COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Reference: Vocational education in schools

MONDAY, 28 APRIL 2003

DARWIN

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Monday, 28 April 2003

Members: Mr Bartlett *(Chair)*, Mr Sawford *(Deputy Chair)*, Mr Albanese, Mr Farmer, Ms Gambaro, Mr Johnson, Mrs May, Mr Pearce, Ms Plibersek and Mr Sidebottom

Members in attendance: Mr Bartlett, Mrs May and Mr Sawford

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The place of vocational education in schools, its growth and development and its effectiveness in preparing students for post-school options, with particular reference to:

- the range, structure, resourcing and delivery of vocational education programs in schools, including teacher training and the impact of vocational education on other programs;
- the differences between school-based and other vocational education programs and the resulting qualifications, and the pattern of industry acceptance of school-based programs;
- vocational education in new and emerging industries; and
- the accessibility and effectiveness of vocational education for indigenous students.

WITNESSES

Committee met at 2.47 p.m.

DUNN, Ms Carmelita, General Manager, Indigenous Education Division, Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training

JENKINSON, Mr Kim, General Manager, Employment and Training, Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training

PLUMMER, Mr Peter, Chief Executive Officer, Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the inquiry into vocational education in schools. I welcome the representatives from the Northern Territory government. Thank you for joining us today. We appreciate your time and your very valuable submission as well. As a formality, I remind you that the proceedings here today are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings in the House of Representatives. I invite you to make some introductory comments and then we will proceed to questions.

Mr Plummer—I would be happy to do that, and my colleagues may then add a bit, depending on how we are going. VET in Schools in the Territory is growing but slowly, in our opinion. Forty per cent of senior secondary students are participating in one or more units of competency under the Northern Territory year 11-12 certificate of education. Increased student participation in VET is evident, especially in the last period of time. For example, in 2001 we had 1,495 students and in 2002 we had 1,753; that is a reasonable increase. Reinforcing that, there has also been an increase in annual hours curriculum per student from 230 in 2001 to 260 in 2002. I should have prefaced these remarks by saying that I will give you some general views, and then I will come to your terms of reference and make a few short remarks on each one of those, if that is okay.

CHAIR—Sure; thank you.

Mr Plummer—The new Labor government committed funding of $1 million in 2002 for the Training for Remote Youth Program. That is not necessarily for kids at school: it may be for kids at school; it may be for kids not at school. When the $1 million Training for Remote Youth Program, the TRY Program, was trialled last year, 541 students participated in 27 communities and 60 training programs were offered. That program is now maturing, and Kim might be able to add some more detail to that later on, but that will be a major sustained effort for remote youth.

There are only a small number of school based New Apprenticeships in the Territory at the moment. We have a significant project under way to try to boost those. The project is aiming for 50 school based new apprentices over two years. The organisation involved has already reached that target and exceeded it by 10. So there are currently 60, which is a good sign. However, I have not seen the figures but I would bet that they are all urban kids. The real issue is that we are getting no kids as yet.

Mr Jenkinson—There is a small uptake of Indigenous people in remote locations.

Mr Plummer—That is a major issue for us. Our students are also using structured workplace learning as part of their NTCE. In 2001-02 we grew from 818 to 1,167. Work placement of approximately 120 hours per year is strongly recommended in the schools. However, it is not mandatory. We will encourage only the students who are deemed work ready to participate. Because of the nature of schooling in the Territory, there are two primary ways at present that VET in Schools is offered. One is what we call the cluster model, which is a group of high schools targeting their students to one of the local high schools. The other is an individual high school offering only what it can offer from within or through an RTO. We are also currently trying to develop a project that is based on a pre and post English literacy and numeracy assessment tool. One of the things that we want to be sure about is that if we are being effective in targeting Indigenous youth who are not necessarily at school, and even if they are at school, we want to be able to measure the progress at entry and departure of the units that they undertake.

Training advisory councils—and we, like every other state, have gone through a rationalisation process; in fact, we led the way before the Commonwealth funding was cut to try to get greater effectiveness—have been involved in the selection of VET in Schools programs and the Training for Remote Youth Program. It is, again, like a lot of our work at the moment, largely from a reactionary base. It is from an historical approach, not from any strategic approach. We are undertaking some major work this year which will put us on a strategic footing to try to drive the purchasing of vocational education and training everywhere but, in particular, in the schools.

With regard to the terms of reference, I have covered the range, structure, resourcing and delivery a little bit already. It is variable. To be effective, we believe that it needs to be seen as core business. It is not as yet, in our view. It does add breadth, choice and relevance. The take-up is generally because of the choice and the relevance to kids. I want to stress this: it is not simply an alternative path for kids. It is not someone saying, 'Academically you are intelligent so you are going this way. You are not so intelligent so you go this way.' There are some problems in making sure that kids are making genuine selections, but that is what we are aiming to do.

This kind of program could be more effective if you could increase the range of hours of delivery. I am very much aware that you got from Centralian College a submission that emphasises the advantages of having greater flexibility in the system. Most high schools are truly traditional, and they do not look to build in too much flexibility for delivering their programs. A couple of our high schools, one of which you are going to tomorrow, are looking to increase that flexibility, but there is still an issue of the overall time taken for these courses to be delivered. Traditional timetables, in our view, are a problem. With regard to in-house skills, if schools are registered training providers in their own right they often do not look outside of that to offer VET in Schools. So the VET offering is based on what is available in the school. It is also based on existing facilities, and we think there are opportunities to do more about that.

One of our strengths in the NT which we are not yet capitalising on well enough is that VET is recognised in the NTCE. Theoretically, you could get your NTCE with a significant proportion of VET in it. There is also an issue about performance indicators. If we are serious about this as an option for kids in high school finishing years 11 and 12, then two other indicators that I think would be very important as performance indicators would be formal training—if they were to

engage in formal training after leaving school, that would be a sound performance indicator—and employment. In other words, there is value adding from the work they have done.

The other issue that is of importance to us is that we have a secondary education review under way right now. That is due to report in September, and part of the task of that review is to seriously consider the role of VET in secondary education. We are looking forward to the outcomes of that review, which is headed up by Dr Gregor Ramsey. We have every reason to be optimistic that we are going to see a very serious report come through.

Going to the second point in the terms of reference on the differences between school based and other vocational education programs and the resulting qualifications, I do not have a lot to say about this at the moment. I think it reflects the state of where we are at. Even as a department we do not have a formal policy position on high schools being RTOs. Eight of our high schools—half of them—are RTOs. One forfeited its status last year. There is a debate about the value of that. The high school you will go to tomorrow will, I am sure, tell you that there is real value in the school being an RTO. I am very aware of the issues that Queensland has had to face with so many of its schools being registered RTOs and the difficulties it has had in managing the interface of credibility with industry. It is no criticism; I think we have some of those issues here, but we have not reached that stage as yet.

The other view I have about this is that we have a substantial number of registered training organisations operating in a small jurisdiction. It is extraordinary; there are over a hundred. So there is an issue there for us to examine. We have three public providers, which will become two. The three public providers are Centralian College, Northern Territory University and Batchelor. Of course, Centralian and Northern Territory University are amalgamating to become the Charles Darwin University. We do not believe that will present problems. Industry perceptions of the products from schools are variable. Again, it depends what school the product comes from, at the moment.

In respect of new and emerging industries, I mentioned to you earlier that we have historically had a reactive way of funding, based on the advice from training advisory committees from industry itself, but have done no scanning of the environment to really try to work out where the changes are happening and what is going on. We will be able to do that from this year on, and that will mean a great deal for us. It will mean a great deal in two ways. There will be some very sophisticated development around oil and gas in the Territory, no doubt, and around the railway. But there is another set of emerging industries in the remote areas that you probably have not encountered—you may have, but you may not have—where we are finding there is a demand for interpreters of languages. That could be an important job option for young Indigenous people.

There are initiatives underway right now based on bush foods and harvesting different products from the bush. All of these could be classed as new, or they could be classed as traditional if you look back at how other cultures developed industries like that. Nevertheless, that is an issue we are confident we will be able to deal with in the future. Karmi will have a lot more to say about accessibility and effectiveness of voc ed for Indigenous kids. But the big issues include high costs and the low levels of numeracy and literacy. Even if we get effective participation, we are still starting from such a low base that certificate I and II are the order of the day, and they do not lead to employment very often at all. There are dysfunctional communities and a lack of facilities—although there is good planning in that regard to overcome

some of that. The mobile adult learning units are shaping up as something that offers potential. Again, that is a short-term operation in a community—it is not permanent—and it must go to a number of communities to have any kind of penetration. But they are looking to be of value.

The access to work issue, other than CDEP in communities, is quite problematic. The truth is that there are plenty of non-Aboriginals working in communities and we need to develop strategies that put Indigenous people out there, not non-Indigenous people. CDEP is not yet formally linked to training, although again that is an area we should get to in the near future. Finally, it is because of the remoteness that there is such limited capacity to provide long-term training. Most training is in short-term stints. That is a broad overview for you.

CHAIR—Thanks, Peter. Kim and Karmi, would you like to add something?

Mr Jenkinson—I am comfortable to reserve my right at the moment, thank you.

Ms Dunn—I am happy enough to answer any questions about that but I do not want to double up coming back again this afternoon. Again, as Peter said, VET in Schools is a new initiative in a lot of our remote schools. Seventy-five per cent of our students come from remote communities, with only 25 per cent in the urban areas. We need to get some accelerated outcomes in urban areas because those literacy and numeracy rates are a bit higher than remote areas. But one of the biggest issues for us is retaining students. We now have retention plans in high schools so that high schools can concentrate on retaining Indigenous students so that they can choose either an academic pathway or a VET pathway. Again, to reinforce what Peter says, the VET pathway should be seen as core business, not something extra that school does. Those students are entitled to the dollar figure that comes on their heads when they are enrolled in schools, to ensure that the schools are catering for them as core business.

I think that is especially true for Indigenous students. Only a small percentage of Indigenous students end up in the academic pathway, so we need to do a bit better for the VET pathway. Again, in terms of remote students, it is something that we have just started the journey on. What we previously offered were generally certificate I and II courses—generic skills that most probably take you nowhere. There is the endless treadmill of certificate I and II in hairdressing, horticulture and the list goes on. I think there needs to be some accountability, or some kind of data collection that can demonstrate that students are on a training treadmill of certificate I and II that is not leading to any jobs.

CHAIR—Do we have any data comparing the links between certs I and II and employment for Indigenous versus non-Indigenous students?

Ms Dunn—No. I do not even think they are there for non-Indigenous students.

Mr Jenkinson—No, we do not at this stage. The first evaluation of the Training for Remote Youth Program is coming in at the end of May, and that will be trying to target exactly what are the links between training and an employment outcome. We are not expecting them to be overly great at this stage, because that was the pilot of that program, but we are expecting those links to be more firm in phase 3 of the operation, which runs for this entire year. The early evaluation from phases 1 and 2 comes in at the end of May, and we hope to focus on capturing the data on the link between the training in a region and an employment outcome.

CHAIR—Are the links between training and CDEP very clear?

Ms Dunn—I think it is early days for that yet. I think some initiatives are trying to link some schools, especially to get young people back onto the learning pathway. If you can earn $150 a week on CDEP, why would you want to come to school? It becomes a competition. You have to marry schooling and CDEP, because young people are going to make a choice about being on CDEP and earning some money or staying at school and not earning anything. It might be a very short-term win for some young people, but that is the choice that a lot of young people are making, especially Indigenous people.

CHAIR—How do you tackle that?

Ms Dunn—One of the things that some of the schools are starting to talk about is looking at whether or not you can be offered a CDEP placement with the proviso that you do two days. It is something similar to school based New Apprenticeships, where some days you are on CDEP, and that complements what you are learning in school, and the other couple of days you are in school ramping up your literacy and numeracy acquisition. But I think that unless we somehow get some accountability to make sure that CDEP is not a viable option for students—

CHAIR—Could it be mandated somehow through the department that it had to go together with training, with the continuation of school, on a part-time basis?

Mr Plummer—Not easily, because it is an ATSIC policy, a Commonwealth policy. But we understand that the review that is focusing on CDEP nationally is focusing on the issue of embedding training in CDEP. If that is done, it will make a difference. There are about 35,000 CDEP places in the nation. I think we get about 8,000 of them here. It would be pretty useful to know that 8,000 Indigenous people are being paid and trained at the same time.

Mr Jenkinson—Some interesting opportunities are arising with various mining companies to mesh the Training for Remote Youth Program with the CDEP program and with training from those mining companies. That can lead to an employment outcome in our remote regions. Some of those MOUs are in a very early stage of development, but we believe that partnership arrangement may allow us to move youth, using CDEP, into employment. But, as Peter pointed out, one of the major costs is the support of literacy and numeracy in those regions. The other major cost is that we are finding that we need to put in place mentoring programs to keep up the employability skills of Indigenous people. They cost money and they are an add-on that you do not necessarily need to find in an urban location.

CHAIR—But don't those same problems exist in urban areas?

Mr Jenkinson—Not to the same extent. Building up a work ethic in an area that may not have had a work ethic for a long time seems to really concentrate itself in remote regions. Those mentoring programs are fairly crucial to the success of any program in remote locations, particularly with those MOUs with the mining companies.

Mrs MAY—In your submission on those remote communities, you talked about the turnover in staff and the continuity of keeping people there. Peter, I just saw you raise your eyebrows. This obviously is also a problem for these remote communities.

Mr Plummer—It is a substantial problem. The turnover of staff is high. It is tough out there. More broadly as a department, we are looking at what kind of packages we need to keep people out there. But RTOs are not our people, and that is part of the employment and training issue. The truth is that, unlike education, where the department is a service deliverer, employment and training is a purchaser of services and does not have the final say about staff. It is quite a big difference.

Mrs MAY—So there is a difficulty in attracting the right staff to even deliver the services.

Mr Plummer—Yes.

Ms Dunn—The other big issue is the lack of infrastructure out there—no doubt, you have travelled to some of these remote communities—and the capacity to deliver programs without that infrastructure in place. The infrastructure in many remote communities is very poor. There is a combination of issues. Housing continues to be a big issue. Even building houses and finding serviced sites to build houses in remote communities is an ongoing issue.

Mrs MAY—Could someone expand on what the Training for Remote Youth Program is and what you are trying to achieve through that program?

Mr Jenkinson—The aim is to re-engage youth back into school, to lead on to further training or to lead to an employment outcome. The program is targeted at youth who have an attendance that is so poor at school that you might consider them to be not attending and at youth who are not attending. It is aimed at capturing those youth. We use the school in some situations. It is a tripartite agreement reached between the community, a school—most of the time—and the registered training organisation. We also realise that many of the youth who are disengaged from school are disengaged from school for all sorts of reasons and they do not want to go back to the edge of a school. In those cases, we have to buy our literacy and numeracy components in through the registered training organisation. Consequently, the tool that Peter talked about earlier will be a useful tool in assisting the registered training organisations. The notion is a collaborative partnership to re-engage those youth in remote areas.

CHAIR—So the mentoring part of it is crucial.

Mr Jenkinson—It is another cost again.

CHAIR—Is the cost the main obstacle to effective mentoring, or is there a problem in trying to attract the right sorts of people?

Mr Jenkinson—Exactly, the right sorts of people. We have only just touched on mentoring that might be used with the registered training organisations and the TRY Program. We have no positive examples of exactly what to do about mentoring yet.

Mr SAWFORD—In a couple of days time we will mark the 30th anniversary of the Carmel report, which was not particularly kind to primary schools, where we have literacy and numeracy problems. It was not particularly kind to vocational education either. It is interesting where we are now, 30 years on. One of the things I liked with your exposition, Peter, was the lack of propaganda. In all the other submissions that we received in other states, there has been

propaganda put forward which is almost a defence of the failures of the last 30 years in vocational education. You do not even bother to do that, which I must admit I was highly impressed by. At 40 per cent, your participation rate is probably higher than any other state. New South Wales often regards itself as the highest. So 40 per cent is not a bad effort. But again, it is far lower than the 70 per cent it ought to be, particularly after 30 years of almost basic neglect. How long would it take the Northern Territory to get to 70 per cent? That is one question. I have a series of questions I would like to clarify from your submission.

Mr Plummer—Depending how effective we can become, anywhere between five years and 10 years.

Mr SAWFORD—It can be done within 10 years?

Mr Plummer—I personally believe it can be done faster than 10 years—you do not want to get me started on this.

Mr SAWFORD—Perhaps we should.

Mr Plummer—Let me start with education and Indigenous kids. We have made it clear following the Collins report that it is core business. If you do not consider it core business, you should not be in the department. We are also making the argument—and I think this is an important figure for the inquiry to have in its mind—that 40 per cent of kids in primary schools in the Territory are Indigenous. Some 28 per cent of the population is Indigenous. In 10 years time, if we do not have those kids educated, we will have not a small social problem but a major social problem. We have already seen encouraging evidence of 'belts and braces' improvements—getting the focus right and keeping the pressure on—albeit from a very low base, so I would want to see it go on for a while. I think one of the issues here is sustained discipline—do not be distracted by smorgasbord, eclectic, modern type approaches; get on with what you know is possible, no matter how hard it is, and start getting the linkages right between training and employment and the targeting. I am convinced it needs some more money, but it does not need any new, modernistic approaches; it is just hard yards out there.

Mr SAWFORD—You mentioned resourcing, and I noticed in your submission that you said funding for organisations is problematic because it 'is generally based on a yearly application cycle'. When you do that, it reflects poor commitment, doesn't it?

Mr Plummer—It reflects the nature—which I think is not helpful—of budget cycles in our nation, whether at the state or the Commonwealth level. It is pretty hard to get commitments to genuine triennial funding, and that would certainly help. The other thing is that there is no doubt that there are costs that we have not yet been able to quantify which affect delivery in remote areas. We will have a better grip on that within about a month.

Mr Jenkinson—We have some early information on the costs.

Mr Plummer—We are getting some serious work done on costings for our providers both urban and remote.

Mr SAWFORD—Does that work indicate that you get far more bang for your dollar over a three-year cycle than you do over a one-year cycle?

Mr Plummer—We did not ask the work to do that. That is my personal view.

Mr SAWFORD—Do you think you would?

Mr Plummer—Yes.

Mr SAWFORD—Your submission states that each of the high schools has an additional career counsellor. Are those people industry or teacher qualified? Are they selected for their interest or by the short-straw method?

Mr Plummer—Some of them are seriously qualified career counsellors; they are teacher career counsellors. I do not think we have any industry type people in that role. There are some quite good connections between the counsellors and some industry bodies up here. Again, it reflects the issue of teachers not necessarily—nor easily—having a wider view of what happens in the business sector.

Mr SAWFORD—When John Walker—who I think has probably been the best education director in Australia in the last century—ran the South Australian education department, he deliberately gave it a vocational edge. He deliberately got people from industry back into teaching, and it was a deliberate move from the top not from the bottom. It gave vocational education a huge boost—and Karmi mentioned the generic thing, which we can perhaps come back to later in the afternoon—in the sense that the so-called vocational schools, which were often regarded as second rate, in fact competed at the same and at superior levels to the academic high schools. That is interesting, because they were also funded at a superior level because their courses were more expensive to deliver. I am not trying to rewrite history but, when you speak about rationalisations, you need to take note of historical and strategic views. Is there anything historical that we ought to note in terms of vocational education and the senior levels of schools? How does that impact on the strategic approach that you indicated in your initial comments?

Mr Plummer—I would have to stay contemporary, because I have only come back into education and employment and training in the last three, and one, years. I think you can get a lot of insight into some aspects of vocational education in schools by referring to the Centralian College submission. That submission highlights the fact that they do not just have teachers involved in the secondary education program; they have trade-trained people and other trained people. Participation levels and the fact that kids tend to vote with their feet says a lot to me, so much so that I have asked the secondary review to have a careful look at that with a view to asking what kind of connections we should have in our high school developments in the north. One of those would be the possibility of a university high school campus at Palmerston, for example, for the same kinds of reasons. Given that the university here is also a VET provider, you can start to get the mix of people that you cannot necessarily get in a mainstream high school.

Mr SAWFORD—How would the Northern Territory government view taking the lead and bringing skilled people back—because there are many people in industry who are great teachers,

even though they may not know so—into VET in terms of having short education courses? Is that a possibility in a small system like yours?

Mr Plummer—Yes, it is. Not speaking for the government but speaking from my own point of view, yes it is.

CHAIR—Who would fund it?

Mr Plummer—The government would fund it; it would have to fund it. Whether that is through ANTA, or national, funding or state funding would have to be worked out.

CHAIR—One of the problems seems to be that, in order to attract tradespeople and professionals back into teaching and to do teaching training, there is a significant cost for them in terms of training and lost wages. Do you think it is feasible for the government to consider a part wage, or even a full wage, while they are doing their education studies?

Mr Plummer—I would have thought that it would have to be a serious consideration and that it would be a matter of cutting a deal with applicants like that. From my perspective, that would be: 'We expect you to do two days study and three days work for a year'—or whatever the equation is—'before we can give you an acceptable ticket'.

Mr SAWFORD—Your submission mentions tensions between industry and educational requirements. I would have thought that was a given anyway. Do you think that, if in some way we brought industry people back and gave them a prominent role in the VET programs in our schools, in actual fact we would reduce some of those tensions?

Mr Plummer—Possibly. Certainly it would go some way to enhancing credibility across that interface. Whether you would reduce the tensions is another issue.

Mr SAWFORD—Sometimes tensions are good things.

Mr Plummer—Yes, of course.

Mr SAWFORD—They are not necessarily a bad thing. Would you like to comment on the skills shortages in the Northern Territory? You mentioned shortages in terms of the railway, the oil and gas developments and what is coming up and what is required in remote areas. Are there certain skill shortages in broader areas that are becoming evident in the Northern Territory?

Mr Plummer—For our core industries there are always skill shortages, but our core industries—primaries—are fairly well catered for. There are always skill shortages, but in general they find the manpower. Sometimes it comes from importing it and sometimes it comes from training. If you look at mining, again there is that mix of a quite significant group of experienced people in the Territory at all levels in the mining industry, but again there is plenty of importation.

Both mining and primaries have not successfully engaged Aboriginal people, except in standout instances. I think that is a bit sad, given how core they are. If you go to tourism, there are certainly some skill shortages at all times, but youth are always putting up their hands for

many of those jobs. The professionals in the tourist industry are usually trained and home-grown over a long period of time through their various hotel chains. We do not get reports of major shortages in those areas, do we?

Mr Jenkinson—No, we do not at the moment, but with the new major projects coming online with oil and gas we know we have a looming shortage of, for example, high-pressure welders. The labour market analysis in some regards will be able to forecast that out for us, but that is coming online now so we know we have an enormous amount of work to do in reskilling and upskilling in a short period of time to have the work force, or a large proportion of the work force, here. Given that there are significant major projects forecast in the Territory over the next three to four years, that skill shortage is going to be Australia wide. The size of the work forces that these projects need will just deplete the numbers of skilled workers from all across Australia.

CHAIR—Why is it difficult to attract kids into those areas, given that potentially there would be fairly good incomes available?

Mr Jenkinson—At this stage we do not know whether it is true that we will not be able to attract them, but that is certainly where our work and our effort have to lie in recruiting at this stage for the next year.

Mrs MAY—When will that labour market analysis be completed?

Mr Jenkinson—By 16 May—

Mrs MAY—This year?

Mr Jenkinson—Yes.

CHAIR—What about Indigenous students, Peter? You said you had trouble attracting Indigenous students into mining, for instance.

Mr Plummer—These projects all represent some real opportunities. The railways showed that you could get Indigenous people trained and into jobs—admittedly, largely at a lower level, but it is a start. It also taught both industry bodies, like the Territory Construction Association, and Indigenous bodies, like the Northern Land Council, that they need to work together as well as with government to try to negotiate their way through this kind of supply problem and ensure that we have some Indigenous people trained at the other end. Indigenous people have a real advantage in that they own the land, and some of them are using that as a bargaining tool to say, 'We want our people trained, and we'll help you identify them.' That is a very new development. That has only happened in probably the last two years. It is early days. But, if you were to take a lead on that, and if you can get reliable and timely advice—and you cannot always do that from the big companies, like Bector or Woodside; they keep everything pretty close to the chest until the last moment—

Mr SAWFORD—The government can attest to that with both parties, I can tell you.

Mr Plummer—Yes. It is sometimes hard to get a long enough lead time to know what you do need to be looking for. They are also ruthless in that if they need the job done they will just import their labour, regardless of the commitments they make to government. What we have to do is find a sustainable equation to build over time on that. But you have got to be optimistic. If Nhulunbuy expand, as they propose, and Mount Isa Mines expand, as they propose, and oil and gas industries do develop here and the railway starts to come on board with the experience that the land council, especially the Northern Land Council, has gained recently, along with the associations, you have to be optimistic that we might be able to do somewhat better than we have done in the past in training Indigenous people.

CHAIR—Notwithstanding what you said about the training merry-go-round problems of certificates I and II, is there a potential though to be getting kids up to certificate II level in some of those industry related skills—mining, welding and so on—so they are ready to slot into certificates III and IV when apprenticeships start to come online there?

Mr Jenkinson—Quite a bit of work is happening in the background now on pre-employment programs that touch on those employability skills that a person needs on the work site, coupled with mentoring programs which we are funding as well. We are capturing that in different partnerships, as Peter suggested, whereby we contract those people and take them from one project to the next. For example, the railway project is coming to an end, and we will be able to use some of the people there who have a certificate I or a certificate II, reskill them, upskill them and position them to begin work on the oil and gas projects. We will try to stage that project into the next project so that we can have them moving to certificate IIs, IIIs and IVs over several projects.

CHAIR—Does this need to be coordinated a lot better centrally, or will it happen on its own?

Mr Jenkinson—No, it will not happen on its own.

CHAIR—How do we coordinate it? What sort of manpower, resources and organisational structure are needed to get those young people into the right areas and then move them on as industry demand grows?

Ms Dunn—The land councils do it already by leveraging training and employment opportunities in their agreements. Obviously there are some native title issues here so the land councils will be negotiating on behalf of traditional owners. They usually negotiate now around employment and training options for Indigenous people, so I think you can get some wins out of that. The land councils are better placed and have a bit more appreciation of the need to leverage employment and training conditions for traditional owners but also for other Indigenous people across the Northern Territory.

Mr Jenkinson—There are some complexities that lie underneath this—that is, taking people from one region and saying, 'You're going to go and do a job in this region now.' People may not want to move from their regions. Also, there are different traditional owners in some cases, so there are some cultural complexities that have to be managed. The people best placed to manage those complexities are the land councils and through cooperative arrangements between land councils.

Mr SAWFORD—I would like to turn back to literacy and numeracy for a moment. Even in metropolitan Australia, particularly from 1973 to 1993, literacy and numeracy were a bit soft and considerable failures occurred within the school system in terms of what was happening then—the attention was not there. International research suggests that if you do not get literacy and numeracy right when a child is between the ages of about seven and 11, you will have a huge problem and a huge cost in trying to retrieve that situation. Do the literacy and numeracy programs in the Northern Territory have to develop a much harder edge than some of the wussy stuff that happened when I was a teacher from 1973 to 1993, and I suspect still happens in some schools in this country? You have to take it a little more seriously, because it seems to me that if you do not get that right everything else that follows is severely compromised and the cost of everything just escalates.

Mr Plummer—Yes. That is part of the initiatives we have been putting in place at the school level—for example, mandating times for literacy and numeracy and not leaving it to the schools at all. They will have an explicit literacy and numeracy framework of two hours per day at the very least. It is to be quite explicit, and we are also insisting that all schools will participate in the measurement of kids at years 3, 5, 7 and 9. I think we were the first jurisdiction—if we were not then we were the second—to insist on reporting those results to parents, unadulterated.

Mr SAWFORD—In what form will they be reported, Peter?

Mr Plummer—I could give you a copy of that.

Mr SAWFORD—Is it in behavioural or objective terms?

Mr Plummer—It is in achievement levels, at the benchmark of where you might expect the kid to be and indicating whether they are there or below it. It is done in diagrammatic form as well so that it can be explained to Indigenous parents, who later studies have suggested just as strongly want to know how their kids are going as any other parent.

Mr SAWFORD—I want to swing to another issue now—I have two others, but I will come back to them. In relation to timetabling, I am always amazed, as a former school principal, when I hear my secondary school colleagues complaining that they cannot alter their timetables to fit in additional programs that arise. Is timetabling that difficult?

Mr Plummer—I think it is a state of mind.

Mr SAWFORD—Is it?

Mr Plummer—I think it is only a state of mind. You are going to go to a school where they have dealt with timetabling issues quite effectively. Another school where there has been quite interesting timetabling successfully managed is Nhulunbuy High School. Because they have a relationship with the mine and they need to provide kids with opportunities out at the mine site, they have worked around all of that.

Mr SAWFORD—In regard to the generic secondary school, is it time we got rid of that? Is it time we called an academic high school an academic high school? Is it time we called vocational college in a modern context exactly what it is?

Mr Plummer—It is probably horses for courses, because I think—I do not want to anticipate our own review here—that part of our problem is scale and access. It may be that you do specialise some schools in particular interest areas, so that you might have a VET focus in one school and an arts focus in another school. Our problem is the scale of our population but, in my view, that could easily be done in major capital cities.

CHAIR—Peter, in your introductory comments you said that we have to make sure that VET is not simply seen as an alternative path for less academic kids. Yet I note on page 5 of your submission that, while VET qualifies for the NTCE, it does not qualify for the tertiary entrance round and for any of your students. Apparently it did when it was embedded, but the move to stand-alone VET courses has removed that possibility. It would seem to me that this creates this tension—that you have a two-tiered system. There are those kids who want to go to university now that are really precluded from having any of their VET courses accounted in the TER. I note in your submission that the South Australian curriculum option is there but no Northern Territory schools have taken that option up. Firstly, is that the case? Secondly, is that a problem that that is the case? Thirdly, are you trying to do anything about that?

Mr Plummer—I will take the third point first. Yes, we are wanting to do something about it. In relation to your second question, I do not know why they have not taken it up.

Mr Jenkinson—I would suggest that it is fairly early days that the South Australian courses have been eligible to be used as a TER. I think it has been maybe two to three years at the most, so it has taken a while to get a hold.

CHAIR—Is it right to say that there is not the demand from students for that? I would have thought that students wanting to go to university—this is certainly the case in other states—would want to be getting a VET component in their studies and still qualify for university.

Mr Jenkinson—It is my understanding that some of those courses are quite specific. I think the course in lab operations is something like that with the cert III counting towards the TER. So there are some fairly specific courses that I am not sure we have the expertise to deliver at the moment or whether they are being marketed yet well into schools. The option is there for the student to be able to take up a course like that and count it towards their TER. I am just not sure that we have marketed it that well yet, given that it is quite new.

CHAIR—Is that something that you are looking at remedying?

Mr Jenkinson—It makes a hell of a lot of sense to me.

CHAIR—What percentage of students in the Northern Territory go on to university? Is it pretty much the same as the national figure?

Mr Plummer—No, it is a bit lower. I need to get you that figure. The other part that we do not know is that, unlike other universities, there is quite a mature age participation in the Northern Territory—from 20 to 23 on. It may be that, because work is easier to get in the Northern Territory, a lot of kids take up work and then go back to university. That is not such a bad thing really, from a personal point of view. We really do not have a handle on that at all, nor does university.

CHAIR—Going back to this other issue, is it true to say that there is a perception that you have a two-tiered system in the Territory—that there are two very different systems—because you cannot do VET and qualify for a TER?

Mr Plummer—I have never heard it put explicitly like that. There may be, amongst teaching—

Mr Jenkinson—You could certainly do VET options at year 11, for example, and then move into the NTCE options at year 12. You would still qualify for a TER.

CHAIR—Based on your year 12 subjects?

Mr Jenkinson—Yes. You can still do VET courses, but it would not necessarily occur in your final year. The university has also taken students on who complete an NTCE. They do not necessarily have to have a TER. That is the interesting part about the university—

CHAIR—Could you elaborate on how that works?

Mr Jenkinson—There are a range of entry points into the university. Students can enter the university through certificate courses or they can enter higher education courses. We have introduced a TER—

Mr Plummer—Yes, in some programs there is now a minimum TER.

Mr Jenkinson—NTU—it has undergone a name change—is a mixed mode university which allows multiple entry points.

CHAIR—So some students could get in without a TER but presumably not into the more competitive or more academic degree courses?

Mr Plummer—Not immediately, but they can then position themselves to traverse.

CHAIR—On another issue, on page 4 you suggest the benefits of a national approach to teacher professional development via industry placement. You state that there ought to be a national approach to that. Other submissions have indicated the benefits of a national approach generally with regard to VET, including all areas. How would the Northern Territory department respond to our having a national approach that covered all the issues we talked about—TER, qualifications and work placement being mandated as it is in a couple of states? Do you see many benefits from having a uniform national approach, and what difficulties would you see with that from the Northern Territory's point of view?

Mr Plummer—If it was in place nationally, I would not see that we would be hampered with difficulties. Personally, I would support a move that brings those kinds of people forward. I certainly support the move for some national standards. The devil can be in the detail.

CHAIR—For instance, to pick one aspect, what about the requirement for mandated work placement as part of VET courses? Are there enough employment and work placement opportunities in the Territory, for instance, to enable that to happen?

Mr Plummer—No. There might be in the urban areas but not in remote areas. Certainly there are equations that we would have to work around in that regard.

Mr SAWFORD—Can I follow up the chair's question on the national approach. The national approach for the last 30 years seems to keep coming up with this propaganda of an integrated approach—the generic approach. You totally ignored that. Was there a reason for that? Do you actually believe in a diverse system? An integrated system such as the one we have had is a conforming system.

Mr Plummer—Where is it being integrated and where is it conforming? We cannot even agree on curriculum year benchmarks in any subject. We have not even truly got national literacy and numeracy testing; it is in name only. A few jurisdictions are joining forces to try to get a more national approach. You have this crazy approach of setting the benchmarks and then you have hours of—I have to watch my language here—

Mr SAWFORD—You are giving a personal view; that is fine.

Mr Plummer—specialised equating to decide whether the balance is right. It is a fiction that we have anything at national level at the moment.

Mr SAWFORD—We are in the early stages of this inquiry. You are the first person who has not defended that and has explained it in the way in which it actually is. We have been to Canberra, Sydney and Queensland. In those three areas they defended the integrated approach of the last 30 years, which is indefensible—that is my personal view. You have not defended it and you have said that it was a fiction anyway.

Mr Plummer—How much of what I say gets printed?

CHAIR—Everything.

Mr SAWFORD—I am delighted with what you are saying. You have at least one ally here, because I think you are stating what is the case. When you take a national approach, would you favour—I have to be careful of my words now—a diverse approach to vocational education in Australia or would you favour an integrated approach? They are very different; you come up with a different animal at the end.

Mr Plummer—I would need to see what both might look like. I am not evading that question; I am just not sure whether I can conceptualise that.

Mr SAWFORD—Where we should go?

Mr Plummer—No, I am not sure. In many ways, what VET has done, with its programs, is more national than anything that schools and the education system have done. But again, even courses within VET have different annual curriculum hours. Unfortunately, we do not get to equate them all the time, but we get to argue about it from time to time.

Mr SAWFORD—I refer to indemnity insurance and transport in the Northern Territory. Are there huge cost differentials?

Mr Plummer—Insurance has gone crazy in the last two years. We do not have a handle on what it means, but it is becoming hugely expensive.

Mr SAWFORD—Do you have any ideas on that?

Mr Plummer—No. I honestly have not thought about it. The government carries its own indemnities. I have not seen what that means for us at the moment.

Mr SAWFORD—Do you have those figures, or could you get them?

Mr Plummer—I am not sure, but I could try.

Mr SAWFORD—It would be useful to see whether it was a significant percentage of your total budget.

Mr Plummer—I would not have thought it was; I just do not know.

Mrs MAY—I would like to follow up a couple of things. In your submission you talk about communicating the differences between general education and vocational education, and demystifying the myth that everyone should go to university; there is another pathway out there. There are two parts to this. By marketing VET in Schools to your students, have you seen an increase in retention rates? Could it lead to students staying at school, choosing a pathway and having a career? You have talked about new emerging industries; there will be opportunities out there for those students. With the marketing strategy you will be looking at, kids will know that there is a pathway out there for them and that there is somewhere else for them to go. From what you were telling us here today, there are even going to be jobs out there for them. Would you see VET in Schools as a tool to keep these kids at school, to learn and to get into jobs for the future?

Mr Plummer—Yes, I would. Empirically, we have not done work to know for sure. I am pretty convinced that Centralian College would be sure that it has meant a lot in terms of retention there. I think Taminmin High School would tell you the same thing. Paradoxically, when the secondary review team went to Casuarina Senior College they interviewed two classes: one was a high-performing maths class and the other was a low-performing maths class. They asked the high-performing maths class, 'How many VET subjects are you doing, and are you working?' Nearly every kid in the class said, 'We're doing a VET subject and, yes, we are working.' They went to the low-performing class and asked the same questions, and no kid was working and no kid was doing VET. So there is a lot of work to be done yet to try and understand what it really means.

Mr Jenkinson—The school based New Apprenticeships, which we have not done a lot in so far, really do offer the opportunity to keep kids at school and get an employment outcome at the same time. Our marketing will very much focus around school based New Apprenticeships as being a viable option.

Mrs MAY—Will that be a state marketing campaign? Will you market VET yourselves statewide or will what is available be delivered through schools, with their new counsellor you have talked about—a counsellor for each school now, although some of them have got teaching loads?

Mr Jenkinson—That is an area we have to do a lot of work in. I am not convinced that just doing it through the schools is the way to go. I think it needs to be a multifaceted approach. We need to be tackling parents and students maybe through other vehicles than just the school counsellor or career counsellor, because we may get a distorted view of what is going on if we do not do that. So marketing needs to be targeted carefully and strategically across all of the stakeholders.

Mrs MAY—We have heard from other schools that we have been to about where they have a mini-expo and parents, the community and the students get involved. Industry are there so that everyone knows what sorts of paths are there and what is available.

Mr Jenkinson—We have similar things in the Northern Territory, but I am not quite sure that that is the only way we need to be getting to our stakeholders.

CHAIR—What percentage of secondary teachers in the Northern Territory are trained at Northern Territory University? Are they nearly all trained locally or do you get a fair number from interstate?

Mr Plummer—By far the biggest percentage are trained outside of the Territory.

CHAIR—Do you have a rough breakdown on that?

Mr Plummer—I could get you some figures. Increasingly we are drawing product from the Territory, but it is only recently and it would still be the smaller number.

CHAIR—The reason for my question was to explore the issue of the competency of teachers to teach vocational education in schools. Is there any noticeable difference in that ability based on where the teachers are trained—Northern Territory versus other states—or is there any difference between states in that regard that you have noticed?

Mr Plummer—I cannot answer that.

Mr Jenkinson—I do not think we have any data on that.

CHAIR—On the issue of duplication of resources, the Australian directors of TAFE suggested to us that a lot of schools are trying to do too much in VET that could be done at TAFE colleges and really we are just reinventing the wheel. Do you think that is happening at all in the Northern Territory? Are there instances where high schools are repeating what their local TAFE is doing?

Mr Plummer—They would be in a minority, because when you talk about the local TAFE you are really only talking about Batchelor, Centralian and NTU. I cannot give you any level of confidence about my statement other than that I would be reasonably sure there is not a lot of duplication. There would definitely be some but not a lot—there could certainly be a bit of work done to rationalise that too.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. We have certainly appreciated your time and your valuable input.

Proceedings suspended from 3.55 p.m. to 4.05 p.m.

FROST, Mrs Carole, Chief Executive Officer, Northern Territory Chamber of Commerce and Industry Inc.

MANEY, Ms Terri-Ann, Manager, Training Services, Northern Territory Chamber of Commerce and Industry Inc.

CHAIR—Thanks for joining us today. Would you like to make some introductory comments and then we will proceed to questioning.

Mrs Frost—Certainly. We have given you some written information; I will not go through all of it again. By way of an overview, the Northern Territory Chamber of Commerce and Industry is the largest employer association in the Territory. We are affiliated with the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and also the Australian Retailers Association.

You can see in the information we have provided that over 65 per cent of our members employ less than 20 employees, and about 85 or 86 per cent employ less than 50. So we come into contact with a lot of small businesses in the Territory through our offices in all the major centres and through providing a wide range of services to those members, many of whom do not have human resource managers, training managers or finance managers. We come into contact with members through providing a wide variety of services—specifically through our training division, which Terri-Ann Maney manages.

We have been involved for quite some time in the training area—certainly in vocational education, employment and training. Some of the programs have been granted through the Commonwealth, such as BEPAs—which have a new name—ETAs, SILOs and IEEPs. You can think of any acronym and we have been involved. The reason that we have been involved in training and the whole issue of vocational training is because of the skill shortages in the Northern Territory. In the pre-election survey that we carried out in 2001, the No. 3 issue was recruiting employees with appropriate skills, and No. 10 was retaining those skilled employees. That survey is not in our submission but we can provide you with a copy. Our members were asked to put in order of priority a total of 73 issues.

We are an RTO—a registered training organisation—under the Australian quality training framework. Page 2 of our submission outlines the programs that we have been involved in over the years, primarily to encourage employers to get involved in and be a part of vocational training. We have two projects at the moment that are still on the run. Ms Maney can talk more about the chamber's employer reference group, which brings together employers who are interested in and want to take forward the issue of vocational training.

That is by way of background regarding the chamber. Information on vocational training is now a core part of our services that we provide to our members. We believe that we are missing out on a golden opportunity to train about a third of our population—the Indigenous population—and also the opportunity to maintain and train our young people here. We have been a big supporter of NTU, Centralian College and Batchelor College because we believe that training our young people here keeps them here, it keeps the parents here—hopefully, it keeps

the grandparents here—and we end up with a good core of skills that do not move around. Our population is notorious for being a transient one.

We have put forward quite a range of issues with regard to your terms of reference. I do not know whether you would like us to go through those or whether the issues will come out during questioning. We have put forward information on the key aspects that we think are important. We are aware that the ACCI has put in a detailed submission; we have been a party to and support that. What we have tried to do is to bring that up to the Territory level and give you some information from our point of view.

CHAIR—Terri-Ann, did you want to make any introductory comments?

Ms Maney—I guess my only additional comment is about the employer reference group that the chamber has established. That is a reference group made up of employers which gives employers an avenue to voice any concerns or any issues that they might have in relation to training, education and employment. We have found through the chamber recently and through a lot of the chamber's councils that training and education are coming up on the agenda quite a bit. The board decided there was the need to have a separate employer reference group. It is great for the chamber and a great avenue to discuss a lot of training issues.

CHAIR—Carole, you said in your introductory comments that we are missing out on an enormous opportunity for training our young people. What are the key things, in your view, that we need to be doing to make the most of those opportunities?

Mrs Frost—Perhaps I can give you an example of our disappointment. The Northern Territory Chamber of Commerce and Industry participated in the Commonwealth Indigenous Education and Employment Program, IEEP, which was tendered out through ACCI to all the state chambers. One of the things that we found very difficult to do—and we have dropped out of that program, much to our dismay, and it was done at a board level—was to meet the targets. We could not meet the outcomes as set by the national contract to get Indigenous people into jobs. We felt that people who had the skills can get jobs. They have jobs; whether within Indigenous organisations in the public or private sectors, there are jobs.

Our big concern really goes back to numeracy and literacy. I think that the Collins report certainly highlighted that, and I will not go back through that again. We need to have home-grown programs here—and I am not saying there are not any. The education department is well and truly aware of the situation. We need programs that involve business. There are a number of avenues to look at employment within the public sector and within Indigenous organisations, but there is a hole, a gap, a lack of opportunity to get employers involved in the private sector employing Aboriginal people. Such a lot of work is required—mentoring of employers as well as employees. We are talking about two different cultures that need to be integrated—and I know the word 'integration' sends shudders down people's backs—in the workplace so that each identifies with and can work with the other. That is what we tried—and were not able—to do with IEEP. That was a big disappointment to us.

The nuts and bolts of what is needed on the ground in the workplace is mentoring, support to employers and support to the young person as well. Even that needs to go back a step. We think that vocational training should be introduced to Indigenous students at a much earlier age. We

can give you other examples. There is a program called TRAC, which you may be aware of. That focuses predominantly on the retail sector. We are finding that by the time students are eligible or get involved in TRAC it is almost too late. To take a young person who is not sure anyway, who is not confident anyway, and put them into the retail sector is downright scary. It needs a lot of pre-work before then in building confidence and the knowledge of what is expected—the meet and greet, that whole aspect of retail. I am the chairman of TRAC as well at the moment, and I wonder whether we are actually doing a disservice in setting young people up to fail by even targeting them into the retail sector.

CHAIR—So those vocational education programs for the earlier years would be based on more generic skills, rather than industry specific skills?

Ms Maney—As Carole said, we would like to see it at an earlier age. That is purely vocational learning; we are not talking about VET in Schools. It could be work experience. Out in some of the remote communities there are other ways in which that vocational learning could start. Certainly some great areas have been successful—music, sport and other areas as well.

CHAIR—Do you think that there are ways in which the chamber could assist that? Given that one of the problems in schools is the lack of teachers with sufficient industry experience, are there ways in which the chamber could work more effectively with schools by providing teachers on a rotational or short-term basis to come into schools and undertake some of that preliminary generic work on teaching work skills?

Mrs Frost—I do not know about teachers, but certainly we have had a lot of willingness from the business community to participate in schools and to talk to school students about expectations in the workplace. They are not new programs; they are very simplistic but very important. We have all gone into schools and talked about how to make eye contact, how to dress yourself when you first go to an interview, how to identify where you would like to do your work experience and how to interact with your peers. It is very basic and sometimes it is frowned on as being too simplistic, but in certain areas it is not at all; it is very much about interacting with different people. How do you enable somebody who is very shy anyway or perhaps was brought up in a different culture to become this bouncy person in Katies saying, 'Hello, may I help you?' It is totally alien. We think that there is a role certainly for the chamber and for our members who have shown willing to go into schools to get more involved in some programs. We have done that with some success in the past; I just do not think we have done it in a structured way.

CHAIR—On industry confidence in VET in Schools, in their submission the Northern Territory government said that they previously had VET embedded in some of their school courses but industry did not seem to have confidence in the uniformity or standards taught there so they moved to stand-alone VET courses. Has that made any difference from industry's point of view in terms of the standard of VET training? From your point of view, is there any difference whether VET in Schools is stand-alone or embedded in a year 12 course?

Ms Maney—We would probably like to see it embedded. There would be more chance for employability skills to be promoted rather than under a stand-alone system.

Mrs Frost—We said in our submission that there is a gradual flow from work experience, tasting work in the workplace, and going into more structured programs such as VET in Schools and then apprenticeships in schools. It is hard for each one to stand alone. We see them very much as a mechanism that flows through. We would like to see some of the core components of VET in Schools being embedded. It does not matter what aspect of vocational training in schools is undertaken by the student, there is a flow-on: communications, occupational health and safety, team building and how to write a resume. It does not matter whether you end up a brain surgeon—at some time potential brain surgeons worked in Kentucky Fried Chicken—those skills will be used. It is hard to say that it should be stand-alone. We would certainly like to see components of it well and truly embedded into the whole system.

CHAIR—From your point of view and your members' point of view, is there any difference whether a student who has certificate II in IT, commerce, retailing or whatever has attained that at school as part of a VET in Schools course, as part of a TAFE course or through some private provider?

Ms Maney—Yes, there is a difference. Industry prefers that, if that certificate II is done completely at school, it is done with industry participation.

CHAIR—There must be some workplace experience?

Ms Maney—There must be some workplace experience.

CHAIR—Given that that occurs, is there any difference between that based at school and based at TAFE?

Ms Maney—Speaking from the Territory's perspective, around Australia there have been some excellent examples of TAFE working very well with industry and schools. It is a great partnership arrangement. TAFE fully understands the industry requirements. Within the Territory, because the TAFE is also part of the bigger picture with the university, it is hard; we have not seen as good arrangements up here. We do not want to see schools as RTOs; the best arrangement is that they partner up with an RTO, whether that is with the TAFE sector or another private RTO. We find that that has the best results in the end.

Mr SAWFORD—How would you describe the level of literacy and numeracy in the Territory?

Mrs Frost—You would have to break it into two components. We have high literacy and numeracy in urban areas. In rural and remote areas, we supported and concurred with the Collins report, which said that it is very much dependent on the teacher, the community and the community support for the teacher. There is generally very poor numeracy and literacy among Indigenous students in remote and rural areas. There is now a better understanding that the three R's are important, and that has well and truly got back into the schools. There is always the terrible dilemma of how much to teach in schools, but the three R's are well and truly back there again.

Mr SAWFORD—Where is that leadership coming from?

Mrs Frost—Across the board. Certainly, there is more benchmarking now. For some time, as you would know, industry across Australia, and certainly in the Territory, has been calling for relevant benchmarking of students' exam results and the certificates that come out. With competency based and the types of reporting that are coming out from employers, employers are more comfortable with the reporting mechanism. Whether the employability skills are still up there where employers want them to be is another matter. Industry expects somebody who comes out of school and goes into the work force to have a certain level of competency in a wide range of areas. Industry and schools call them different things. It is not as bad as it has been. In the last round of benchmarking we were on the upper—we were increasing—in the Territory.

Mr SAWFORD—Do you think there is a sense of urgency in dealing with that in remote areas?

Mrs Frost—I could not say how urgent it could be. It is absolutely appalling. This is a bit of a passion of mine so I will not apologise. Every year that we miss out on training our Indigenous population adds five years to the outcome or the lack of outcome. We have been saying the same about New Apprenticeships—whatever you want to call them. Every year that we do not train, that we do not give people skills, adds five years. I cannot give you any mathematical formula for that; this is just history in the Territory. Every year that we lose business getting involved in training takes double the time to ramp them back up again. We have recessions—with big or little R's—SARS, Ansetts and bombings. It is terrible. When the confidence goes and the ability for employers to train is removed for one year, one season, it takes double the time to get them back into it again. They have to make up the profit for the previous year before they go forward again. Because of its nature—even our big businesses would probably be medium sized elsewhere—we are considered a medium business. The chamber employs 30 staff; we would be a big business in Darwin. It shakes confidence badly and it is very hard to take on a young trainee.

Mr SAWFORD—You refer to careers advice and you use the example of what used to happen with the old CES. Would you like to expand on that?

Mrs Frost—I was trying to remember the name. Isn't it terrible—we have these moments, don't we? I was in Alice Springs before I came to Darwin, and the CES had a job network or a job club—I cannot remember the name—which had specialist career advisers whose job it was to go out and talk to the schools. They had marvellous information packages on all the trades, university entrance and all those sorts of things that the students could take away. They participated in careers days, talked to the students and liaised with industry. In my days in Alice Springs, a group of us went into the schools. There was always a person from the CES, somebody from the group training companies and somebody from the chamber of commerce—either myself or an employer—and we would go in and talk to the students. They got a very good grounding of what was required. It seems that that has fallen into a hole. Nobody has picked that up as well as it had been.

Mr SAWFORD—What happens now?

Mrs Frost—It is very much left to the Territory. It is a Territory government thing. I know that there have been attempts to continuously revise and implement a careers advisory system in

the schools. I understand that there is a program now, but those teachers still have a teaching load.

Mr SAWFORD—What would you recommend?

Mrs Frost—I would recommend specialist career advisers.

Mr SAWFORD—Where would you get them from?

Mrs Frost—They would preferably be people from industry. You do not have to be a teacher—there are no daggers in my back, are there?—to go into a classroom, as long as you have been trained to talk to schools. There could be two or three specialist people who visit a number of schools. They could take with them industry people who could talk about expectations. I asked a class some years ago what their aims were and where they would like to be. They all said, 'Managers,' but nobody had any idea of how you got to be a manager. All they knew was that the manager did not make the tea and brush the floor. They all also wanted to be travel agents because they thought that they would get free travel around the world. Students have these unrealistic ideas of what they want to be when they leave school. It could be outsourced. The schools do what the schools do best, and that is to teach. Careers advice could come from industry, it could be outsourced, it could come from a NAC, the group training companies or the chambers of commerce. There are any number of places that those jobs could come from.

Mr SAWFORD—You have done it before.

Mrs Frost—Yes, we have, and we did it well as a group. We worked very closely with the other vested interest parties in the Alice Springs region and we did it very well.

Mr SAWFORD—At the bottom of page 3 of the paper you gave us this afternoon, you mention some concerns that the chamber of commerce has about the schools being registered training organisations in their own right. Would you like to expand on the reasons for those concerns?

Mrs Frost—I will give a brief overview and then Terri-Ann can finish. Certainly, we know what is involved in becoming an RTO—what resources and commitment are needed in order to be a registered training organisation. I understand that schools do not have carte blanche to automatically become RTOs. They have to go through the same process that we did, and that includes policies and procedures, and quality manuals. It is horrendous, and rightly so; it is a high benchmark to achieve. Whether it is appropriate that schools be RTOs, or whether that is the perfect opportunity for them to partner, should be debated. Terri-Ann has had more experience.

Ms Maney—It is definitely about the quality issue under the AQTF and the accreditation process. It is a huge workload for schools to maintain it. Getting back to what Carole said before, we should let the schools do what they do best. Partnering with another RTO seems to work best.

Mr SAWFORD—Some schools around this country—they would be a minority of schools—often through the extravagance, interest and passion of their principals and often against the

wishes of their state education departments have developed quite incredible vocational training programs. They are the exception rather than the rule. They tend to rebel and be highly reactive to the status quo. I cannot remember the name of the guy up at Gosford in New South Wales. He and Peter Turner at Salisbury in South Australia got themselves into all sorts of trouble, but they ran very effective vocational training programs. Not all registered training organisations in the private sector necessarily have a good record either. In terms of vocational education, how much is it due to leadership? Whether it is private, public, school based, college based or secondary college based, is it the direction that is given by the leader of that particular program rather than the structure?

Mrs Frost—I would say it would be from the top, from the principals. It is the sort of thing where you see an opportunity. Because of our small base, a number of the colleges and schools around the Northern Territory need to look at where they service their community best. You get conflicting agendas in that, where one principal believes that a school is a school and another one says, 'We've got to take an opportunity; there might be money in it. There could be better funding for us; there could be better outcomes.' It comes back to industry participation. If you become completely self-contained, the resources are immense and the pitfalls are huge, but you do not get the industry involvement that we think is important.

Business have been told for long enough that training is a two-way street, that we have to put our money where our mouth is and that we cannot keep saying there is a shortage of this or that trade without participating. We have been told in the past that the reason there are skills shortages is wholly and solely that industry has not trained, for whatever reason. That is a fair criticism. That does happen. If the economy goes down, the three things that drop off immediately are subscriptions, membership and training. I do not know if there is a survey on that, but that is certainly relevant as far as we are concerned because we are involved in all three. To make sure that business are involved, we as a chamber constantly talk about business putting their money where their mouth is. That is why we formed the reference group. You cannot sit and whinge and moan and say, 'We've got skills shortages.' You have to participate. So if the education system is going to say, 'This is ours,' that will be right: it will be theirs. We will wait for the product to come out.

Mr SAWFORD—Does your organisation favour a single structure? Do you have a concept of a structure that you think would work better than any other or do you support a variety of structures? Do you support an integrated system or a diverse system?

Mrs Frost—Because the Territory is so big and the population base is so scattered, it is horses for courses. You would really have to look at what suited a school community best. Some of the schools in remote areas might have to be it.

Mr SAWFORD—So you are saying a diverse system?

Mrs Frost—Yes.

Mrs MAY—I would like to tease out a bit more on the skills shortages which you alluded to and which Rod has touched on as well. How closely does the chamber work with the schools in the delivery of vocational education courses, knowing your membership and the skills they need in their businesses? We have also heard a bit today about emerging industries—that there is

going to be a shortage of skills in the future and they can see a real problem. As representatives of the chamber, how closely do you work with businesses and schools in delivering the vocational education programs that you see are needed? Is it flexible? Does it change with identifying those shortages?

Mrs Frost—We do not participate in actual delivery. We do not have trainers that go into the classroom and deliver training.

Mrs MAY—But do you work with schools in an advisory capacity to change what they may be delivering?

Ms Maney—Through our Business and Industry School to Work Alliance program, which is a national project—and there is one of those positions in each of the chambers around the country—we look at issues that are constraining business and school partnerships. We are very much of the view that we have to start at the top and work down. We have to be able to see the policy on VET in Schools from the department and see where they are headed. The chamber is a member of the DEET strategic planning committee for VET in Schools, so we certainly are involved in any planning issues.

As far as schools are concerned, getting down to that level, we have found that it is best that we put our efforts at the top. We are a representative of the board of studies and we are very much pushing through them that even the principals need to be aware of VET in Schools. We need to do a lot of education at that level and hopefully it will filter down. But on a daily basis we talk a lot to schools and we are identifying different issues with them. Through our employer reference group we are getting feedback from industry. We are doing a survey at the moment to find out what industry think of the level of some of the secondary school students coming into the workplace. So we are very in touch with a lot of those issues.

Mrs MAY—Once again, in your submission you touched on the inflexibility of timetabling. You talk about a five-day and a seven-day timetable. The seven-day timetable causes huge problems because you do not have that same-day aspect. Is this something you raise with schools? Do you talk to schools about why they are so inflexible?

Ms Maney—Yes, we do.

Mrs MAY—What is the feedback?

Ms Maney—It has been an issue for quite a number of years and particularly since the introduction of VET in Schools. It is a hard one but I guess it is getting a little bit easier. The introduction of school based New Apprenticeships has also made schools a bit more flexible as well, and we are seeing some excellent examples of that. School based New Apprenticeships could be just what we need in order to see a bit of flexibility with some of the other programs. We do not have large numbers of school based New Apprenticeships; I think we are talking about maybe 50 in the Darwin area. As we increase those, we will certainly be looking at some best practice models. There are some great examples of timetabling for that in some regional areas and we try to promote what some schools do to others—trying to create best practice.

Mr SAWFORD—What sorts of examples?

Ms Maney—The large employer in Nhulunbuy is the mine and they work very closely with the timetabling.

Mr SAWFORD—What do they actually do?

Ms Maney—They have a set day for industry training.

Mr SAWFORD—A block timetable?

Ms Maney—Yes.

Mr SAWFORD—Do they have a longer school day or allow some teachers to start later? For example, some of the best voc ed schools start at six o'clock in the morning and go to six o'clock at night but the teachers start at different times. Do you have any examples of that?

Ms Maney—No, I am not sure of the exact details.

Mr SAWFORD—So there is just a block?

Ms Maney—Yes, just a block.

Mr SAWFORD—Do you have any other examples?

Ms Maney—No, I do not have the examples at this stage.

Mrs MAY—That is what we needed to tease out. You also touch on support for employers and you have said in your submission that around 65 per cent of your members have 20 or fewer employees. Could you expand on the support they are looking for if they take someone on? Are you talking about someone one day a week for training, or through work experience? What sort of support do you think they need or what are they looking for?

Mrs Frost—They are looking for somebody whom they can ring up and say, 'I think I have a problem in the workplace with this young person.' When you have a small workplace, you employ somebody and you want them on board. Taking into account all the cultural requirements of an Indigenous person, we have found in the past that the young person is not always comfortable in going to the employer and saying, 'I need time off' or 'I am not comfortable doing this' or 'I need to be shown again' or whatever. The easy way out is not to go—not to attend work. You could lose a potentially good employee when the employer says: 'Oh God, there they go again; another day off. They are unreliable.' Contrast that with ringing someone up to say, 'I think I have a problem here,' or having somebody up front in the workplace doing some preparatory work before they go into the workplace to make sure there is a relationship between employer and employee, and then maintaining that.

Some years ago there was a program—again I cannot remember the name—involving Woolworths and a registered training organisation who took on 12 young people and mentored them with the employer all the way to the end of the 12-week course. That showed considerable success. Not everybody ended up working for Woolworths but the great majority saw out the 12 weeks, and both parties said that they had learnt a lot from each other. It gave the young people a

sense of achievement. Most of them finished the 12 weeks and they went on to other things. That was everything from 'this is how you dress; this is how you turn up' and being with them so that when the induction happened in the workplace there was a person in the middle making sure that both parties understood and followed it through. Unfortunately it never went any further—I do not know why.

Mrs MAY—You would be happy to know that we have heard this in past inquiries, so it is something that is coming up.

CHAIR—How often does a work placement lead to employment after school?

Mrs Frost—From anecdotal information, quite often.

CHAIR—You have done no research and have no data on that?

Ms Maney—No, we have not—and that would be good to get. But we have had employers say to us that they do not have to advertise—they use VET in Schools students and use the program as a recruiting ground.

Mrs Frost—Certainly we have seen that it assists in the drop-out rate. You get students saying, 'I want to be a motor mechanic' or 'I want to do IT,' and sign up, but then drop out because they really did not want to do that. As part of the whole program of work experience and VET in Schools it is really sad when you get somebody committed to a four-year apprenticeship or a three-year training course and then they find out that it was the wrong one. Again, once you have lost them you are more likely to have lost them for good, because they do not want to set themselves up for failure again. So if we can eliminate that and get them to move around and get a taste, that prevents that huge drop-out rate happening as well.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. We appreciate your time.

[4.45 p.m.]

DUNN, Ms Carmelita, General Manager, Indigenous Education Division, Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training; and Committee Member, Learning Lessons Committee

CHAIR—Welcome. Thank you for appearing before us today. Would you like to make some further introductory comments in this particular context or should we proceed straight to questioning?

Ms Dunn—I think we should proceed straight to questions. Peter covered most of the things that we are trialling, but I am happy to answer any questions.

Mr SAWFORD—I would like to refer to the executive summary page where it lists the key issues. You identify four or five problems: poor attendance, long-term systemic failure, resource implications, failure to access available Commonwealth funds and a need for the Indigenous Education Council to be completely restructured. When you say restructured you then refer to an outcomes based approach and the establishment of partnerships between parents, communities and the peak bodies, and I want to come back to that in a moment. I have asked this question of others but I want to ask you also: do you favour an integrated system or a diverse system?

Ms Dunn—I think my response to that question is similar to Peter's. It is a case of horses for courses. I think what you need to do is make sure the standards are there because for a long time, especially around Indigenous education and even VET in Schools for Indigenous students, it has always been about lessening the standards rather than actually upping the ante to develop standards that are equivalent across the board. So my worry is that once they start talking about less than, it means that it is lessened and you run a dual system.

Mr SAWFORD—I will come back to that in a moment. At the beginning of the key issues section there is a reference to improving educational outcomes and a reference to the partnerships, the processes and the outcomes but there is no reference to a rationale or a purpose. The document says that the purpose is to improve educational outcomes. It seems to me that in education you need three things to be coherent: you need a rationale, you need a process and you need to spell out the outcomes. This summary spells out two of those things: the outcomes and the process, but I cannot find where it spells out clearly what the rationale ought to be. Is there a reason for that?

Ms Dunn—Maybe not. I think if you had a look at our strategic plan you would see that it spells out how we are going to get there and the rationale we are going to use to achieve those outcomes. The way it is written those are pretty generic.

Mr SAWFORD—I understand that from what Peter was saying as well, but that is part of the process—the strategy is the process—that is not the overall purpose.

Ms Dunn—I suppose the purpose is to give Indigenous people very similar economic and social outcomes to those that non-Indigenous people enjoy in the Northern Territory. That is the purpose of education.

Mr SAWFORD—A sentence in the educational outcomes paragraph says:

- a repeatedly stated observation from Indigenous elders that their children and grandchildren have lesser literacy and numeracy skills than they do.

Why are they saying that?

Ms Dunn—It is most probably because they have moved away from the three R's that Carole talked about.

Mr SAWFORD—Do you agree with those elders who are saying that?

Ms Dunn—Yes, because I think that is their experience: they feel that they have better English literacy and numeracy skills than their children and grandchildren. You talked earlier about doing lots of things but not doing lots of things without a purpose. I think you talked about funny kinds of literacy and numeracy strategies that did lots of things but did nothing. I cannot remember the term you used.

Mr SAWFORD—Do you agree with that?

Ms Dunn—Yes, that is their perception. I think there is a difference in terms of the cultural knowledge of Indigenous young people now of their own language and culture. A lot of older Indigenous people can read and write their language and culture, but young people now have a greater understanding of their own language and culture in writing. So fundamentally what is important for Aboriginal people is language and culture, but fundamentally what is important for them in contemporary Australia is to have good English literacy and numeracy skills. There should not be a trade-off of either/or; there needs to be a coming together of both.

Mr SAWFORD—We have just finished an inquiry on the education of boys. This committee questioned the use of gender equity as a policy. In fact, I think we discredited the policy of gender equity in this country. One of my views is that, as a principal, if you use religion, ethnicity, gender or race as a basis for education you can get yourself into all sorts of trouble. I come back to the purpose: you want Aboriginal people to have the same economic and social opportunities, and I think that is really the desired aim. Can that occur in the current situation? Does it have a hard enough edge? What needs to change and what would you be recommending to this committee? I know we are looking at vocational education, but we are also looking at literacy and numeracy—the whole gamut. What would be the priority, in terms of your recommendation to this committee, to make a significant change to the opportunities for vocational education for young Indigenous Australians?

Ms Dunn—Hard data, for a start. Your current report is about courses and units, and you say that even your own figures are a bit rubbery. When it comes to pinning down the exact numbers of students that are actually participating in VET in Schools, you have to go looking for it. At least now, in terms of school based education, the numbers are crunched and you can talk about

the real numbers being achieved, whereas in VET in Schools the figures on students completing courses are a bit rubbery. For example, some students are doubling up on courses, so you do not actually get the hard numbers. The other thing that I think is really important if you want to get Indigenous students to get some accelerated outcomes is that you need to give some support for students that we know have poor literacy and numeracy skills. They need to have some support in levels III and IV. You cannot give the literacy and numeracy support for students doing I and II and then take it away in III and IV. If you want some outcomes right now—given that in our system currently we have not produced students with good literacy and numeracy—you cannot expect them to just gain those skills in certificate I and II; you actually have to provide some III and IV. I think you need some hard data about that which tells you whether it is true that a lot of Indigenous people are on this endless round of the training treadmill of I and II. It is okay for the RTOs because they already have their dollars—thank you very much. It is not leading to employment. It is really important to give young people a whole range of tastes but if that is all they get then you must question what you are doing it for, because it leads to no outcomes.

You could do some work with CDEPs. There is coverage right across Australia with CDEPs. If you equip CDEPs to participate in vocational education, I think that would make a difference not only in our jurisdiction but across all jurisdictions, because there are CDEPs across the nation. I am. not sure where the ATSIC review of CDEPs is, but I think they can make a substantial difference in terms of partnering schools to provide work experience and work support for young Indigenous people who may not be that comfortable in the workplace; that is something Carole talked about earlier. That is because all you are getting is young Indigenous Is and IIs participating in work experience or structured workplace lining. What we want is a critical mass of students so that you can wear some attrition.

Mr SAWFORD—Are there any examples of CDEP programs being involved in vocational education?

Ms Dunn—We are about to begin one at Maningrida but it is has not yet begun. I think there are a couple in Western Australia, including St Marys High School. I am not too sure where they are, but you hear generally about some of them just beginning that process. I think it is more to do with the community saying, 'Maybe that young person should not go on a CDEP unless they actually marry it up with the school'—that is, a school and CDEP partnership.

Mr SAWFORD—Aren't there benefits there for young people who, for whatever reason, do not want to continue at school—if early leavers got involved in CDEP and through that got their vocational education?

Ms Dunn—Yes, but I do not know that CDEPs are equipped to do the training; it is early days yet. I am an ATSIC regional councillor and we do not actually equip CDEPs with the capacity to do employment and training. I think that it is a capacity issue more than anything and, if CDEPs were given a capacity, especially in remote areas—

Mr SAWFORD—How would you do that?

Ms Dunn—You have to resource them, because what they mainly do is compliance for ATSIC. They develop work plans and they make sure the participating host organisations

comply with the grant. They are not there to generate training and employment. They could be, if they were resourced. It becomes a resource issue.

CHAIR—Were you suggesting before that the resources might be more effectively used by CDEPs than by RTOs?

Ms Dunn—I think some CDEPs have become RTOs. I think that that is a possibility, especially in some remote areas.

Mr SAWFORD—Deliberately or by default?

Ms Dunn—Deliberately. Maybe it is by default for some in other jurisdictions; I am not too sure. Peter said earlier that we had about 100 RTOs in the Territory. For such a small jurisdiction, there are too many people in the field. The driver is not about equipping young people with skills to move into the workplace; it is about the profitability of those students for RTOs in terms of bottoms on seats and the almighty dollar.

CHAIR—So what sorts of organisations besides schools are RTOs? Give us a quick run-down of some of the others.

Ms Dunn—Some CDEPs are RTOs. I think on the Tiwi Islands they have an employment and training organisation, so some communities have RTO status. There are a whole lot of private providers out there, as well as the three public organisations. Some schools are RTOs. There are just so many. We could get the information for you, most probably. There are also group training organisations.

Mrs MAY—Do you have an opinion on whether schools should be RTOs? I think you heard what Carole said earlier.

Ms Dunn—I am still out on that one. If some schools can do it really well, they should. I still like CDEPs. I think for schools it is a capacity issue. In the Territory there is the VET agenda and the recent push by our system for VET to become the core business of schools. It is more about a capacity. It is a great opportunity for us to beef up our efforts, especially with our three public providers because they can offer a greater breadth of courses.

Mrs MAY—And industry too?

Ms Dunn—And industry as well. I think it is really important that industry be involved along the way because the reality of those employability skills is that they have to be gained from the industry. They are the people who are out there at the coalface.

Mrs MAY—Absolutely.

CHAIR—You sounded a bit cynical in your comment about RTOs being driven by the dollar and putting bums on seats. Do you think that applies to group training companies that are RTOs and also take a commission from the placement of the people they are training? Have you had any experience of that being a problem?

Ms Dunn—I think Carole and the chamber of commerce talked about it earlier. It is really hard to get the Indigenous outcomes that group trainers or any of the RTOs are looking for. While their intent might be good, the actual outcomes are very poor. You do get a little bit cynical about it all because the outcomes that you are looking for in terms of employability skills that young people can use to get real jobs are not there. If you look at the Territory figures for youth employment and exclude CDEP figures in both urban and remote areas, the unemployment rate for young Indigenous people is very high.

The way it is badged, if you like, suggests that if you are in training you are employed. That is not true at all. It is about how you badge it. It is really important that unless you actually call it what it is, you are not going to fix the issue. Carole said to you earlier that they actually had a contract for a program and they could not meet the outcomes because it is so very difficult to get those outcomes. She is right about trying to give young Indigenous people some employability skills at school because if they are there we can do something with them while they are there.

CHAIR—Do you mean focusing on more generic skills and literacy and numeracy rather than on specific industry related VET courses?

Ms Dunn—A bit of both. Carole also talked about young people saying that they all want to be managers and that all they wanted to be was the boss of the company, when in reality they are not going to be. There is an expectation that is built up in schools that you can be whatever you want to be, but that is not actually the reality. In reality, you might work for the government but all you are ever going to be is an AO3, an AO4 or an AO5. Some might get to be a CEO, but not everyone is going to be a CEO.

Especially for some of the students in remote areas there are new markets emerging. There is a capacity there for fish farming now, for example. Fish farming in the Top End has now exceeded the wild catch quota. In Central Australia there are things like the cut flower industry or horticulture, the citrus or grape industries—there is a whole range of things. Some Indigenous communities are co-located with those industries. You would think that you would need to have some vocational education so that if there was a possibility of a labour market there for Indigenous people, they could take it up. That is notwithstanding their being a rocket scientist or whatever they want to do, but there could be a potential labour market there and so we have to get smart about that as well.

CHAIR—Isn't it also true that, regardless of whether you are talking about Indigenous people or white Australians, if you do not have the infrastructure in the community you cannot grow your economy? When you are talking about citrus farms and grapes out of season and aquaculture and so on, all of those things need infrastructure. In my electorate, for example, I have had a great big blue lately with the state government about a bridge opening or closing in terms of its determining the potential of tourism where I come from. You can have options and infrastructure that grow economies and provide job dividends, and you can have expenditure from governments that does not take that into account. That goes back to what you were saying, which is that people spend all their time training and then there is no job dividend. You would think there is a lesson in all of this that one of the recommendations the Commonwealth government ought to be looking at in terms of its expenditure in vocational education and training is that there ought to be job dividends at the end.

Ms Dunn—There has been a push for some accountability about job dividends but, for a long time—especially in Indigenous communities, where there are limited labour markets—RTOs have been able to get around that, if you like. Especially where there are potential labour markets, there needs to be a bit more accountability about those—

Mr SAWFORD—How do they get around that?

Ms Dunn—They say they are remote—

Mr SAWFORD—I do not want you to name people but, in a general sense, how do they get around that?

Ms Dunn—I suppose they talk about the disadvantages of their remoteness, literacy and numerous skills and a whole range of things—

Mr SAWFORD—They talk about them as an excuse?

Ms Dunn—There are lots of excuses, but I think it is a hard ask as well because our systems, especially our school system, have not produced Indigenous students with literacy and numeracy outcomes that RTOs can actually work with. We are trying to do something about that right now in terms of explicit literacy and numeracy strategies in the classroom every single day. We are trying to do some explicit teaching of literacy and numeracy. Up until recently, all of our bush schools were not involved in MAP testing in terms of benchmark testing. We have now mandated that all schools will be involved in benchmarking but that does not help as far as the 30 years of neglect that Indigenous students have most probably had. We do not even do very well in the urban areas in retaining young Indigenous students, but we can start getting some accelerated outcomes there because there is a labour market and there are greater resources marshalled in urban areas.

CHAIR—You mention the need for greater involvement and ownership by Indigenous people in the education of their young people. Is that happening? Are we seeing a turnaround?

Ms Dunn—I think it is happening slowly. It is not happening across the board but I think there are patches where principals and schools are saying to Indigenous parents, 'If you want similar outcomes for Indigenous children, particularly your child, then your child has to come to school.'

CHAIR—So what are the features common to those places where that is happening and which we ought to be trying to replicate?

Ms Dunn—Good relationships between the school and the community. There are only pockets of those but I think that our data is suggesting that we are making early gains. They are not very big gains. We would like some quantum leaps but I think what we are getting is some incremental growth across a number of fronts.

CHAIR—So that depends mostly on the personality of the school principals and the communities?

Ms Dunn—Yes. If we could find the mix that could be sustainable without individuals, across our whole system that would make a difference to us.

CHAIR—So there is nothing that governments could be doing to enhance that process?

Ms Dunn—I think the government has made it quite clear that Indigenous education is a core business and I think that the pressure has now been put on schools, principals and teachers to deliver literacy and numeracy outcomes for Indigenous students, even in terms of improving attendance by retaining the students. They are really quite tangible things that you can actually hang your hat on, instead of a whole range of generic things like offering a whole range of courses when the students might or might not come in today. We are saying that it is really important that you have a relationship with the community and it is important that you actually have a relationship with the parents. We are reporting to parents, saying that this is what is happening. We are now saying that we want to be quite clear about making sure that parents know that, by not sending their children to school, those children are not going to have the best opportunity to gain the literacy and numeracy skills that they might possibly gain if they turn up for 90 per cent of the day.

CHAIR—Is that message starting to get through?

Ms Dunn—In pockets. As a system we are trying to set some standards in our schools about it being really important that the further you go away from Darwin or Alice Springs, the more you do not drop your standards and that you should have high expectations for your students in terms of their coming to school and getting good outcomes and achieving. We did not previously have high expectations of Indigenous students so we did not offer secondary provisions out there. I suppose there were two secondary provisions, one big 'S' for urban schools and one little 's', which was for bridging and foundation courses. We did not invest in Indigenous students for a long time. We are attempting to invest in those students right now because we realise that they are going to be a sizeable part of the Northern Territory population and we just have to do that otherwise there is going to be a huge impact in a few years if we fail to improve student education and VET outcomes.

Mrs MAY—In this 1999 review were there any surprises for the department? Do you think it highlighted areas that you were not aware of? Has it given you a bit of a blueprint or a focus for the department to work with in the future? Has it been a valuable resource for the department?

Ms Dunn—Absolutely. I think it was what the department knew but no-one was brave enough to talk about it. I think it has provided some clear directions. Obviously the involvement of parents and the community in that review was too hard to ignore—it was not just some sort of review that had no credibility. A whole range of Indigenous parents were involved. So the themes around our strategic plan fit the 101 recommendations in the 1999 review.

Mrs MAY—Is the department working through all of those recommendations?

Ms Dunn—Yes.

Mrs MAY—Were some of them implemented?

Ms Dunn—We have developed strategies around them. We will have our roll-out in terms of the hard data. The new student administration and management system will mean we can track our students and keep good data on them. We have improved the IT capacity of our schools. We are trialling some proper secondary provision in remote communities. Again, it is only occurring in some sites. One of the recommendations was that we trial self-managing community controlled schools. We are about to begin that process this year. It will occur over five years and we will talk to communities at five sites about their capacity to be involved in education.

There is now a literacy and numeracy strategy in schools. The genesis for that was obviously the Collins report. We have as a priority plans regarding attendance and retention of Indigenous students in schools. We have made Indigenous education a core business of the department. I think it is a bit early for VET, having regard to our capacity. But it is a great opportunity for Indigenous students in terms of retaining them. I refer in particular to the school based New Apprenticeships. I think that is a fantastic new initiative that might produce some results.

CHAIR—You said in the report that literacy and numeracy are barriers to effective take-up of VET, but it is probably fair to say, isn't it, that VET can actually provide a means for them to be interested enough in staying on at school and improve their literacy and numeracy. So the two ought to be working together.

Ms Dunn—Yes. You need to be focused about what you are doing. It is no use not being focused. I think that is what has made a difference in turning it around in terms of Indigenous students. As a system we are really focused about what we are trying to do. We can do a whole lot of things and not do anything well, but if we run with our themes in terms of the elements of our strategic plan, we will get some outcomes. VET can also offer some life skills that Indigenous students really need. The delivery is always an issue. We are such a small jurisdiction and our capacity to deliver to such a huge geographical area continues to present challenges. With respect to the additional staff, I talked about housing and infrastructure. Some of the communities still have Indigenous people living 15 to a room. How can you justify putting one non-Indigenous teacher into a house or a duplex in those circumstances? It is a big challenge in terms of housing and infrastructure. Peter and Kim talked about this, and it occurs in remote areas and in urban areas as well—the cultural obligations that impact on students' attendance at and completion of courses.

I also think, as I said before, that it is about that hard data on whether, as a result of VET courses, young people are actually going through to the work force. It is about accountability, and I think that needs to be felt in VET. If you could do one thing, that would be quite valuable for Indigenous students. It could then become quite transparent that what we are doing is an endless round of training courses, none of which leads to employment. The other thing, obviously, is marketing it to Indigenous parents and students. I do not think the link between school and work is clear. The reason for staying at school is that, the further you go on, the more employability skills you gain to get some work at the end of it. Historically, there has been a generation of people on CDEP or some government transfer payment. It is very hard to develop a work ethic.

Mrs MAY—Would you see that as a challenge with the parents—on re-educating the parents about how important it is for their kids to go to school and stay at school for their literacy and numeracy?

Ms Dunn—Yes. That is very hard. They cannot see the possibilities because they were not there for them. It is very hard if you are living in remote communities or even in a low socioeconomic area to instil that hope in young people. I suppose that school is about the only place you can do that. What you have to do is take the parents along. It is a lot easier in primary schools because parents are really involved, but high schools are a different place. The pastoral care of students is not there. There is no interaction between teachers and parents. I have a young daughter in high school—they may have only eight teachers. So that interaction with parents is not there. You feel a sense of hopelessness that the high school teachers are the experts and you are not in charge. It is not really a good partnership between the teachers, the school, the parents and the child.

CHAIR—And children of that age do not want you involved at school, whereas when they are at primary school they do.

Ms Dunn—Yes, that is another issue. We have developed MOUs in some communities where there is a labour market. We have one at Borroloola and another at Gove. We are going to try some school and industry partnerships. There is a Commonwealth initiative called something like working together for Indigenous youth. We are going to trial some issues around that with the school, where we try to get some of the secondary students working in some of the mining companies or some other local industries. We are going to try to provide some experience for students that may lead to jobs. We will be able to do the modelling that is required. I think that modelling is really important. I keep talking about a critical mass and accelerated outcomes for Indigenous students in VET as well. I think VET is a place where you should be able to get some accelerated outcomes.

Mr SAWFORD—When you use the word 'focused' do you really mean balanced? It seems to me that not only in Indigenous education but in fact in education across the English speaking world—because there are similarities in the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and Australia—30 years ago we had a balance of implicit and explicit teaching, but explicit teaching suddenly fell away and became implicit. You could have described our curriculum as having analysis and synthesis, but the analysis has fallen away and become highly synthesised. In other words, there is a big focus on language and literature and less emphasis on pure mathematics and science.

In fact, that lack of balance has created great problems over the last 30 years. In a sense, education for Indigenous youth would be far better if it included everything, not just half of the curriculum. Both you and Peter have mentioned over and over again explicit teaching. That must be sending a message to all of us that that was not attended to as well as it should have been in the last 30 years. Certainly the inquiry into the education of boys showed us that that was not happening. It was much easier to have cooperation. There is nothing wrong with cooperation but people walked away from competition in any form, when in actual fact competition can be a healthy challenge to some people where the game is equal; in other words, where you have similar abilities. When you say 'focused' are you really saying that for success to come out of education programs for Indigenous youth, whether they be in urban or remote areas, there needs to be a much greater balance in the programs that are offered? You mention employability, but if you do not have the program right there is no employability. If the kids are turned off at year 9 by basically wrong programs, you will never get them back.

Ms Dunn—What we mean by focus is much more about exactly knowing the technical aspects of your teaching methodology and knowing what you are doing and measuring what you are doing.

Mr SAWFORD—That's with everything, isn't it?

Ms Dunn—Yes, you don't just do it because you have always done it like this; you do it because it actually works and you achieve something out of it. In terms of a focus, we are saying that we and the government have focused on literacy and numeracy because we recognise that we have not done very well as we have left them in a state of disrepair for 30 years. We know that if we can do that well, we can achieve some educational outcomes. Unless people have good English literacy and numeracy skills, they are doomed to CDP—we are quite explicit about that. It is really important that Indigenous people have culture and language—you are not going to get away from that at all—but it is also important that they have English literacy and numeracy and the methodology that you might apply should be a methodology that works, not the methodology that you happen to bring in your suitcase from Western Australia or Queensland and which you think works because it works in an urban school there. We have to know that it works for Indigenous students. One of the approaches we are currently trialling in some schools, the accelerated literacy program, is quite clearly showing us that the particular methodology actually works for students. That is Brian Gray's approach.

Mr SAWFORD—When you say that it works you mean that it is a matter of encouraging children to write and also to write accurately. Is that what you mean?

Ms Dunn—No. There is a rigorous approach to your teaching methodology. You are measuring what you are doing. You are not doing it implicitly; you are doing it explicitly. You are actually teaching in a certain way that may be really boring to you as a teacher, but by God it works for students. It is about a scaffolding or building block approach and there are no surprises for kids: they come into the classroom every day and this is what they are going to get; they are not going to have a teacher come in with a different approach. You have an approach that builds on what you have learnt and they can learn, and that is producing some results for us in some of our trial sites. We have about five sites: a couple in a high school, one in a remote community and one in Alice Springs, where we are looking at some town camp kids. We are actually focusing on what works for Indigenous students. We do not want an Indigenous methodology; we just want to know what teaching methodologies work.

CHAIR—Thanks very much, Karmi, we appreciate your time. Good luck with the challenges and the initiatives.

Ms Dunn—Thank you.

CHAIR—I call on one of my colleagues to move that the committee receive as evidence, and authorise publication of, the submission received from the Northern Territory Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Mr SAWFORD—I so move.

CHAIR—There being no objection, it is so ordered.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Sawford**):

That the committee authorises the publication of the evidence given before it at the public hearing on this day, including publication of the transcript on the electronic parliamentary database.

Committee adjourned at 5.25 p.m.