release at MCA. We are being very positive. We are not putting our heads in the sand and saying that we want the college back. We are realists and we are trying to make the most of it. If the working party goes some way towards achieving those outcomes that will be fantastic.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Have you been given all the assistance you have requested from politicians in your endeavours to see Ministers and their staff?

Mr GELTCH: Yes, we certainly have. It is worth pointing out individually who has supported us.

Mr DELVES: Certain members of the Labor Party have been very supportive of the college. They have come here and we have met with them and shown them around. Mr Catanzariti has been very supportive and has given us access to people we needed to talk to. Regardless of whether those meetings have been successful, we have been assisted in getting to see those people. Some members of the Government have been very supportive. We need to be included. We know informally that this working party exists, but as an advisory council—which some people probably wish would go away—we see ourselves as representatives of the end users of agricultural education in New South Wales. We are not naive enough to think that things do not change. We are not here asking for the college to be put back to the way it was. If there is a problem, we have to fix it, and we would like to be involved to the process of fixing it. We also see the needs of youth in western New South Wales.

By its very nature, agriculture changes. As a farmer, over the past 10 years I have found that farming has changed dramatically. It has become big business. There have been amalgamations and so on. It is not a little family farm any more. The employment bases on those farms are also changing. We are getting larger farms and the costs are greater. We therefore need qualified, informed and well-educated people to work on those farms. It is a changing process. We have just been through a severe

drought and obviously that had an effect on the number of students coming to the college. As I said, we are not naive enough to think there were no problems. We need to find a way to fix them. If the Government can offer us a way to satisfy as the needs of a section of the community—albeit a small section—I will applaud it. It is a small section of the community, but it still needs education services. If we can find a way, even if it is radical, I will congratulate those involved.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Over the past 10 or 20 years there has been a decline in the number of agricultural colleges from about five to two. What has been the long-term adverse impact on agriculture as a result?

Mr GELTCH: There has been an academic creep. That is why it is so important that we have skills-based training. Hawkesbury, Wagga Wagga, and Orange all had agricultural colleges and they were absorbed into the university system. I see that as a process of academic creep. There was certainly some skills-based training at those colleges. When they were absorbed into the university systems, we lost that skills-based training. I have seen some graduates of those colleges and I am very much aware of that. It makes it all the more important to maintain skills-based colleges. The old Wagga, Hawkesbury and Orange agricultural colleges offered almost cradle-to-grave education. They offered skills-based training right through to management-based education. We fight very hard to ensure we do not have that academic creep. This is very much skills-based training. There has been almost a divergence in the way education has been delivered to the agricultural sector in New South Wales. It has moved away from multifaceted, multidisciplinary education into a more streamlined, academic versus skills-based system. Tocal and MCA were doing skills-based training very well. TAFE carries out that role as well. We must ask the question whether this institution would be better off in the TAFE system. I indicated earlier my concerns about that. I am prepared to table a document that Leeton Shire Council and the advisory council have put together about consolidation of the provision of public agricultural education in New South Wales.

Document tabled.

Whether it is provided by the Department of Education and Training or the Department of Agriculture, there is a need for skills-based training in southern and western New South Wales. That need is currently not being fulfilled by TAFE or Tocal. That is taking nothing from Tocal; the situation is such that they cannot deliver that type of education.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: If it gets to a situation in which there are two colleges—and there is every possibility there will be one—will the Department of Agriculture consider these remaining colleges as irritants and not really its fundamental responsibility? Do we face the prospect of them disappearing?

Mr GELTCH: Tocal has some strong linkages in the New South Wales decision-making processes. Its future is very sound. The friends of Tocal are very strong. It has grown from a different base. It was owned by the church and was gifted to the New South Wales Department of Agriculture. Much of the infrastructure was not built by the department. It will always have a role. It can access coastal students; the numbers will be there. It is unique and it will play a continuing role. It will also play a great role. My concern is what will happen here. It is a dumbing down of agriculture.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I refer to the discussion we have been having about skills-based training provided by TAFE. Many of those skills courses, such as the chainsaw courses, welding and so on, can be adequately offered by TAFE. What is it that TAFE cannot offer that the MCA can?

Mr GELTCH: We have talked about pastoral property management. We can talk about irrigation or any other discipline in agriculture. It is very hard to articulate. A student on a property in the Western Division has to be a Jack of all trades and must be aware of all those disciplines. They are intertwined.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: We are talking about a management decision-making process.

Mr GELTCH: Absolutely.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: That is the thing that an agriculture-specific college can train these students to achieve. They pull all these skills bases together and then train them in the decision-making process.

Mr GELTCH: That is correct. You have put the words into my mouth. It is not something you can pick off the shelf. It is not like a welding or chainsaw course that you can pick off the shelf and deliver in one or two days.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Do you have any idea when enrolments were advertised for the following year?

Mr GELTCH: It was a continuing process. In terms of the publicity, it would have started in the second half of the calendar year.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: When the announcement came in October last year that the college was to close do you have any idea how many enrolments they were for 2004?

Mr GELTCH: There would not have been enrolments as such; there would have been inquiries. The college then starts differentiating whether they are tyre kickers or genuine. I will take that question on notice. It certainly was in the order of 40 or 50.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Given the increase in enrolments from 2002 to 2003—when they increased by 31 per cent—it is quite likely that the enrolments for 2004 would have seen another substantial increase.

Mr GELTCH: No, I could not agree, but it was looking positive. However, until the numbers were in, we could never make a definitive statement. We were very positive about where it was heading. I refer back to the director general's comments. It had only been a couple of years previously that he and Minister Amery reaffirmed that the institution was here for the long term. We did not see the stark reality that we had to lift the residential base numbers. If we had realised that and we had been put on notice, we would have worked a bit harder.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I refer to the letter you quoted in your submission dated 8 August.

Mr GELTCH: I can table that.

Document tabled.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: It has been suggested that the advisory council probably should have advised the students and parents of the impending closure. You suggested that you did not know. If you had known, would you have seen it as your responsibility or the advisory council's responsibility to advise the parents, or should that advice have come from the department?

Mr GELTCH: Obviously it is the department's role to do that. In fact, I was pretty upset and I rang the director-general personally one morning because parents were ringing me—which is contrary to our advice—but I can name two people that were not advised. My view was that even if it was not a phone call, but to me a phone call followed up by letter is the way to do these sorts of things. But at least the letter if not the phone call, but there was nothing, and that did concern me. Again, I think we all stand condemned for the fact that we probably did not do enough. I do not resile from that fact. We had to be prepared to take that responsibility. Let us make the best of what we can now.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: It would seem to me there were some signs out here that you referred to in regard to the staffing being run down. There may have been almost a departmental agenda as opposed to a ministerial agenda because all those decisions to close down were made a long time ago. I refer to the process they went through, the program manager promised to consult with you and she did not consult with you, and when she did get to you she cherry picked and was not upfront with you and tell you what was really in the report. Whether that was deceit or duplicitous or both but certainly one of those terms, and then you received a letter from the director-general, Kevin Sheridan,

stating that recent action resulting in a college review demonstrates that funds were committed to maintaining the quality of service by MCA and that every effort would be made to appoint qualified, experienced staff. Clearly, he lied to you. So, you have been subject to duplicitous conduct, deceitful conduct and you have the director-general lying to you. I think you are a bit hard on yourself when you say you did not do enough. No-one could survive in those sorts of conditions. It is clear that Minister Amery was supportive of the college remaining in its current form but perhaps the department has ambushed the current Minister who has either betrayed you or let you down.

Mr GELTCH: I do not disagree with your summary. I had a lot of time for Richard Amery. I think he did a fantastic job. He was really very supportive of this college and gave us full support. The tragedy is that the current Minister never visited this college. That to me is a real tragedy. He never came down here. I hope you all have the opportunity to get around and have a look at some of the infrastructure that is here and get a feel for it and see the passion from the staff.

CHAIR: We are running very late. Can I ask for one more question from—

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: So it would indicate that the department was running the show and not the Minister?

CHAIR: Mr Lynn, I was going to get one more question from Mr West, and that was it. The argument being they have not asked questions of other witnesses. I am mindful that we are way beyond our schedule.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: We did not get the last questions. You and the Labor Party did for an hour, and we have had less than 10 minutes.

CHAIR: Point taken. One more, Mr Lynn.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: That was the statement I made.

Mr GELTCH: Could I just respond to that by saying that there are two issues in my mind. The first issue is that someone must be held accountable for the decision that has been made, I believe, and then let us put it behind us and make the most of what we have. There are various parts. We talk about the working party, we talk about the Department of Education and Training, we talk about the initiatives the current principal has taken. So there are some positive things. There are two issues: someone must be held accountable for what I regard as—words are not strong enough to describe how I feel about the decision. You put some of those words, and I agree with them, but let us move forward and be positive as well and try to make something out of it.

The Hon. IAN WEST: Beginning next year the MCA will focus on its long and proud tradition of providing long-term learning courses for farmers and consolidation through its continuing education staff, through the emphasis shifting to more flexible, dynamic form of delivery, which has been dictated to by farmers in a number of short-term distance learning courses in regard to property management planning, irrigation efficiencies, product pastures, irrigated pest management, et cetera. Do you concur that this is what is being asked of MCA by the farming community and it is the way of the future?

Mr GELTCH: Certainly short courses are part of the way of the future, there is no doubt. They always have been and they always will be. And they will probably play a greater role now than they did 10, 15, 20 years ago. My concern is this. On the morning of the announcement Ms Helen Scott-Orr suggested that the short-term program here at the Murrumbidgee college would be ramped up. My question to her was to ramp it up, will there be more resources put to that end—financial, physical and human resources put to that end? We have not seen those yet. That to me is the real point. The staff here are trying to do a fantastic job and trying to achieve the outcomes you have indicated but my grave concern is whether those resources will be there to allow them to achieve that.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Luncheon adjournment)

GEOFFREY ALAN SPEERS, Assistant Manager, Training Services—Riverina, Department of Education and Training, 14 Marama Parade, Mount Austin, Wagga Wagga, 2650, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: If you wish, your address may be deleted from the published transcript.

Mr SPEERS: I would like that.

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

Mr SPEERS: As an individual.

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

Mr SPEERS: Yes.

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

Mr SPEERS: Yes.

CHAIR: For the record, would you explain the two submissions that you have made?

Mr SPEERS: My principal reason for putting in the submissions was as a private citizen and as a parent who has concerns about the educational infrastructure within this region. Obviously, I also have professional concerns about that as well. I think that is reflected in the first submission that you would have received. For the record and for the Committee's information, I have checked my department's code of conduct and it is appropriate for me to be here as a private citizen. Depending on the questions asked by the Committee, there may be some information that I cannot give because it is departmental information as distinct from information that is available in the public domain. I have drawn my submission to the Committee from publicly available information primarily from the college and annual reports—information that is available from my department on its web sites and through various reports.

The other main reason for placing a submission before the inquiry was also in relation to the third aspect of the terms of reference which is, if you like, the social capital impact that the removal or, dare I say it, downgrading of the college's operations may have, not only on the surrounding community but on the community in general in south-western New South Wales. In terms of the two submissions I put in, the first one was primarily and hopefully a fairly factual statement of what the college's input to education, particularly vocational education and training, within the region is about. The second one was actually an afterthought which relates to the second of the terms of reference. While I obviously have not seen the internal reports within New South Wales Agriculture, nor have summaries of them being widely circulated, it would appear to me, both as a person of analytical bent and also as an educational professional, that some of the information available to the department either may not have been utilised or may have been misinterpreted, if you like, in developing its decision to take certain actions in relation to the college. I felt that the second submission is primarily to say that there are alternative or other sources of information which the Committee may wish to explore or, through various mechanisms, may wish to point the department to. That was the basis of the second one.

CHAIR: If there are any other statements you wish to make prior to the Committee asking you questions, feel free to go ahead.

Mr SPEERS: Just to summarise and possibly also expand on the first of the two submissions I put in, it is particularly critical in a region such as south-western New South Wales—and I am speaking in terms of south-western New South Wales not just specifically of the Leeton-Narrandera immediate district—that our educational infrastructure be maintained. This is a region which, from my

professional experience and certainly not limited to that because it is common knowledge, suffers from what you would call supply side deprivation within its educational infrastructure. It is very susceptible to the removal or the changes to the operation of education institutions within the region. As I indicated in the submission, the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture is probably ranked in terms of student numbers and student contact hours delivered with the third largest TAFE campus in the region, which is at Griffith. Depending on variations year to year, it generally maintains that level of activity so it is in fact a large contributor to the education infrastructure, both in terms of the number of students that the organisation comes into contact with but also, as another measure, the number of student contact hours that it actually delivers. From a professional viewpoint, that is probably a more appropriate measure of educational impact because it takes into account the fact that you have longer and shorter course terms.

The second point I would like to make is that there is also a very big impact in terms of the overall educational infrastructure within New South Wales. There is no other facility to my knowledge in this State that delivers broad acre dry land farming training. That is a significant contributor to Gross State Product. It is certainly a massive contributor to the economy of this region, but it is also a contributor to the economy of the country as well. If we are to take seriously the emergence of the what in various sectors has been called the clever nation, et cetera, that has emerged in the past 10 years, and if we are to take seriously our contribution and our ongoing role in the global economy, to remove one of the primary skills inputs is to remove a lot of the capacity and potential for the future.

It is now well recognised that training and skills development is a significant contributor to economic development, if not the most significant contributor to economic development. If we are to look at the agricultural sector as having certain domains, if you like, within it—and dry land broad acre farming is one of those—to remove what is in this State anyway the most significant contributor to skills development for that sector is in my personal opinion a detrimental step. To find an equivalent facility or education provider you need to go to Dalby in Queensland. There is nothing similar in Victoria.

CHAIR: With your knowledge of numbers on the ground and the types of facilities and training that are being undertaken here, you and the previous witness have mentioned about the college being the winner of the inaugural National Indigenous Peoples Training Award in 1998, for example, and it has also been pointed out that the college has an involvement with the young Aboriginal people from this region. Can you explain to the Committee the value of this program, and how it is working for indigenous communities around this region?

Mr SPEERS: I probably need to be reasonably careful what I say because some of this may well be departmental information that it may not be appropriate for me to bring forward, but certainly the program that has been running here, through what is called the Aboriginal Rural Training Program [ARTP], has been running since about 1994. My involvement with it commenced when I came to this region in 1997. As a department—and this is public information—we have used that program and that facility as one of the main ways of facilitating education and training within indigenous communities, particularly vocational education and training. That training has also gone back into the at-risk schools sector. The one of the things that has occurred over the past for five years has been the expansion of that program to actually go into the schools sector as well from what was strictly speaking a vocational education and training program. It has actually developed into doing interventions within the school system, particularly at Narrandera. It has also expanded much more broadly in this particular region. It has gone right across New South Wales. It has worked in Dubbo, Broken Hill and at various other locations.

In terms of its impact, I am probably not the best person to ask on that because I am not privy to a lot of the hard statistics, if you like, in terms of outputs and outcomes, but if I can give an example of one I am familiar with, because it is not too far from where I live and a number of friends of mine actually work there, I would nominate Shepherds Park School in Wagga Wagga which is attached to the Juvenile Justice facility there. The impact of the ARTP has been considerable there. Just off the top of my head—and you would need to confirm these figures—the recidivism rate halved within two years of the program's commencing and it was a quite simple vocationally oriented program. Its difference from previous programs—and one of the reasons why we as a department have

used it as a provider of preference, dare I say, is because of its cultural sensitivity to those particular groups.

The people who have worked in that program are conscious of the need to be appropriate to the community they are going into, to the extent that in some cases they will not work with a community if they feel it is inappropriate or that the community cannot work with them. As recently as five days ago I had discussions with people from that unit about that very thing; that is, the appropriateness of continuing to deliver training to a particular indigenous community. They felt that the community was not quite ready for what they were hoping to deliver and they had issues with some of the personnel involved. Those personnel felt it would be better to resolve those issues before commencing their official activities as education and training providers. The impact is certainly strong. It is a well-known and well-recognised program. It has been used as a model at the Federal Government level for evaluation programs. As an individual I can speak highly of it.

CHAIR: You mentioned that the significant increase in enrolments since 1998 has been due to an increase in part-time enrolments reflecting a general trend from VET to module enrolments rather than full courses. Can you explain that?

Mr SPEERS: The vocational education and training sector was opened up to the user-choice policy from about 1994. So, rather than being a TAFE-based sector, private providers could become registered and be accredited to deliver training and, in particular, to receive public funding. A number of shifts have occurred in the way training is delivered and in the way that people have approached accessing the education and training system. One of those shifts has been towards work-based delivery. That has probably been one of the biggest shifts. The other significant shift, primarily since 1998-99, has been the move away from people enrolling in what one would call full certificate courses at various levels to training that is specific to their immediate needs. Unfortunately, the statistics do not go back that far. That trend was picked up in only about 2000 in the official data collection process.

There has been a significant growth in the proportion of students in vocational education and training now enrolling in specific modules or parts of courses rather than in full courses. I refer the committee to the reports produced by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research Ltd [NCVER], which collects national data. Its student outcome surveys, which are produced every 12 months, indicate that that ratio has increased by about 50 per cent since 1999-2000. That suggests that people, particularly those already in the working force, do not want to enrol in a full program but would prefer to do training that is specific to their immediate job needs and career aspirations. They want to train for promotion or to move to alternative employment. That shift has occurred particularly in the 35 to 50-year-old age group. There is still traditional entry-level training for people coming in from high school or university. They do full qualifications. There is also a trend for people at the end of their working life to do full qualifications. Those people engaged in the labour market have shown an increasing preference to pick up modular-based training.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: If they do a series of the module-based courses I referred to earlier—the skills-based courses—I do not have a problem with that. Where do they now go to get the training to bring that all together and to get training in the decision-making and management processes they need on the farm? Farming is not about having a range of different skills; it is about being able to tie them together and having a management style, and using those skills to run a business. Where do they now get that training? I do not believe that can be achieved in a three-day course.

Mr SPEERS: Are you talking about the current situation with MCA or just in general?

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I am talking about both. That is one of the things that MCA used to provide, as did a host of other colleges. That is no longer there. Tocal is the only college that provides that sort of thing.

Mr SPEERS: Within the national training framework you can aggregate the building blocks to achieve a qualification. However, you cannot pull that together. The sum of the parts is greater than the whole. In the absence of a training facility or organisations that can do that, there is not a great deal of opportunity for that to occur. You can have a lot of little skill sets that are not tied together in

any coherent way. The sort of training the college is providing is done within a framework of people rolling through a series of modules and competencies. You build up a coherence through that series. While it was deliberately skills based, because that is how the national training system is set up, the fact that they were doing it continuously through the one agency, and in most cases with one or two trainers or educators, meant they built up the connection between those skills and the framework within which they could be used.

It should be remembered that most training organisations do not now operate simply as training organisations. Recent research done by the National Training Authority shows that training organisations are more and more becoming knowledge brokers. That is consistent with a move to a more knowledge-based economy. It is not just about training but also about how you tie that training to the rest of what you are doing in your working and community life. It is also how that training fits together with other things you are doing. That is hopefully how the overall national framework will function when it finally gets itself bedded down. We will have that coherence as well as the ability to segment and specialise.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Are you aware of the rumour—it is a rumour as far as I am concerned—that \$2 million has been withdrawn from the agricultural college fund bucket this year? It probably came out of Commonwealth funding.

Mr SPEERS: Not to my knowledge; certainly not that amount. The answer to that would appropriately come from my department—probably the Deputy Director General of Strategic Planning and Regulation. Our department is the channel for Commonwealth money into various parts of New South Wales.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: You said that while there was a move towards the provision of short courses at the entry level you needed to have full-time qualifications. I presume that one way of doing that is by going to university. However, another would be by getting qualifications from institutions such as this college. In a region in which the population is very dispersed, presumably there is an ongoing need for a residential facility. Would the existence of that facility also be of benefit to people undertaking short courses?

Mr SPEERS: Yes. That is a commonsense statement. I refer to certificate II, III and IV level training rather than tertiary-level training. There is a tension between people doing their training on the job, which in remote and dispersed communities is the preferred method, versus the advantages that can be gained from mixing with people who are doing similar training elsewhere.

There is a tension, particularly at entry level—and I am talking here about certificate 2, certificate 3 and certificate 4 level rather than, if you like, tertiary level training—between people doing their training on the job which, particularly in remote and disperse communities, is the one of preference, versus the advantages that can be gained from going away from the workplace and mixing with other people who are doing similar sorts of training, that cross-fertilisation, that osmotic effect that occurs within a community of scholars, as universities like to refer to it. The availability of a residential facility gives you the best of both worlds in that respect in that you have a big enough educational infrastructure based here, for example, which can then reach out to remote, dispersed communities.

You also then have the facility to bring people in. That is certainly what I see as one of the strengths of the college, that it had the facility to do that and did do that. Where it was appropriate, students who were doing, particularly, traineeships in remote locations could be pulled in and were pulled in—voluntarily obviously—to do work within the college here. Obviously the facility here is able to do that because it is not just a bricks and mortar teaching facility but has land and animals and things like that—or had land and animals and things like that. It is a working farm. It is an appropriate educational environment in that regard.

Certainly as well, short courses can be run at virtually any location where you can get a room and electricity and various other bits and pieces. Again, it is the ability to be able to pull those together. In some remote locations you cannot get enough people to run short-course training, it is just not economically viable, and we have to live with that. So, having a central facility that you can use to do that, particularly one where you can maximise the benefits for participants—if you are going to

come for a day, why not come for two or three, stay overnight and cram a bit more in. To me that is pretty much commonsense and fairly logical.

As a side comment to that, to me one of the most interesting things personally is that I have seen nothing reported about the use of these facilities post the decision as to what will the motel, dormitory facilities be used for. Whether something is lying in the wings on that, I do not know, but it would relieve a lot of angst on my part and probably on the part of a lot of other people if we were to be informed about what is going to happen to what is fairly significant government infrastructure and a fairly significant facility and a good facility within the region.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: So, even if the facility as a whole lost money on one aspect of it, the provision of residential accommodation, from the point of view of the individuals who participated, is probably a very cost-effective form of obtaining an education? Plus, it would have advantages, particularly for young people who may not like the conventional classrooms or whatever? It has a social component to it?

Mr SPEERS: Yes. I have to reserve comment on the costing side of it because that is a business decision made by the department, by college management, whatever. But I think one of the things that need to be taken into account in any costing formula is exactly what you said, which is that there is a social capital aspect to that, which a hard bricks and mortar, teaching resources, learning materials-type costing will not take into account. The question is, what if this education does not occur? What are the impacts on skills development within the region? Certainly from an academic research viewpoint, which happens to be my area of interest, the development of a skills economy, if you remove the development of skills from a region, what do you then do with that region's economic potential? I hark back to what I said before. Skills development is a primary contributor to economic development. If you remove skills development from an economy the best you can hope for, in my opinion, is stagnation. The worst-case scenario is that you go backwards pretty damn fast.

(The witness withdrew)

PATRICK BRASSIL AM, Deputy Chairman, Riverina Regional Development Board, 80 Macleay Street Wagga Wagga, and

PETER STANLEY DALE, Executive Officer, Riverina Regional Development Board, 48 Fitzmaurice Street Wagga Wagga, sworn and examined:

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

Mr BRASSIL: Yes sir, I have read them.

Mr DALE: Yes, thank you.

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

Mr BRASSIL: Thank you, sir.

Mr DALE: Thank you.

CHAIR: Before you receive questions from the Committee, if either or both of you would like to make a short statement, please feel free to go ahead.

Mr BRASSIL: Yes, I should like to. I should explain why it we are interested in the matter. We are interested simply because we think the Riverina Regional Development Board should be interested in all avenues of employment and all aspects of life throughout this region. An important aspect of this is education. We are interested in education in particular because it has a number of effects in the region in which it operates. First, it adds to the quality of life of people who are being educated or who have become educated. It makes the people being educated ready to accept challenges that might become available to them. The educational facility itself is a source of employment in the region. So, I think there is very good reason why we should be involved in this thing.

The inquiry has already received a submission from us and, generally speaking, we are here to support that submission. We are also aware of some other submissions, for instance, the one from Leeton Shire Council and also the one from the Riverina Area Consultative Committee. Generally speaking, we support what they say, because we have had the opportunity of reading them. We take the individual questions that the Committee has put forward or is looking into and I think we can go into those. Do you want me to or would you sooner we only do that in response to questions?

CHAIR: If there is anything that has not been covered by your written submission, if there is anything you would like to briefly raise at this point, it would be appreciated. Only if it has not been covered in other ways.

Mr BRASSIL: I think it has been covered, really.

CHAIR: That is fine. Mr Dale, would you like to make a statement?

Mr DALE: If we are dealing with matters in our submission, I think that is sufficient for the purpose of what we are here today for.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. I am wondering whether either of you individually or as an organisation were consulted before the decision was made regarding the MCA?

Mr BRASSIL: No.

Mr DALE: No, Mr Chairman.

CHAIR: If you had been consulted, what would you have advised?

Mr BRASSIL: On present knowledge I would have advised that the college be not closed to residential courses and be left open only for long courses. I would have expected to be consulted because I believe the State Government has brought us into existence as a regional development board for particular things to do with the economic development of the region. I believe no department, or no Minister for that matter, should interfere with the employment of people in the region without first consulting us and other interested people in the region. The fact that we were not consulted has left the decision makers in this matter lacking a point of view that we could have put forward.

CHAIR: Could you inform the Committee why the college was not included as part of lifelong learning, and do you believe that had the MCA been part of the Department of Education and Training its future would be different?

Mr BRASSIL: Well, one, I cannot say why it was not part of lifelong learning and, two, I would say it would be different because it would then be part of TAFE, I presume, and TAFE would want to keep providing the service it is there for. Being part of the Department of Agriculture seems to me to indicate that it is an ancillary activity of the Department of Agriculture, which is concerned with other aspects of agriculture besides educating people in it.

Mr DALE: I think, just to add to the comment in relation to the lifelong learning and the future of public education, this institution did not fall within the ambit of that discussion because it was not part of the Department of Education and Training. I think the position we took in response to that particular inquiry was that it was a great pity that it was not part of it and it could not be encompassed as part of the public education structure in this State and, from our perspective, in this region, particularly, as pointed out in our submission, the Riverina Regional Development Board has a very well-established economic development strategy.

This was developed and not just yesterday or a few years ago: it is a 10-year-old strategy which has been constantly reviewed. In fact just recently it went through a complete review process under the guidance from a consultancy team appointed by the State Government. This was a voluntary process that the board resolved to take anyway. The point is that under that regional economic development strategy, we have a particular reference to employment, education and training. It is a cornerstone of future needs for this region.

I heard the previous speaker, Mr Speers, refer to the need not only for skills retention but skills development. The board has been very active over a number of years on that front and sees the need for skills in the region as a primary objective to the extent—while this is not subject to the terms of reference here—of becoming very involved in the migration programs that are available to bring in skilled migrants to this region simply because we are not generating enough of our own organic growth, as people talk about. We just cannot generate them. Take away a facility like this, and that will deteriorate the situation even further.

CHAIR: What is involved in preparing a rural community impact statement? Perhaps you can inform the Committee what it looks at. Is the board normally consulted? Was it consulted in this particular instance?

Mr DALE: My recollection is that quite a number of years ago—this goes back to the mid to late 1990s—there was an undertaking given by government that it would not undertake any type of detrimental action, or any action—maybe the government did not see it as detrimental, but anyway—that would impact on either industry, industry development or employment where it would reduce the number of people in communities. In this instance, as I understand it, we are talking about 40-odd people out of the community of 11,000-odd. That is a significant economic loss and our submission refers to the application of the multiplier effect and what the economic impact is projected to be in this region.

The point that the board is making and that I think the Leeton Shire Council made is that certainly to their knowledge and definitely to our knowledge no such statement was prepared and no such assessment was made of what the big picture impacts would be of this from a regional perspective. It is the old debit-credit; no doubt there were some hard figures looked at and believed to be true for the Minister to make his statement, but on the other hand was there other information that the Minister may not have had in terms of the snowballing, cumulative, cascading effect of taking

away a facility that was going to generate skills level training now and into the future and was going to have an attendant economic impact in terms of loss of jobs multiplied through the community? All country-regional communities are struggling as a result of the drought. Some are struggling better than others and some are doing extremely well, but by and large no regional area can afford job losses to the extent of that, particularly where they are connected directly to skills development.

CHAIR: Mr Dale, in your submission you mention that the board is aware of a paper that promotes a case for a new collegiate system for rural and remote students through rural education and training precincts. I wonder if you have a copy of that paper and whether that can be tabled?

Mr DALE: Yes, I do.

CHAIR: Perhaps you could submit that.

Mr DALE: Yes, Mr Chairman. That was put forward as an example that was promoted by one or two authors as to the likely possible future position for this college. I cannot say that the board has fully considered that and determined whether that is its preferred final outcome, but that was certainly one proposal that was put forward that involved this college coming under the auspices of the Department of Education and Training. Again that proposal may not have been widely canvassed, for instance, among those various institutions but certainly it was a proposal that was put forward that looked like it might have had some merit. There may well have been other proposals that had merit, but that was just one that appeared to have merit and that paper is available, I believe. There is no reason why we should not be happy to provide that.

Mr BRASSIL: No, no reason. It is not our paper, anyway.

The Hon. IAN WEST: I move:

That the paper be tabled.

Motion agreed to.

CHAIR: That will be considered by the Committee. Mr Brassil, do you wish to add anything to that?

Mr BRASSIL: Yes. On that particular matter, the board has not considered it but in our submission we say that the board cannot understand why the Murrumbidgee and Tocal colleges have not been transferred to the Department of Education and Training under a model proposed in our submission, or similar. I think the operative term there is "or similar" because there can be lots of variations on that model. There was lots of debate before it came into effect, too.

CHAIR: I take your point on that and the Committee will certainly be mindful of that. The Committee will treat it as a guide rather than as a definitive statement from the organisation and we appreciate that you are allowing us to consult that material.

Mr BRASSIL: Of course. Thank you very much, Mr Chairman.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: If colleges such as Tocal and MCA were to be transferred to the Department of Education and Training, do you see that they should maintain their focus as an agricultural-specific training college, or would you see them ending up being just another TAFE, basically?

Mr BRASSIL: I can see it being wider than just agriculture, yes, so that I do not think it should be continuously just agricultural specific. However, I think there should be some sort of set-up so that the importance of agriculture to that particular college is recognised; that it is the specialty of that college, and that it should be maintained. I do not see why that could not occur with TAFE but I do not see anything wrong with teaching other aspects that are fairly normal to TAFE. For instance, they do teach quite a lot of general subjects that people receive certificates for, and I think it is mentioned in somebody's submission that they can then go on and matriculate and get into university and places like that. Secondly, I do not see why some other skills should not be taught, for instance

welding or metal work generally, or a number of other skills. I would not see particular virtue in keeping it specific to agriculture except in so far as you would not expect many others to stay at the college in the residential section.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I guess if we look at the agricultural training facilities that are in New South Wales now compared to what was here, say, 30 years ago, the residential agricultural course colleges have gone from five down to one. There are differing academic standards for some of them but there was certainly a choice of five institutions where you could get agricultural training. Now there is only one. Are you concerned about the demise of agricultural training in New South Wales?

Mr BRASSIL: To the extent that it is not being replaced in some other way, yes. For instance, you used to get some agricultural training in normal secondary schools in New South Wales, and you still get it. It is not nearly so intensive as agriculture that you got at, say, the Yanco agricultural college. Yes, I think that the demise of agricultural education at the early levels is a shame. It does not seem to me that at the advanced level you have got the same worry because the agricultural colleges that are not operating as Department of Agriculture colleges seem to me to be operating as part of other organisations. For instance, the Wagga college is now part of CSU and the Orange college became part of the University of Sydney. I believe that is going to change. I am not sure what happened to the Hawkesbury college.

Mr DALE: It is in the University of Western Sydney.

Mr BRASSIL: I suppose that is all right. It is in western Sydney.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: The point is that if you look at the changes that have occurred to those three colleges that you have just mentioned, they have become much more academic. Students that go to them come out with a degree in agricultural science.

Mr BRASSIL: Yes, that is true.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Whereas the sorts of courses at Hawkesbury, Wagga and Orange that were provided 30-odd years ago were more skills based or a mixture of skills-based training and some academic training and lots of management training and those sorts of things. The skills-based part of it is something that I suggest could be provided by TAFE quite adequately, but what is not provided by TAFE is bringing all those skills together into a management decision-making process which I think is going to lead to the demise of agricultural training across the State. Do you have any comments on that?

Mr BRASSIL: I do not see the danger in the way you see it, sir, no, because these colleges do practical training at the same time. I know for instance in some of the work done at CSU Wagga—I am friendly with people who work there and, yes, the hands-on sort of education does occur—it would be confined to the first year mainly and perhaps even the second year, and then it is much more academic, as you say, and you end up with a university degree. I think that is one of the reasons that you are giving us for why this college should be maintained, to give that sort of thing?

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Absolutely.

Mr BRASSIL: Yes, we believe it should be maintained. There is only it and Tocal left, as far as I can make out. I was amused to see somewhere that Tocal was much more centrally located. We regard it as right on the perimeter. It is nearly in the Pacific!

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: You stated a little earlier that education is seen as an ancillary role within the Department of Agriculture now. I guess New South Wales Agriculture is really about providing research and extension services to farmers and others whereas the Department of Education and Training is more about educating all disciplines. Where is the overlap of all of that and how do we try to reconcile that, do you think?

Mr BRASSIL: I think the system in both TAFE and secondary schools takes a lot of that into consideration so that even in a secondary school—I worked in secondary schools for a long time,

30 years—where you have specialists who are very interested academically in their subject, they have had to take a more general view because, being secondary teachers, they had to teach all ages from about 12 up to about 18 so that they learnt to gear their subject and the skills that they wanted to teach to various levels. I think TAFE teachers do exactly the same. They are conscious of the fact that it is part of the education process of the whole college that they are working for, but it is an important part and cannot be isolated from the college.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Earlier I was talking about the subject of the college being located within a research station. The suggestion was that the provision of short term or long courses by the college is a really important aspect of research because it gives the researchers an opportunity to put their research into practice. People would come, learn some skills, take them away, and then they would get subsequent feedback. That would seem to me to be a reasonable argument for the retention of the connection between agriculture and this college.

Mr BRASSIL: Yes. I agree. However, I do not see how the college could not be run by the Department of Education and Training and still maintain that. Wagga started as a research centre and it operated with the Wagga college. However, they had different governing bodies and different people involved. They seemed to co-operate. Whether they co-operated to the degree you are suggesting—that is, with lecturers talking about their research to a class of students—I do not know. I doubt it. That would have been unusual. It would probably have involved a visiting lecturer rather than a normal teaching situation. I do not know enough about the set up to be able to explain it.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: As you are no doubt aware, every government department is strapped for funds. At the moment the Department of Education and Training has courses for skilled migrants, preparation programs and the mature workers' program. Some programs have been scrapped on the pretext that they are job providing courses rather than educational courses. Do you think that if this facility were integrated with the Department of Education and Training that that might be seen as a peripheral exercise and not a core function of the department and therefore that it would also be scrapped in these stringent financial times?

Mr BRASSIL: I do not think so. I know that is a big statement to make. Every high school has an agriculture department, even some schools in Sydney. They have agriculture teachers. The children are taken on excursions to see various agricultural activities. While we have that core of expertise in the teaching profession agriculture teaching will continue. We could argue that languages used to be important years ago, but they are rarely taught in schools now. A group of teachers were very committed to languages. I do not have an answer for that. Fashions come and go in education. I do not see why agriculture should get outed in New South Wales, but I can understand why languages could.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: If we reduce the number of colleges from five to two we are heading down that path.

Mr BRASSIL: That is correct. We are down to one.

Mr DALE: In relation to the first question, drawing the relationship between the institute and this facility, I refer to the situation at Wagga Wagga and Charles Sturt University. It has significant teaching in viticulture and oenology. It has a commercially productive winery and a wine science course that is internationally recognised. Those facilities work in absolute synergy. There is value added all the way through that process. There is an on-the-job training component for the students in those subjects. They are on the spot and they have an educational institution in which they can draw on different levels of education. In that sense, everyone is getting the best value: The academics have a ready-made student who can see the process and the university enjoys the fruits of its labours in marketing wine that is well acknowledged in this country. The synergies are there with these facilities all in the one precinct.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Is the RRDB aware of the working party from the Department of Agriculture and the CSU investigating these issues?

Mr DALE: I am aware of it only because it was disclosed in the submission by Leeton Shire Council, and we were made privy to that submission. I was not aware of it until I read that submission.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Are you aware that student numbers have been declining since 1993 to 2003?

Mr BRASSIL: Yes, I am aware of that.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Do you have any idea why?

Mr BRASSIL: Another submission addressed that. I thought that it blamed the drought for some of it. Someone compared today with 10 years ago, and it was comparable. There was an increase in the middle. I am sorry I did not note it more carefully.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: I thought you would have had a view.

Mr BRASSIL: Not other than what I have said.

Mr DALE: I refer to notes made available at a meeting held here on 8 September with a raft of concerned people. Of course, that was a week or so after the announcement of the closure.

CHAIR: Are those notes publicly available?

Mr DALE: Yes.

CHAIR: Perhaps you can table the document.

Mr DALE: I am sure they are publicly available.

Document tabled.

Mr DALE: The document states that the Student numbers quoted for 2005-06 included both full-time students and part-time trainees. However, the 2003 figures quoted by the Minister when justifying the closure only mentioned 39 full-time students and not the 35 part time students. If the correct figures had been used it would have given a total of 74 students.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: The 65 students in 2000 were full-time and part-time students. Do you have a break down of the full-time and part-time students?

Mr DALE: It that information is in the document.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing before the committee.

(The witnesses withdrew)

ADRIAN PICCOLI, Member of Parliament, was called:

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

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: Yes.

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

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: Yes.

CHAIR: Before there is questioning from the Committee, if you would like to make a short statement?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: I would, thank you, Mr Chairman. Firstly, to thank the Committee for allowing me to give evidence as the local member. I have put in a relatively detailed submission based on my own knowledge of this issue but also based on representations made to my electorate office by people concerned about this decision. That contains a lot of detail but I would like to make six points generally in my presentation. The first is that I believe for the electorate I have represented for five years the closure of the full-time residential courses is the worst decision that has ever been made. That is reflected in the number of people who have contacted my office—parents of students very distressed about it—but also people who have no link either through having children at the college or working here. People saw it as a real blow to the community, a real kick in the teeth, if I can say that.

The buoyancy of country communities can be based on something as simple as an inch of rain. The closure of an educational facility on top of the drought and on top of everything else was a real blow to the psyche of the community, not just in the electorate of Murrumbidgee but right across western New South Wales. At a time when we are on building prisons and closing colleges, I can only see it as a very backward step. I attended the graduation ceremony here at the college a couple of months ago. While I congratulate the students, it was a fairly sombre experience held in a relatively small hall, whereas in previous years it has been held in the forecourt under a big marquee with several hundred people and the Minister for Agriculture or the director-general being the official guest. This year's graduation ceremony was an unfortunate sign of the times.

The second point is that there was no real consultation prior to this decision being made. Even when I was told I refused to believe it and said I did not think any government would close a college. I was wrong. People have talked about that in fair detail. The third point is the justification for the closure. Again, previous witnesses have talked about the cost savings being relatively small. There was the running down of the place; the lecturer positions that were not properly replaced—I think his name was Ross Arnold, the irrigation certificate lecturer who was not replaced after he finished—and Jeff Armstrong in 1999, the sheep management and pastoral property management lecturer. How do you blame students for not enrolling when they did not have the opportunity to be taught by as highly skilled staff as possible? Any educational facility is only as good as the teachers who are there. Bricks and mortar do not teach you anything. That is an important consideration when you look at why the numbers may have been declining.

Also, when the Government or the department looked at the declining numbers, rather than see that as a justification to close the college, surely it should have been justification to look at what could be done to get those numbers up and look at the reason behind the declining numbers. It relates to those lecturers but it probably relates to the advertising of the college and the publicity of the college. I think that has a fair bit to do with it. I am sorry there was not this sort of attention on the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture prior to this decision being made. That is one of the unfortunate things.

The fourth point is what about the future for the western Riverina? As I said, I am sorry an inquiry of some sort was not done on the Murrumbidgee college beforehand. As you would have seen at lunchtime as you had a look around, it is a terrific facility. If numbers were declining, that is something that should have been looked at previously. One of the most significant future development

issues we have in the western Riverina is the skills shortage we face. At places like Leeton and Griffith in particular there are a large number of job vacancies. The job vacancies that exist here are inhibiting development to some extent. I know businesses like Barters, who employ 1,500 people, in some ways are unable to expand here despite the fact that they have the land and the resources and everything like that. What they do not have are the human resources. They do not have the people with the skills. It is difficult to attract people who are born and raised in Sydney or on the coast to come inland. Really, the future for improving the skills base here is to train local people locally. The Murrumbidgee college certainly has been well-placed to do that.

If it was not doing it properly with the declining numbers, there should have been further investigation into what could be done to improve it, to improve its performance and work towards filling those skills shortages that we have in the western Riverina. I think there would have been room for expanding it into areas other than just agriculture. These days agriculture is not just about planting, harvesting and animal husbandry. It is also about environmental management, an issue I know the Chairman is particularly interested in. Leeton is almost the heart of the Murray-Darling basin. We are only a stone's throw from the Murrumbidgee River. Surely the scope for a place like this would be in environmental science. It would be more appropriate for students to study environmental science in Leeton than at Sydney University or somewhere like that. You are on the ground. So, there is great scope for a place like this. I am just sorry that the decision to close those full-time, residential courses was made before we moved on to these types of considerations. I understand there is a working party between the college and the CSU. Once you have knocked back the college the way it has been knocked back, it is hard to then build it back up again.

The fifth point was education. Tertiary education is the key to jobs in western New South Wales, a point I have made before. The sixth and final point I would like to make is the big picture issue about the quality of access to services for people, particularly in western New South Wales. I have in front of me a background paper prepared by the New South Wales Parliamentary Library in 2003 entitled, "The New South Wales State Electoral Districts ranked by 2001 Census Characteristics." Some of the statistics contained here are enlightening in some ways but unfortunate in other ways. This research paper basically lists all of the lower House electorates in terms of different characteristics. For example, table 41A ranks all the electorates by proportion of persons with tertiary education qualifications. The electorate of Murrumbidgee, which the college is in, ranks 84th out of 93 electorates. The electorate of Murray-Darling, which is just west of here, ranks 88th out of 93. The electorate of Lachlan, which is just 80 kilometres north of here and contains West Wyalong and Lake Cargelligo, ranks 89th, and the electorate of Barwon, which is in north-western New South Wales, ranks 88th. So, these western New South Wales electorates that are very dependent on the Murrumbidgee college, or have been very dependent on the college, rank in the bottom 10 per cent of electorate with tertiary qualified persons.

Again, table 43A ranks electorates by proportion of persons with no qualifications. The electorate of Murrumbidgee is ranked sixth, so it is ranked very highly, I guess you could say. The electorate of Lachlan is ranked fifth. The electorate of Murray-Darling is ranked fourth and the electorate of Barwon is ranked third. So, these western New South Wales electorates have four of the six seats with the lowest number of people with qualifications. You might deduce from that that it is just a factor of western New South Wales or country New South Wales, but if you look at electorates where there are tertiary facilities—I know Murrumbidgee college is not a university, but it is essentially a tertiary facility—the electorate of Monaro, which covers Queanbeyan, and has Canberra University and the Australian National University, is ranked 63rd; the electorate of Bathurst, with the university there, is ranked 35th; Wagga Wagga is ranked 33rd and Orange is ranked 23rd.

The last table I want to refer to is table 45A, ranked by proportion of persons attending a tertiary education institution. Out of the 93 electorates, Murrumbidgee is 90th, Murray-Darling is 88th, Lachlan is 86th and Barwon is 85th. So, these electorates have really the lowest number of persons attending tertiary institutions. If you look at those other western New South Wales seats that do have tertiary institutions, Northern Tablelands, which is centred on Armidale, is ranked twelfth; Wagga Wagga is ranked fourteenth; Bathurst is 27th; Albury, with Charles Sturt University, is 35th. I will table those if you like, but they are some Parliamentary Library documentation. If we want to provide equitable access to tertiary qualifications for people right across New South Wales, you have to provide the institutions. You cannot rely on the fact that people are able to travel, because a lot of people cannot travel. Those statistics show that the equity of access to tertiary education is not spread

evenly. It is spread to where the institutions are. That is the most compelling reason for the Murrumbidgee college to retain those full-time residential courses and for them to be expanded into other areas, perhaps jointly with the university, but prior to the current decision having been made.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Piccoli. Would you like those documents tabled?

Documents tabled.

Your submission notes 35 part-time trainees at MCA in 2003. Do you know what has happened to those students? Have they continued their traineeship elsewhere?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: I am not sure what has happened to the part-time trainees. I know of all the full-time students, only one has gone to Tocal. A lot of the students who were previously here went to a college in Victoria, I cannot remember what it is called, and a number have gone to Queensland, and only one has gone to Tocal. Of the trainees I am not exactly sure. The information I have generally received is the feedback from parents themselves.

CHAIR: You mentioned in part of your submission the direct effects on the rural sector. You said:

Closure of the MCA will result in a loss of irrigation knowledge and the education of the next generation of irrigators with irrigation practices in other areas being inconsistent with local practices.

Could you perhaps expand on that?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: There is a lot of pressure on irrigation practices, and I think the irrigation industry, both Broadacre and in horticulture, has come a long way. I know the college has been very focused on water use efficiency, doing a lot of research into that and a lot of training in that. I think the irrigation practices in western New South Wales are certainly very different to what occurs on the coast, in the Sydney basin and in the Hunter Valley. The point of that is that I do not know that the training you might receive at Tocal would be particularly relevant to Broadacre irrigation and Broadacre horticulture. I just think that the uniqueness of the Murrumbidgee college, because of the agriculture that occurs in this area of western New South Wales, will not be replicated in another institution like Tocal. They represent different types of agriculture.

CHAIR: You said further in your notes:

The Agriculture Minister has said that closing the MCA will generate yearly savings of around \$1 million.

Further down you say:

The effect of the closure on nearby towns has been estimated to see losses of \$2.5 million in direct wages and \$10 million overall in ripple effect.

Could you inform the Committee where those figures have come from?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: I am not sure where the figures have come from. I can get back to you on that.

CHAIR: Perhaps you can take that on notice?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: Yes. Just on that, the college was used for other things. In the last dot point there on the last page of my submission, I say:

Prior to the closure the College was to host a Top Deck Reunion to 200 people, 250 for an Agfest, school groups of 200 children and also Statewide participants in Leeton's Little Athletics Carnival.

They all used the residential accommodation here. I also know, although I do not think it is stated in my submission, that the Rotary Club for the past two years has held its Rotary youth leadership awards here over a period of about a week. They are other uses apart from just the educational use and that the college has had. I know that since the announcement to close the residential courses was made, that Topdeck reunion could no longer be held here. We tried through my office to have the

Minister to have that reunion go-ahead, but it was not able to be and had to be accommodated elsewhere in Leeton. The college really provided an opportunity for those other non-agricultural events to occur here. Without this facility, I question whether those sorts of things will still go on in Leeton.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: The working party between the Department of Agriculture and CSU, do you have any confidence that that will bring something to the college here?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: If it had been set up prior to the announcement to close the residential courses, yes, but if we look at the time line of what happened, it will show that the announcement was made, there was a great deal of public outrage about it, and I know that perhaps the most outraged group of people were the Leeton Council. Then it was announced that the advisory group was going to be established. I think it there was a genuine desire to have some sort of outcome between CSU and the college, that would have been announced prior to the closure of the courses. I think it was done to placate the protesters to some degree. I know I cannot say that without sounding political because I am a member of a party, but really if the college had been given a year and if the Government had said that that is what it was planning to do in a year's time—

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: You have no confidence in it?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: Know.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: He made one comment earlier that in your opinion with the number of representations that have come through your office, this decision was the worst one you have come across. I know this is not in the terms, but do you believe that the closure of these residential courses is worse than the closure of the Letona fruit cannery some years ago?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: Yes, I certainly do. The closure the cannery was a commercial business that the Government was actually pouring millions of dollars into a high. I think that, since that is, Leeton has gone ahead in leaps and bounds, actually.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: That was a good decision?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: Look, closing and education facility is, I think, to anybody not seen as a particularly good decision.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: There was a view expressed by members of the advisory council earlier today that there appeared to be a pattern of allowing the college to run down and that that could perhaps be dated back as far as 1998. Would you like to comment on that?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: From what I have heard—and that is probably the same as what you have heard—from the advisory council and from others is that is, yes, that is true. Whether that is the fact that education is not part of the Department of Agriculture's core business and that maybe it has taken its eye off the ball to some degree, I do not know; maybe that is the case. But if that has been historically the case, I think that when the numbers were dropping down, it was an appropriate time to look at it, and look toward the future and look at why those numbers were coming down as well as look at what could be done to turn it around rather than seeing it as a justification for stopping the courses. It is the case that those lecturer positions were not field. I am sure that that had a lot to do with that.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: There has been quite a bit of discussion through the courtesy of Hon. Rick Colles today about the loss of practical hands-on skills that were taught in institutions such as theirs but are not necessarily an acquired at a university or as a college of advanced education. If you couple the loss of this college as a provider of those skills and you look back within TAFE at the teaching population that is ageing rapidly, it looks like we are going to have a crisis in the provision of skills within TAFE. That does not augur particularly well for this area and perhaps for the entire State.

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: Absolutely. It is difficult to get any type of skilled employees, teachers included, but that is no reason to throw your arms up and say that it is all getting too hard. It is actually more reason to focus more attention on how to resolve some of those problems. For every

person who lives here because there is not a good enough lecturer in agricultural science, there is a person whom will move to Sydney. They will add to that 1,000 people a week who are moving to Sydney. If you want to keep people here, you will have to think about new ways of doing it and new ways of attracting people. You can do it through education with the points system for teachers who go into remote areas. Leeton is regarded as being remained area for the purposes of the Department of Education and Training or a difficult to staff area. There are solutions out there. Because it is difficult, that means we should put more attention into solving it.

But the most important thing I think about the Murrumbidgee college is the residential side of things. That is very important to western New South Wales because of the distances and access. If you had even the Murrumbidgee college here fully fledged without a residential component, it would still be pretty difficult to access it if you are from Balranald, Brewarrina or Nymagee or anywhere else. The reason why it has raised such passionate concerns here is because of the residential side of things. Young students could come here, do their agricultural courses and actually stay here because of the boarding facility. I know that Gordon Dunlop from the Isolated Children and Parents Association [ICPA] will be giving evidence later. The ICPA are very concerned about the residential side of education.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Are you aware of the publicity that has been given to the short course proposals over the past 12 months?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: Yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Would you say it has increased dramatically over the past 12 months?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: From my observation, there seems to be a little bit more. I do not know whether I notice it now more than before the announcement was made, but I have noticed the advertising a bit more, yes.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I am wondering if the full-time residential courses had been promoted to the same extent as these courses are, whether there would have been a lot more enrolments than there has been?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: Yes. I would not say that from my experience, even as a relatively recent school-leaver myself, it has been a particularly well publicised college.

CHAIR: Some would say that you are still at school, given the institution you are a member of.

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: Well, still learning, anyway.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: I think when those numbers were dropping there was an opportunity to look at the marketing behind it. I think some of those other institutions market themselves very well, and there is no reason why this college could not do the same.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Did you have a lot of representations from constituents?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: I did. I received a lot of telephone calls and letters from people, and I might say that they were not just people who had a personal interest in the college but from people who saw it as a psychological blow, where government has shown a lack of confidence in agriculture in a rural community by withdrawing facility such as this.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Where some of those people even potential or existing employers?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: I could not answer that question. I would not know the answer to that question.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: In your opinion, how important is it for agricultural students to be trained in their own climatic and geographical area? How relevant is it, for example, for somebody to go to Dalby to learn to farm at Condobolin or Leeton?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: From what I know of agricultural training, whether it is intentional or not, the training is kind of skewed towards what occurs locally. Here obviously the irrigation is a focus because we are in the middle of an irrigation area, but I do not think if you go outside a particular region you will get the same sort of training. I think that is part of the problem. While the names of the courses might be the same in Tocal, it is a different type of agriculture.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: We heard earlier on from the Murrumbidgee advisory board that they take some responsibility for not perhaps marketing properly. But when I look at the report and we go back to October 2000 when the director-general released the terms of reference for the review and the department held the review, it seems that they had no intention, even back in October 2000, of conducting a review that would ensure the college survived. There is a lot of duplicity there and we have the head of the department actually lying, I believe, in writing about what the intentions were. Do you think that if the department had recognised the problem in 2000 and said to that we need to bump up our marketing, you may have got a different result?

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: I think so. When I was listening to Mr Geltch's evidence earlier, I thought that if they had been given notification that if numbers had dropped, the college would close, then perhaps their attention might have been more acutely focused. I think the council was taken very much by surprise when the announcement to close those courses was made. I think if they had been given some parameters and it was said that to if they get their numbers up to whatever by X date, and if they had been given that kind of ultimatum I think the results would be much different.

The Hon. CHARLIE LYNN: That is not out of the question for the department to do that, given the expertise it has on a Statewide basis.

Mr ADRIAN PICCOLI: Yes. That is right. I do not think there has been in a focus on the college. I do not think there has been enough commitment in the past four or five years towards the college, and I think the Department of Agriculture—and this is only my personal opinion—was more or less happy that numbers had gone down sufficiently to justify closure of those courses.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Piccoli. The Committee appreciates that you have taken the time to attend, bearing in mind you have other commitments.

(The witness withdrew)

GORDON LESLIE DUNLOP, State President, Isolated Children's Parents' Association, Nestorville, Tallimba, 2669, affirmed:

CHAIR: Your address may be deleted later, if you desire. Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

Mr DUNLOP: Yes.

CHAIR: If you should consider at any stage that certain evidence you wish to give or documents you may wish to tender should be heard or seen only by the Committee, the Committee will consider your request. Before the Committee asks questions of you, would you like to make a short statement?

Mr DUNLOP: Yes, I would. I thank the Committee for inviting me to attend. The Isolated Children's Parents' Association has been in existence for 32 years. It is a completely voluntary organisation and we deal with many issues ranging from early childhood right through to tertiary. We deal a lot with communications and hostels. We are always lobbying for equal access to education, and this inquiry falls right into our category of concern. We have been involved with the Murrumbidgee college for many years. Helen Withers, our past president, has been involved in setting up the pastoral property management course and has been a member of the advisory council since 1993.

We lobbied very hard for students to gain the private vehicle conveyancing subsidy from the transport department because these students are recognised as school-age students, even though they do not attend a school. They are still between 16 and 18 years old, so it has been a very big issue with ICPA for students at Tocal and Murrumbidgee to have access so that they can have transport from their home to their nearest pick-up point to deliver them to these colleges.

We have always had representation at our conferences from MCA. This year was the first year we had no-one. We were not invited to the presentations to graduates at the beginning of this year and that was a major concern. I have always had contact with the principal and the deputy principal. We feel that with the closure of the residential courses our door has been closed this year, and it is a great loss. I would not wish this upon anyone. The students gave me their student representative funds to hold in trust until this college re-opens. I said to them, "How do I look you in the eye given the misrepresentation of costs?" It was such an emotional time. When I went home I did not take any phone calls. I did get two calls from students thanking me very much. I would not wish that upon anyone.

CHAIR: I appreciate the work that you and your organisation have done in representing disadvantaged people. Was the association consulted prior to the decision regarding the college?

Mr DUNLOP: No, we had no consultation. Our major concern with the advisory council was that it was nominated by the Minister and there has been no consultation with it, the community, the students or the parents.

CHAIR: What was the source of the \$24,500 and \$12,000 quoted at page three of your submission?

Mr DUNLOP: The \$24,500 was a costing for only 39 full-time students. They did not take into account the 2,400 part-time hours that should have been added to the costing of the 39 full-time students. Tocal's costings included both full-time and part-time students. When you put the two figures for MCA together with Tocal's figures you come up with a costing of about \$12,000, which is well under the TAFE recommendation. It works out at about \$19.80 and \$12.80 an hour and TAFE ranges from \$12 to \$18 an hour face-to-face.

CHAIR: You mention in your introduction that children were being withdrawn from boarding school and mothers were supervising their children and were not able to cope with the demand of working on the farm and continuing to teach. Can you elaborate on that in terms of the impact of the closure of the residential facility?

Mr DUNLOP: It is two different issues. I am doing distance education at home. The drought has had an impact on farm income. Families need a second income off-farm, which has put extra strain on them. They are finding it very hard to educate their children by distance education.

The impact of the drought has certainly had some impact on MCA. It is not the overall impact. There has been an overall decline in the rural population. I am on another advisory board that has all the figures for every student in the State. It fluctuates in some areas. We do not regard this as a geographically isolated area. Some geographically isolated areas are fluctuating. However, overall there is a total decline. It certainly has had an effect on the enrolment at MCA. The main issue is that the figures are not declining here; they have increased. They have gone from 24 to 29 full-time students in 2003. The reason for the decline is that families cannot afford to educate their children. When they get to years 11 and 12 and they cannot cope with face-to-face teaching they come to agricultural colleges. They also feel obliged to stay at home and help their families. It is a big expense to board and the drought has had some impact. I am sure that if everything was fine and there had never been a drought there would not be a decline in the numbers.

I heard before about the lack of classes and teachers, especially in the pastoral property management courses, over the past three years. We feel that the college has not been well advertised. As Mr Piccoli said, there needs to be promotion of any institution, like there is with public or private education. Farming has not changed; the techniques have changed but in essence it has not changed. We are in the hub of the agricultural industry; we are in the centre of the industry. We have every opportunity for work experience, whether it be irrigation, broadacre farming or whatever. The pastoral property management course is offered here to an advanced level. It is not offered at TAFE. Wagga TAFE has a course, but it is not up to certificate IV level. If those children achieve in the second year in that course they are eligible to go on to CSU in Wagga Wagga. We appreciate the relationship between CSU and Wagga Wagga. It is vital that we keep the accommodation open because it is the only access these children have for an agricultural experience at that level.

One big issue for families is that we have the agricultural high school next door. If families cannot cope with year 11 and 12 there they send their children to this institution. Families might live at Condoblin or Hay and have one child at the high school and one child here. If this institution is closed, those year 11 and 12 students who want to come here cannot. It would mean breaking up the family unit, which we are very concerned about.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Was your organisation advised prior to the announcement being made? How did you first hear about it?

Mr DUNLOP: I heard about it through the advisory council. We lobbied very hard in our main deputation in October. We had a meeting with—

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Mr Macdonald?

Mr DUNLOP: No, he refused to see us. We saw Mr Kelly. We asked for a 12-month moratorium. It was mentioned in the upper House. We were very disappointed that it did not happen. Otherwise we would not be here today.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: If there were to be some changes, what sort of process should occur and what consultation should be conducted?

Mr DUNLOP: Any consultation. It is vital that we build up these communities. We understand what it is like living in these communities. It is up to the Government to ensure that government agencies are focused on strengthening local communities. One interesting factor in this document is that farmers must deal with declining commodity prices, low profitability and rising debt. Is it our fault that we have low commodity prices? It is part of the Government's responsibility to build up the commodity prices. Sometimes I wish I lived in America so we would be subsidised. We grow a very good quality of produce. It makes it very hard when we have no control over declining commodity prices.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: How many members do you have?

Mr DUNLOP: We have 1,300 families and 3,300 nationally.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Of the 1,300 families in New South Wales, how many have students who have come through this place?

Mr DUNLOP: I have no idea. However, two people on our state council have studied here. A large number of farming families have members who have done part-time and residential courses here.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: Would it be fair to say that the decision will have a big impact on members of your association?

Mr DUNLOP: It certainly will. Last year I influenced a family to send their child here. They came here and looked at the facilities. They also went to Tocal to have a look and decided to send their child here. They kept asking me whether the college would stay open. I said we were trying our best and that if we could get the 12-month moratorium we would have a chance. That child has left. That family has been in agriculture for four generations, and that child has left to do another traineeship. We must encourage local skilled people to come to these courses. We must publicise them. As Mr Piccoli said, we are in an area where there are not the opportunities for skilled workers compared to other areas of the State. It is vital that this facility stay open. It will succeed only if there is accommodation, so children can have access.

The Hon. RICK COLLESS: If it were to exist in a short-course form, but the residential accommodation were provided, would that in part deal with the difficulties?

Mr DUNLOP: I am sure it would. It is hard to open full-time courses unless there is a survey of community needs. Since there has been a lot of bad publicity, many people think that the college has closed completely. I have made sure that people understand that it is only the residential full-time and part-time courses that have been affected. Some people believe that it has been closed all together. We must provide every opportunity to access education. I do not care whether it is run by TAFE or the Department of Agriculture. Dr Refshauge informed us on Wednesday last week that there was no money in the Department of Education and Training's budget, so I do not know how it funds the MCA. Of course, there is money in the transport budget.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: On page 3 of your submission you nominate the casualties of closure as the 44 people who lost their jobs, the 39 full-time students and the 95 part-time students. On the following page you refer to 43 families being lost to the district. Have they been lost to the district?

Mr DUNLOP: Some of the staff who were working here have jobs in others districts. It is also the loss of students in schools. I am not sure about where the 44 families have gone. I know that some lived in Griffith and came here to work.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: You expect a significant flow-on effect to the local economy.

Mr DUNLOP: It certainly does. It has a huge impact on sporting facilities and spouses. They could have been nurses and they have left the district. I can refer only to figures from the department about how hostels affect communities. The hostel in Hay had 20 students and over six years it put \$1.4 million into that community. This is on a much larger scale. I am sure the figures have been produced about the loss of income to the community.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: So, it is not just the income that was generated by those people and their families being here. When they depart they take skills with them?

Mr DUNLOP: Yes, they take their skills. If they are highly qualified students in sport, it is taking those skills away from the local schools. It is a huge flow-on effect. I am sure it would have a bigger effect if it was in a smaller community. Leeton certainly has viable horticulture and viticulture and Broadacre farming. It has it all here. So, it would not have the effect, say, if you had the Murrumbidgee college in Gulargambone or somewhere.

Amended

(The witness withdrew)

(The Committee adjourned at 4.01 p.m.)