

Response to questions on notice asked by the  
Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia for its inquiry into  
Workforce Development in Northern Australia

... across the regions in your jurisdiction in terms of  
... changes? Which sectors operating in those regions are  
experiencing the most challenges in attracting and retaining staff?

- *Good people. Good jobs: Queensland Workforce Strategy 2022-32 (QWS)* is a ten-year whole-of-government strategy to strengthen Queensland's current and future workforce. The Strategy includes five focus areas — workforce attraction and retention, workforce participation, local solutions, school-to-work transitions and skilling Queenslanders.
- The QWS identifies a number of key areas of workforce demand for Queensland in the coming years that are relevant to all regions across Queensland:
  - Growing need for degree-qualified and experienced health, social and education workforce
  - Strong demand for entry-level and VET-qualified workforce in health care and social assistance
  - Increased demand for VET- and degree qualified engineering, technical and digital workforce
  - Ongoing demand for entry-level workers in our consumer-facing service sectors
  - Demand for a VET-qualified workforce in skilled trades, traditional industry and utilities.
- It is important to recognise that each of Queensland's regions is unique, which results in varied demand for workers and skills across each region, along with varied workforce challenges and opportunities.
- The QWS highlights that regional population centres within Queensland (e.g. Cairns, Townsville, Mackay) are generally experiencing strong workforce demand in the following sectors:
  - Health Care and Social Assistance
  - Retail, Accommodation and Food Services
  - Mining
  - Education and Training
- Rural areas in Queensland (e.g. Far North Queensland) are generally experiencing strong workforce demand in the following sectors:
  - Mining
  - Health Care and Social Assistance



- Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing
- Retail, Accommodation and Food Services
- Jobs Queensland is an independent entity providing advice to the Queensland Government on workforce-related issues. Jobs Queensland publishes detailed projections of future employment demand for regions, industries, occupations and qualifications. Regional profiles are available for key regions in Queensland: [Region profiles | Jobs Queensland](#)

**2) Historically what were the biggest challenges for workforce development in the north, and how do these compare to the challenges today? How were these challenges addressed by governments?**

- Queensland is a large and relatively sparsely populated state. It is the most decentralised of all the mainland states, with less than half the population living in its capital city. This decentralisation is particularly apparent in the north of the state, and many workforce challenges are very localised rather than uniform across 'the north'.
- Historically, the Queensland Government has addressed workforce challenges through a range of programs that have been in place for a number of years. For example:
  - The Skilling Queenslanders for Work initiative was introduced in 2015 and supports unemployed and under-employed individuals undertake vocational education and training (VET), enabling increased workforce participation and improved skills development for disadvantaged Queenslanders.
  - The Back to Work program was introduced in 2016 and provides targeted assistance to support young people, people with disability, long-term unemployed people, and Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples to access employment support, with a view to longer term retention in the workforce.
  - The Local Government Association of Queensland has received funding since 2015, to work with remote First Nations councils to build capability and grow the local workforce (assisting 16 remote Indigenous communities and six communities with high Indigenous populations, primarily within Northern Queensland).
  - Significant annual investment in Vocational Education and Training and broader skills development for Queenslanders.
- More recently, the Queensland Government has taken a broader approach to strengthening Queensland's workforce, including in Northern Queensland, through the QWS that is referenced elsewhere in the responses to these questions. The QWS builds upon and complements the broader suite of support outlined above.

**3) What makes people in your jurisdiction want to live in Northern Australia? What incentives from all levels of government could encourage people to live in Northern Australia?**

Question referred to the Hon. Glenn Butcher MP, Minister for Regional Development and Manufacturing and Minister for Water, as the Minister representing Queensland on the Northern Australia Ministerial Forum.

**4) How do levels of government currently collaborate to address issues in Northern Australia, and how can collaboration and coordination be improved?**

Question referred to the Hon. Glenn Butcher MP, Minister for Regional Development and Manufacturing and Minister for Water, as the Minister representing Queensland on the Northern Australia Ministerial Forum.

**5) What policies do you have in place to address workforce issues in Northern Australia, and how will these be evaluated in terms of effectiveness and whether they are fit-for-purpose?**

- The Queensland Government is taking a proactive approach to strengthening Queensland's current and future workforce. In August 2022, the Queensland Government released the QWS which is Queensland's first whole-of-Government workforce strategy. The QWS delivers innovative and practical solutions that are needed now to ensure Queensland has a ready workforce to support growth, strengthen our communities and keep Queensland at the forefront of new economic opportunities.
- The Queensland Government is committed to increasing the size, skills and adaptability of the state's workforce by committing \$70 million towards new initiatives through the QWS. This builds on the significant investment in existing government-funded programs to accelerate job creation and workforce development and help Queenslanders overcome barriers to employment. In 2022-23 alone, the Queensland Government is investing more than \$1.2 billion in skills and training initiatives.
- The QWS was informed by the Queensland Workforce Summit, held in March 2022, which identified that workforce solutions work best when they are community-centred, industry-led and government-enabled. The QWS is underpinned by a focus on collaboration, innovation and partnerships with key stakeholders.
- Through the Local Solutions focus area, the QWS highlights that each of Queensland's regions is unique and these localised workforce challenges and opportunities are best addressed through locally-led solutions, underpinned by quality data and collaboration between government, industry sectors, employers and communities. The QWS includes specific actions focussed on supporting regions to implement workforce planning strategies and actions linked to their

local needs and priorities, recognising that each region in Queensland is different and needs different solutions. This includes:

- Jobs Queensland partnering with individual regions to develop workforce plans and initiatives to support 'grow your own' workforces and cross-sector skills development
  - Partnering with rural and remote communities through local governments to deliver local skills and job creation initiatives to increase workforce capacity in these locations.
- Local structures are currently supporting workforce outcomes at the local level, including a network of Regional Jobs Committees, Regional Community Forums, Local Decision-Making Bodies, regional office networks of government agencies and Neighbourhood and Community Centres.
- The QWS Action Plan for 2022-2025 was released alongside the Strategy. Successive plans will reflect the lessons learnt and build on the achievements of the previous plans, tackling any challenges and opportunities that have emerged. To ensure the QWS remains responsive to the evolving needs of Queensland's workforce over the next decade, the plans will be evidenced-based and evaluated. In addition, a range of review activity is currently underway to maximise the alignment of existing workforce-related advisory and engagement mechanisms, such as Regional Jobs Committee and Jobs Queensland, with the objectives and priorities outlined in the QWS.
- As a whole-of-government strategy, the QWS is also informing a range of workforce-related activity in portfolios across the Queensland Government. This includes, but is not limited to, the Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan and the commitment within it to develop a Future Energy Workforce Roadmap, the Queensland Resources Industry Development Plan and the commitment within it to develop a Queensland Resources Workforce Plan and the development of a Queensland Health Workforce Strategy.

**6) What level of consultation and co-design do you currently have in place for policies affecting people in Northern Australia? How are you working with remote communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities?**

- Matters relating to consultation and co-design for policies affecting people in Northern Australia and working with remote communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities extend across multiple Queensland Government portfolios.
- Key examples within the Employment, Small Business and Training Portfolio include:
  - Regional Jobs Committees are supported by the Queensland Government to provide an opportunity for local stakeholders to work together to align regional



skills and workforce development with local industry and employer needs. The committees are bringing together local business, government, community leaders, training providers, industry representatives, high schools and unions to ensure training and employment solutions are more accurately aligned with local skills needs and economic activity to support regional jobs growth. Nine Regional Jobs Committees are in place across Queensland, of which three are in Northern Australia (Cairns, Townsville and Mackay).

- In September 2022, the Queensland Government released the Paving the Way – First Nations Training Strategy. This \$8.3 million strategy will support First Nations people to be better connected with training and skilling opportunities that link to sustainable good local jobs. The delivery of the First Nations Training Strategy is an action in the QWS. The development of this strategy was underpinned by extensive stakeholder engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander councils, community groups, businesses, industry groups and individuals. Delivery of the strategy is underpinned by a number of guiding principles, including community-led approaches to address local needs and harness efforts, resources and opportunities to work toward shared and long-term goals, including goals for self-determination.

**7) What are the main issues your government is focused on addressing in Northern Australia, and what initiatives and policies do you have in place (or have you implemented) to address these issues?**

Question referred to the Hon. Glenn Butcher MP, Minister for Regional Development and Manufacturing and Minister for Water, as the Minister representing Queensland on the Northern Australia Ministerial Forum.

**8) What can the Australian Government do better to address issues with workforce development in Northern Australia?**

See response in Q12

**9) What key issues would you suggest this committee focus its attention on as a matter of urgency for this inquiry?**

See response in Q12

**10) How is your government encouraging internal migration to Northern Australia? What policy initiatives would you suggest the Australian Government consider implementing to support state initiatives designed to encourage internal migration Northern Australia?**

Question referred to the Hon. Glenn Butcher MP, Minister for Regional Development and Manufacturing and Minister for Water, as the Minister representing Queensland on the Northern Australia Ministerial Forum.

**11) What are the 3 biggest challenges impacting workforce development in Northern Australia?**

- Three key challenges impacting workforce development in Northern Australia (noting that this is not exhaustive) are:
  - Increases in workforce demand and specific sector needs, requiring an enhanced focus on workforce attraction and retention, changing employer perceptions and practices to find employees they have not considered before, and maximising workforce participation
  - Greater demand for higher-level, flexible skills, especially in key STEM areas, advanced trade skills, health, and in education to support this skilling
  - Changing skill needs: in regions, with regional areas experiencing locally-specific growth; and in industries undergoing adaptation.

**12) Which portfolios/policy areas do you consider are in most need of reform to address the challenges in workforce development in Northern Australia?**

- This is a combined response to questions 8, 9 and 12.
- The QWS highlights that the Queensland Government is committed to working with all levels of government to address current and future workforce challenges and will continue to advocate to the Australian Government for:
  - Employment services and income support systems to facilitate effective pathways into work (employment services must be flexible enough to tailor support for Queensland's decentralised population and unique regional communities)
  - Lifting barriers to workforce participation through childcare subsidies, taxation arrangements, superannuation regulation and the National Disability Insurance Scheme
  - Regional economic development including housing availability and affordability
  - Addressing skills and workforce shortages through the national skills reform, university funding and skilled migration.
- The QWS provides a contemporary and comprehensive summary of workforce-related challenges and opportunities for Queensland, underpinned by extensive stakeholder consultation and research. The five focus areas in the QWS represent the key policy areas considered to be of most significance to strengthening Queensland's current and future workforce, noting that responsibility for these areas extends across industries, communities, regions and all levels of government:
  - Workforce participation to enable all Queenslanders to participate in the workforce and support Queensland employers to rethink their employment practices to access and grow a more diverse workforce

- Local solutions for the implementation of workforce planning and initiatives and coordination of efforts across industry, the community and government at all levels to focus on local and regional priorities
  - School-to-Work transitions that create strong school-industry partnerships and improve access to high-quality career information for school students
  - Workforce Attraction and Retention, where partnerships with industries and communities on new approaches to attract and retain workers are established
  - Skilling Queenslanders now and into the future to develop an innovative, modern and flexible training system to increase collaboration between government, industry and the education system at all levels.
- While effective local strategies rely on labour mobility, they are also influenced by a range of factors. Workforce attraction and retention must be supported by strong regional economies, the provision of quality services, vibrant and inclusive local communities and access to infrastructure. The availability and affordability of housing is also key to ensuring that local jobs can be filled. These are complex issues that require all levels of government to work together to assist regional communities and improve outcomes.
  - The Commonwealth Government's responsibilities in relation to international migration are an important influence on the challenges of workforce development in Northern Australia. Any reforms to Australia's migration system should consider how migrant intake facilitates productivity and addresses future skills demand in the labour market, particularly in locations with challenges attracting a skilled workforce.
  - Facilitating access to education and training will help build the skills base of the region. Creating a pipeline of skilled workers for emerging and traditional industries is essential to future labour market growth. However, this requires a renewed focus and investment in transferable skills and training opportunities. It will also require a focus on lifelong learning, close collaboration between industry and the education and training sectors, while supporting contemporary training offerings such as micro-credentials to complement traditional training courses.
  - The new National Skills Agreement must provide flexible, long-term, and secure funding to support Queensland's VET sector and ensure Queensland is best placed to support a highly skilled workforce that responds to skilling and workforce needs, now and in the future.

### **13) Which industries predominantly employ people in Northern Australia in your jurisdiction?**

- Across the five SA4 regions in Queensland which are wholly or partly in the 'Northern Australia' area of the State (Cairns, Central Queensland, Mackay-Isaac-Whitsunday, Queensland – Outback, and Townsville) the industry division which

employs the largest number of people is Health Care and Social Assistance (88,500 people).

- The next largest industry divisions are Retail Trade (55,900 people) and Construction (54,200 people).
- Each of the Mining; Education and Training; and Public Administration and Safety industry divisions employ just over 40,000 people.
- Note these data (ABS Labour Force, February 2023) are based on four-quarter average totals and include both full-time and part-time employees.

**14) How do problems in workforce development in Northern Australia reflect Australia-wide issues and how are they unique to Northern Australia?**

- Many of the current workforce-related challenges facing the Northern regions within Queensland are being experienced throughout Queensland and nationwide.
- Issues affecting rural and remote communities are of particular significance in Northern Australia, for example in relation to digital connectivity and accessing education and training and other services. In addition, weather and climate related issues, including the impact of severe weather events, can present particular challenges for some communities.
- Northern Australia is not a homogenous area; there are significant variations across vast geographic areas, including within and between the constituent parts of Queensland that are in the Northern Australia area. This reiterates the importance of local leadership and collaboration within regions to identify workforce opportunities and challenges relevant to the region and implement locally-led responses, underpinned by quality data and collaboration.

**15) Which industries and sectors do you consider have the potential to create lasting employment and long-term, local economic benefits for the north?**

Question referred to the Hon. Glenn Butcher MP, Minister for Regional Development and Manufacturing and Minister for Water, as the Minister representing Queensland on the Northern Australia Ministerial Forum.