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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Reference: Vocational education in schools

TUESDAY, 29 APRIL 2003

DARWIN

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Tuesday, 29 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 9.33 a.m.

BRISCOE, Danyah; CALVANO, Jennah; CASWELL, Ross; CASWELL, Megan; EDWARDS, Cavan; ERKELENS, Rebecca; FORREST, Dean; FREESE, Jim; GRIBBEN, Nathan; INNALL, Troy; LAWRENCE, Bill; McALEAR, Rebecca; MIJOTA, Lucas; PAYNE, John; and RISK, Bobby

CHAIR—I declare open this hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training. Thank you to Taminmin High School for having us today. Thank you, particularly, to the principal, Mr Kim Rowe, and to the staff, and thank you to the students for giving up their time to come to talk to us. Just to fill you in on what we are doing here, we are visiting a number of schools across the country, talking to a lot of people involved in education to get an understanding of how vocational education works in schools so we can try to see if there are ways the government can improve what is happening with vocational education. We want to hear from you about your experiences, how you think it works, how you think it could be improved, what is good about it, what needs to be improved et cetera. We will start with you, Lucas.

Lucas Mijota—I am doing multimedia. Last year I did VET music at Taminmin High School.

Danya Briscoe—I am in year 12. Last year I did rural skills.

Rebecca Erkelens—Last year I did rural skills, and I am in year 12.

Jennah Calvano—Last year I did rural skills, and I am in year 12.

Ross Caswell—I am in year 10, and this year I am doing certificate I engineering.

Megan Caswell—I am in year 12. Last year I did business services at Taminmin.

Rebecca McAlear—I am in year 12, and I did business studies and a bit of auto.

Bobby Risk—I am in conservation and land management. I am in year 11.

Nathan Gribben—I am in year 12. In year 10 I did fishing and maritime studies. I have done auto certificate I and metal and engineering certificate II.

Bill Lawrence—I am doing certificate I in conservation and land management, and I am in year 11.

Jim Freese—I am in year 11. I am doing engineering and auto.

Troy Innall—I am in year 11. I am doing multimedia and auto.

Dean Forrest—Last year I did certificate II in information technology. I am in year 11.

John Payne—Last year I did certificate II in information technology, and this year I am doing certificate I in electrotechnology.

Cavan Edwards—I am in year 11. Last year I did certificate II in IT, and this year I am doing certificate II in multimedia.

CHAIR—That is terrific. We have a whole range of subjects there. I am particularly interested in, first of all, why you chose to do a VET course and, secondly, why you chose the particular VET course that you chose. Is it because it sounded interesting? Is it because your mates are doing it? Is it because you can see a real connection there and know you can get a job in that area afterwards? What made you choose the particular VET course that you chose to do?

Jennah Calvano—I had been doing agriculture for about three years before I started the rural skills VET course. I just wanted to do it to provide me with a realistic view. This way I got sent to an actual station and export yards, and it gave me a view on what it is really like to be in the work force.

Mr SAWFORD—When you said you had done three years of agriculture, what were you doing and where? Was that here?

Jennah Calvano—It was just normal agriculture in school. I had a whole Wednesday of planting crops and working with cattle and buffaloes.

Mr SAWFORD—Where did your interest come from prior to those three years?

Jennah Calvano—I had really taken an interest in animals and stuff like that, and I just wanted to find out more about them.

Mr SAWFORD—Does your family work with animals? Do you have a farm?

Jennah Calvano—No.

Mr SAWFORD—So you had no previous background in agriculture at all?

Jennah Calvano—A little bit. We used to live on a farm when I was really young, and we have a few animals at home.

Rebecca Erkelens—I live on a farm 150 kilometres out of Taminmin. I come here every day. We run cattle and horses, and we have mango trees and stuff. The rural skills from the certificate will help me along so I can get a job with animals or in this area. I reckon the VET course has helped a bit.

CHAIR—Will you work on your family farm when you leave school or will you look for work somewhere else?

Rebecca Erkelens—Probably not. I want to go to uni and study agriculture, but I did not think of that until I did the VET course. It really helped me make a decision about it.

Mrs MAY—Did you particularly choose this school, seeing you live so far away? Is there another school you are bypassing to come here?

Rebecca Erkelens—No, this is the closest school I can come to.

Mrs MAY—So you come in by bus every day?

Rebecca Erkelens—Yes.

CHAIR—How long does it take—about an hour and a half?

Rebecca Erkelens—It is about four hours each day on the bus.

CHAIR—Does anyone else travel that far?

Rebecca Erkelens—No.

CHAIR—Do you study on the bus?

Rebecca Erkelens—It is a bit difficult. I just listen to music or whatever.

Mr SAWFORD—It is a bit hard to study on the bus, isn't it?

CHAIR—Thanks, Rebecca. Is there someone else?

Ross Caswell—I chose certificate I in engineering, because it is something that I will enjoy doing later on in life and I thought there would be good opportunities for me.

Mrs MAY—Did you know what the course was offering you? Did you know what engineering was?

Ross Caswell—Yes.

Mrs MAY—And this is where you particularly want to go in the future?

Ross Caswell—Yes. I would enjoy doing metal fabrication and stuff like that, which the engineering course has.

Mr SAWFORD—Nathan, you mentioned fishing and maritime studies. What sorts of courses are offered here and how did you become interested in that?

Nathan Gribben—I started doing fishing and maritime studies when I was at Kormilda College, and then I ended up coming to Taminmin half way through the year and kept doing that course. Every Wednesday I would go down there and do the course—it was a full day course on the Wednesday—and in year 11 I did a full-time VET course at the NTU, a certificate II in metal and engineering. That was through Casuarina College. But everything was done at the uni and you just did VET maths and English.

Mr SAWFORD—When you say fishing, is that commercial fishing, prawn trawlers and all that stuff, maritime studies?

Nathan Gribben—Yes.

Mr SAWFORD—Did you get a master's ticket?

Nathan Gribben—We did not actually get the master's ticket. We got fire training, first aid and a radio licence.

Mr SAWFORD—Was aquaculture involved?

Nathan Gribben—It was a bit, but it was mainly just getting all your certificates and having a bit of a look into it.

Mr SAWFORD—Do you hope to work in that industry?

Nathan Gribben—I did at the time but I ended up wanting to do something with metal or motors or something like that.

Mr SAWFORD—So you have changed your mind?

Nathan Gribben—Yes.

Mr SAWFORD—But you enjoyed the course, nevertheless?

Nathan Gribben—Yes, it was a good course.

Mrs MAY—I wonder how many other people chose a VET course because they thought that is where they would like to go in the future and found that the VET course told them that that was not where they wanted to go.

Megan Caswell—Yes.

Mrs MAY—So you found that a useful exercise?

Megan Caswell—Yes. I did the business course here at Taminmin and we had the model office and everything set up. The reason I did it was that it looked interesting when we got shown around all the VET courses at Taminmin. Basically it had all these things that you could use later on in life—things such as tax and stuff like that that everyone has to do. The course showed us how to do it and how useful these sorts of things could be to us. There were simple things like letter writing skills and similar things that could help you a lot in the future. I did not realise what I wanted to do as such. I did not realise whether I wanted to do something with business until after that course. I now realise that I would like to do psychology and go to uni.

Mrs MAY—That is a big change from business.

Megan Caswell—Nonetheless, it did show me what that sort of thing is all about.

Mrs MAY—You have learnt skills that you are not going to lose.

Megan Caswell—Yes.

Mrs MAY—They are going to help you later in life. We have been to the business school and seen what they are doing there this morning. It is obviously a very comprehensive course and a chance to learn a lot of different skills.

Megan Caswell—It is very prac based. I heard that, to do the certificate course, some of the other schools around the Northern Territory just work out of textbooks and things like. Taminmin offers really good things. It has the model office, hands-on experience and that sort of thing. It is basically like doing work placement all the time. You have that opportunity.

Mrs MAY—You did work placement while you were doing that?

Megan Caswell—Yes, I did it at the legal section of the health department. I also did it at Litchfield Realty, which is close to the school.

Mrs MAY—We passed that, I think, on the way in.

CHAIR—How long is the work placement? Is it in blocks of a week?

Megan Caswell—It was two weeks.

CHAIR—Have you all done work placements as part of your courses?

Ross Caswell—Not yet.

CHAIR—You have not yet, Ross. Did any of you find that the people who took you on for the week or two were interested enough to perhaps say, 'Come back and see me when you leave school; we might have a job for you?' Does that work very often?

Megan Caswell—The health department actually offered for me to come in and get some experience during the weekends and things. You worked in a legal firm.

Rebecca McAlear—I was at Peter Maley's office in Coolalinga. He actually offered me a job at his office in town, but I could not take it because it was just too far to go in.

CHAIR—He offered for you to leave school and go and work for him?

Rebecca McAlear—On weekends.

CHAIR—Did anyone else pick up part-time work? You did?

Cavan Edwards—I did not have enough hours. We get credit for our NTCE if we do so many hours of work placement. I did not get enough after three weeks and Compaq, where I was at, actually let me come back for another week to get the hours up. It was fun. So I got my hours and credit and that was worth it.

Mr SAWFORD—How many people here do part-time work? Can you perhaps tell us what you do and how many hours a week you do it for?

Lucas Mijota—I would rather be doing something to do with the music industry in Darwin or multimedia or something like that, but I work for my grandpa in the agriculture industry selling fertilisers and working a bit with him on the farm, with mangoes and whatever else.

Mr SAWFORD—How many hours a week would you do?

Lucas Mijota—I only work weekends, so it is probably 16 or 18 hours.

Mr SAWFORD—What about other people?

Danya Briscoe—I am currently working at Target as a sales assistant. I am getting about 18 hours a week. During the mango season, I also help my dad on our five-acre property with mangoes, because we grow them commercially.

Rebecca Erkelens—I do about three days a week waitressing, which has got nothing to do with agriculture. I work at night, or I help my dad during the day during the holidays or just after school in the mangoes or with the cattle.

CHAIR—Rebecca, you live 150 kilometres out.

Rebecca Erkelens—Yes, I live in Eva Valley near Batchelor.

CHAIR—You said you do waitressing there. Is there much of a town there?

Rebecca Erkelens—There is a small town but there are two restaurants. I work at Jungle Drums Bungalows just doing waitressing.

Jennah Calvano—I also work at Target, Palmerston, with customer assistance. It provides me with a bit of money after school.

Mr SAWFORD—How many hours do you do?

Jennah Calvano—I do 12 hours a week or maybe nine.

Mrs MAY—I want to ask about the distances you have to travel when you are working part time. Do you have your own cars, or do your mums and dads drive you? It must be a little bit of a hassle, I would think.

Danya Briscoe—I have my own car and I just drive in.

Mrs MAY—What about you, Lucas? Do you have your own car?

Lucas Mijota—Dad provided me with one, so I am happy.

Mr SAWFORD—What about anyone else with part-time work?

Megan Caswell—While I was doing my course and until just recently, I was doing waitressing at a local tavern restaurant. That was for probably only eight hours a week at the most. That just gave me money for fuel in my car so I could come to school instead of getting up earlier and catching the bus. It was easier. That was just part time, something to do.

Jim Freese—I am doing okra picking out at Corroboree.

CHAIR—What picking?

Jim Freese—Okra. It is an Asian vegetable. I do that for about 12 hours on a weekend.

Mr SAWFORD—Can you tell us what sort of vegetable it is? Is it a green vegetable?

Jim Freese—Yes.

Mr SAWFORD—Is it a leaf vegetable or root vegetable?

Jim Freese—It is like a fruit on the bush. You will see it in the markets down south. That is where it gets sent.

CHAIR—Back to the question of the vocational course that you choose when you are thinking about what career you might follow after school, how much help did you have from your careers adviser at school here? Did you have an idea already? Had your parents talked to you about it? Or did you sit down for a long time with your school careers adviser to work out what is the best course for you? Do you think you have enough of an idea of where to go, or do you have a whole lot of questions still about what you should do after school?

Dean Forrest—I said to our careers adviser that I want to do something with computers, and she basically put a lot of her time and effort in and went out of her way to find a good place for me to do work placement. She has done that a couple of times. Once I said, 'No, it's not the type of thing I want to do,' so she dropped that one and started looking elsewhere for it. It was really helpful for her to do that.

Megan Caswell—For that aspect I would go and talk to Mr Dous. He is in charge of working and what subjects would enable us to get our NTCE at the end of the year. I got a lot of help from him on which subjects I should choose and then when I thought part way through the start of the year that I might want to change them I could go back to him and discuss that with him. That was pretty good because I still want to get into uni so I need to make sure that I have the right courses that will let me do that. It was good that he could help me with that.

CHAIR—I want to come back to that uni thing in a minute. Are there any other comments on that point?

Ross Caswell—Since I left primary school or about part way through grade 8 I have had the idea that I wanted to do something in the metal industry, so as soon as the VET course came up I applied for it and I got in.

Mrs MAY—Do many of you spend time talking to your careers adviser particularly about the future and what you need to do? Megan, you have touched on that as far as university goes. How much contact do you have with your careers adviser in choosing subjects, particularly VET subjects for the future?

Jennah Calvano—Being in year 12 it is really scary, because I am not actually sure what I want to do after school. Doing the VET course gave me a view on rural skills and what to do. You change your mind after a few times and you see what you like and you just keep trying.

Mrs MAY—Do you talk that over with your careers adviser?

Jennah Calvano—No, not very often.

Mrs MAY—Do you have to make appointments to see your careers adviser or is that person available?

Jennah Calvano—Yes, you have to make appointments.

Mrs MAY—What about information in the careers office? Are there brochures there, information that you can take away and read?

Jennah Calvano—Yes, I actually went to see the counsellor because I am interested in getting a scholarship, or trying to anyway, and she gave me a booklet and helped me out and showed me all these things I can do, so hopefully that will get me somewhere.

Mrs MAY—Is there anyone else who has had any advice or have you just done it on your own?

Megan Caswell—If you want information on something, there are a lot of people that you can go and talk to. There are your teachers and in year 12 you are assigned study mentors—I am not sure if you get them when you are younger. I am lucky, I get the school principal so I can go and talk to him about anything. But there are lots of people that you can go and talk to. When I had Miss Morrison in year 11 doing business, it was good. We could go and ask her about lots of things and she would give us advice or if she could not help us she would let us know about someone else who could.

Mr SAWFORD—What if you are shy?

Megan Caswell—What if we are shy?

Mr SAWFORD—What if you are shy? You are not, but what if you are? Can you get lost in this place?

Megan Caswell—I am not sure. I do not think so. There are a lot of people that can help you and they keep their eyes out. If they think that you are not going to speak up, I am sure that someone else would do it for you—especially here.

CHAIR—I want to ask about university. I think two or three of you have said you want to go to university. Rebecca and Megan, you said you did the business course last year. I am just a little bit confused about how vocational education affects your tertiary entrance, especially if you did that business course that was for 10 hours a week and that does not count for your TER. Did you then have to pick up a new subject in year 12 so you would have enough subjects for the NTCE and the TER?

Rebecca McAlear—Yes, I had a lot of trouble with my timetable, because one of the subjects I wanted to do would not allow me into university, so I had to swap around and Mr Dous helped me out with that.

CHAIR—So which subject did you pick up in year 12?

Rebecca McAlear—I was still doing a certificate I in automotive, I had only done half of it last year and I had to change out of that and go into a course that would allow me enough credits to get into uni.

CHAIR—How many credits do you need?

Rebecca McAlear—You need four PAS subjects.

Megan Caswell—I know for the course I am doing that to get into uni you need to have at least four or more PES or PAS subjects.

CHAIR—Were you doing four in year 11? You were only doing three?

Rebecca McAlear—I think I was only doing three.

CHAIR—What about you, Megan?

Megan Caswell—The same. I did the same as Rebecca.

CHAIR—What subject did you pick up in year 12?

Megan Caswell—I am doing correspondence geography with the Open Education Centre.

CHAIR—How about you, Rebecca?

Rebecca McAlear—I am doing computing.

CHAIR—Does starting that in year 12 put you at a disadvantage compared with other students that were doing geography or computing right through year 11?

Rebecca McAlear—For computing, it is not really. You can still pick up a few things along the way.

Megan Caswell—Business helps you with that as well, because it is the same sort of thing.

Rebecca McAlear—Business did help a lot with that.

CHAIR—What about geography?

Megan Caswell—I don't know. It was hard at the start, because I actually got it a few weeks late, so I had a lot of stuff to catch up on. But like I said before, I had lots of help. Mr Dous is also a geography teacher, so I had him that I could go and see a lot, even though he is one of the assistant principals. I think I kind of annoyed him a bit going and knocking on his door all the time, every time I had a problem. But I got through that with a lot of help from the teachers and I have sort of picked it up. So I think I know where I am going now with that.

CHAIR—Every state has a different sort of system. I am just worried that there might be a disadvantage that, if you are doing a lot of VET courses in year 11, it makes it harder if you do want to go to university. Did anyone else have that problem? Did you have to pick up another subject, Rebecca?

Rebecca Erkelens—I found that for subjects I wanted to do at university, like aquaculture, you just need a good pass for year 10 maths. So basically anyone can do agriculture or aquaculture at university.

CHAIR—So you can do university without a TER?

Rebecca Erkelens—Yes, I could go to university now and start on the low cert or start at cert II or cert III and just work my way up at the NTE.

CHAIR—But for other subjects—you said psychology—you need a TER to get into them?

Megan Caswell—Yes.

Cavan Edwards—Last year they offered us a few year 11 subjects and VET courses that we could do. Through that I have got a few credits up already, like stage I credits. So I am actually doing a year 12 or stage II subject this year.

CHAIR—What subject is that?

Cavan Edwards—Year 12 computing.

CHAIR—That computing subject counts for the TER as well?

Cavan Edwards—Yes.

Mr SAWFORD—What is the best thing about the school? What is something you would like to change or improve? And which AFL team do you support? The last question is optional, of course.

John Payne—I think the best thing about the school is how friendly all the teachers are and how helpful they are. Also I think one of the benefits is that last year when I was in year 10 I was

allowed to do a few year 11 subjects. Like Cavan, I have got a bit of a head start on my NTCE as well. I am also doing computing. What was the other question again?

Mr SAWFORD—What would you change? What would you improve?

John Payne—Probably the distance from town.

Mr SAWFORD—So the distance is a problem?

John Payne—Yes, that kind of thing. With the new VET course that I am doing this year—cert I and electrotechnology—I am doing that in Casuarina Senior College. Every Wednesday I wake up at about six and get in there by eight. The distance is a bit of a problem, especially with peak hour traffic and everything in town.

Mr SAWFORD—John, you said that one of the good things about the school was the flexibility in the sense that in year 10 you could do some areas of year 11. Do you think maybe there needs to be a bit of flexibility in terms of the way transport is organised as well? Is that possible? It is a short day, isn't it, when you are leaving? A lot of block ed schools basically have a long school day: some start at six in the morning and finish at six at night. It doesn't mean the people work 12 hours. There would be a couple of shifts, so you have got a bit of flexibility. If you want to hang around, you can do things, you can continue on projects. You don't seem to have that flexibility here because of the need to get on buses. Is there a way around that?

John Payne—I don't actually use buses, because I have got my Dad's car. If I were trying to catch buses into Casuarina Senior College it would be really hectic.

Mr SAWFORD—Did anyone else want to say something?

Ross Caswell—The one thing I pretty much like about this school is the facilities they have. For example, for the engineering certificate they have a big shed down the back that has all the tools, equipment and stuff you can use.

Mr SAWFORD—You were lucky that you arrived just as it was built, weren't you?

Ross Caswell—Yes. Also, for agriculture they have the big farm down the back where they can all do their stuff.

Troy Innall—They recently got a new computer lab for searching on multimedia. It is one of the best setups you can get, even though some people do not agree. It is really good. There are good, fast computers that work well.

Mr SAWFORD—What has changed?

Troy Innall—Not much. I live pretty close to the school and do not have any travelling problems. I can just walk to school from where I live.

Mr SAWFORD—Are you able to stay back and work on your own individual projects here at school?

Troy Innall—Yes, if I want to, but most of the time I do most of my work at home if I need to. I have most of the resources at home.

CHAIR—I have one last question. Did you find your own work placements or did the school find them for you?

Lucas Mijota—Half and half. We would put our little script in of what we would like to do, and if it was not possible the teachers would come up with something else.

CHAIR—Is it hard finding work placements or is it pretty easy?

Lucas Mijota—It depends on what you have.

Megan Caswell—Yes.

Nathan Gribben—When I was doing it, it was fairly easy, but I think they have a new system now. Before, you could pretty much organise it all yourself and then just tell them what you had organised, or you could tell your teacher and they would organise somewhere to go. I have just filled out the sheet. They give you a piece of paper and you fill out all your details, including what you like doing. You can write down a few places that you would like to try and go to, you send that away and it all gets organised for you. You pretty much say, 'I want to go there but, if I can't go there, you pick.'

CHAIR—So that works okay?

Nathan Gribben—Yes.

Mrs MAY—With the work placements, are each of you able to find them locally? Lucas, I think you indicated that you would like to go into Darwin itself. I know we are in Darwin, but is the travelling to Darwin a problem?

Lucas Mijota—No. It is sometimes, because I live either in Berry Springs or in Palmerston, but if I were to go into town I would be in Palmerston. It is not really that much of a problem; it is just the problem of trying to find work. The music industry is booming right now, I would have to say. There have been a few more parties and concerts to play at and muck around with, but it still has a long way to go. The things that they offer would only be to work in music stores, selling CDs, or maybe get a degree in engineering—I do not know what you would call it.

Mrs MAY—What area of music are you particularly interested in?

Lucas Mijota—Just playing. Me and a few of my mates have got a bit of a band.

Mrs MAY—What instrument do you play?

Lucas Mijota—Bass guitar. But even then it is hard to find a gig. You just have to be in there and make sure you find out when the next one is on, otherwise you will have no chance.

CHAIR—Finally, what about life after school? Are you feeling pretty positive about employment opportunities? Are there lots of jobs around? Most of you will work locally or in Darwin.

John Payne—With the VET courses that I have done so far, I have got a pretty good grounding to go into some sort of job with computers and stuff like that. I think it has really prepared me for some sort of life after school. If I get through this next course that I am doing, that is all the better because it is all the more to go on my resume.

CHAIR—So you feel pretty positive?

John Payne—Yes, I feel kind of positive about getting a job after school.

CHAIR—Good.

Mrs MAY—For those of you going on to university, would you see yourselves going to university here or do you want to go interstate?

Rebecca Erkelens—I found that for what I want to do in agriculture they do not have the courses at NTU; they only have management courses, or, say, if you want to be a station hand or a ringer at a station. That is not really what I am interested in. If you want to do stock inspecting or whatever, you have to go to Adelaide University. They just do not have the courses here for that.

Megan Caswell—They do offer the courses that I want to do here at NTU but I am aiming to go down to Flinders University—mostly because I went down on a school trip last year for a week and we visited all the universities and TAFE colleges in Adelaide. I really did like Flinders: I had a lot of fun there and it is just huge. I am aiming to go there, but there is always Northern Territory University if I do not quite make it. But it is still OK to aim up there.

Mr SAWFORD—I have one last question. Does this school have a blend of light and dark? I mean is there a bit of seriousness and a bit of humour? Is there a blend of all of that or are we all too serious?

Lucas Mijota—There is a bit of a blend.

Mr SAWFORD—Who would say it is more serious in this place?

Rebecca Erkelens—It is not serious.

Lucas Mijota—It depends if you really want to do what you are doing right now.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, it has been great. Good luck with the rest of school and good luck with what you do after that. Lucas, we may see your name in lights in the music industry.

Lucas Mijota—Hopefully.

Mrs MAY—And we met you all the way back here.

CHAIR—Good luck to all of you.

[10.11 a.m.]

ANDERSON, Mr Ross, Teacher—Technical Studies, Metalwork, VET Automotive, Taminmin High School

CALLAND, Ms Rose, Assistant Principal and VET Coordinator, Taminmin High School

CLEMMENS, Mr Mark, Trainer—Multimedia, Taminmin High School

D'ARCY, Ms Suzanne, Teacher—Information Technology, Taminmin High School

MORRISON, Mrs Robyn, ET2, Senior School Coordinator, and VET: Business Administration Certificate II, Taminmin High School

PEDERSEN, Mr Kai, Teacher—Engineering, Technical Studies, Taminmin High School

ROUSELL, Mr Maurice, Senior Teacher, Agriculture and Technical Studies, and Farm Manager, Taminmin High School

ROWE, Mr Kim, Principal, Taminmin High School

SINCLAIR, Mr Timothy, Teacher/Professional Instructor, VET Music, Taminmin High School

CHAIR—Thanks again for having us here this morning and for your hospitality. The last session, with the students, was very interesting. Congratulations on some of the great things you are doing here in the area of vocational education. You are doing some very impressive things here with VET. One of the aspects that I am still trying to get a handle on is the interaction between the VET stream and the more academic stream. One of the difficulties in trying to come to an understanding of this is the variation. Every state has got a different system. It was interesting to hear about a couple of your students who want to go to university in Adelaide. Is it the case in the Northern Territory that there is a perception of two different levels of secondary education: the academic level for those who are academically capable and want to go to university, and the VET stream for kids who do not quite make it. Is it a second tier of education? Are they seen as equal in esteem?

Mr Rowe—I could lead on that. Maybe Rose or others will want to add more later. I definitely see VET programs at the moment as our core business. It is not an alternative pathway; it is seen as a very viable set of options that are available to kids of an academic level, who may well go on to university level, as well as to kids who are going into the work force immediately and undertake further training, apprenticeships or something of that nature.

My son is at university at the moment in Queensland. That is an interesting thing: we send our kids all over Australia from the Northern Territory. He is studying journalism, but in his NTCE he did two units of vocational education and training at a year 11/stage 1 level. That contributed to his NTCE. It in no way disadvantaged him when he was undertaking his studies for academic

entry into QUT. In fact, he is now working to pay his way through university—he is not so into dad's pocket any more—utilising the hospitality program training that he got from Centralian College.

CHAIR—Did he get a TER as well?

Mr Rowe—My word he did! That was a full PES line—that is, a full university entrance line at year 12 level—whereas in year 11 he had done two units of VET program.

CHAIR—So on a full PES line they have to do four subjects; is that right?

Mr Rowe—Five.

CHAIR—Those students who have done either a couple of lines of VET in year 11 or the business course that is the equivalent of two lines presumably, as one of the students said—I think it was Megan—have to pick up a new subject in year 12.

Mrs Morrison—Not necessarily. The students that have gone on this year have done accounting. Because we do not have enough to run a full class of year 12 accounting, students are doing it by correspondence. The background that they learnt through the business course was equal to the year 11 accounting course so that they felt comfortable and have done very well in the year 12 accounting.

CHAIR—So accounting is a PES course for year 12 in the Northern Territory?

Mrs Morrison—Yes.

CHAIR—But it is possible that some students will still have to pick up a new subject in year 12 to get the five subjects that they need.

Mr Rowe—Yes, but the Northern Territory curriculum frameworks allow for the development of educational outcomes and skill development which is going to be able to be extrapolated from one subject to another. What is successfully done in geography, for example, or a humanities subject is then able to be taken over into history or one of those subjects as well. So there is not necessarily a disadvantage happening if they do have to move on to another subject. For example, my son had never studied classical studies—which is ancient history, effectively—before year 12. He came out with a 17.

CHAIR—Could you explain what a 17 is?

Mr Rowe—It is 17 out of 20, which is an A. That came from the skills that he had developed in other year 11 subject areas.

CHAIR—So you do not see a disadvantage, Kim, even for those wanting to get into the hotly contested university courses such as law et cetera?

Mr Rowe—If a kid wants to get into a really good course like law at Sydney Uni or medicine at Newcastle Uni, they are going to be intensely involved at stage 1 and stage 2 in the academic

stream. They will know that right from the outset. We have had students leave this school and go to Casuarina because they want as high a level of academic work as they can get.

CHAIR—For most students aspiring to university—doing education, psychology et cetera—doing VET in year 11 and then picking up a new subject in year 12 is not a disadvantage?

Mr Rowe—I do not believe so.

Mr SAWFORD—In a couple of days time we will commemorate—not celebrate—the Karmel report of 1973. Kim, you remember this. It was a report which got a few things right in higher education and academic high schools but which got a lots of things wrong, particularly in vocational education and in primary schools and particularly in the resourcing of both those two areas. I like it when I hear principals talking about vocational education as core business. I liked it yesterday when Peter Plummer from your Department of Employment, Education and Training did not promote the propaganda about vocational education which we have heard from all other states thus far, which is a defence of the deficiencies of the last 30 years, particularly in vocational education. That propaganda, almost without exception, talks about the structure of vocational education being integrated. Yesterday, your department of education and training used terms like 'core business'; it did not use the term 'integrated' at all. It used the terms 'diversity' and 'flexible' and a whole range of other terms. You are using the same terms. How has that come about and why is it different here in the Northern Territory?

unknown509unknown1**Ms D'Arcy**—I have no idea.

Mr Rousell—You have people coming in from all states, perhaps with different ideas. Our ideas are fresh—sometimes they are old. We are looking at things in a different light. There is still a pioneering spirit up here. I have been up here only seven years and this is what I am finding in education and in all sorts of things. I have relationships with industry, farming and so on and certainly it is all happening. We are not imposed upon by other people. We make our own way.

Mr Rowe—That is certainly so. One of the other important things is that as you look around the table you can see we have multimedia, music, agriculture, tech studies, IT and business. We are looking at a huge diversity of things which gives us the capacity to better prepare our young people to be far more flexible. We give them a foundation but we have greater flexibility and diversity. That is available and on offer. It is involved, it is going to contribute to their higher qualifications. They are not going to miss out but they are going to have, if you like, a catholicism or a collectivism that is not able to be accessed in a really narrow banded or single directioned set of courses.

There is another issue that works very much on us here, and that is the Indigenous students in the population. If you offer something that is, if you like, leaning towards a more academic direction, you are not going to achieve any measure of success with those young people and you are going to have an unemployed and unemployable group of people in the community who will live on welfare for the rest of their lives. One of the real values—and I have come from Tennant Creek and seen it work there and in Alice Springs—is that when you begin to offer vocational programs there is a significant success rate for those people because of the way they learn. At least 25 per cent of the population is Indigenous in the Northern Territory. We are better able, I

believe, to accommodate a broader range of young people in our education system by using those courses, rather than alienating them.

Mr Clemmens—With VET the experience and exposure, as Kim has covered, and the diversity of subjects and disciplines that one can study are great. Also, one thing that VET offers that I have yet to see—it may be lack of experience—in mainstream education or the academic line is work ethic and being able to deal with the philosophy of going to work on time—really fundamental things. If a student does not follow a path to university, those important things have been well established in them so that when they do leave school they have work ethics that have been passed on by a teacher in the VET course. They are strong and they apply those ethics out there. That gives them an opportunity of employment. VET shines in that area. It is one of the themes of VET.

Mr SAWFORD—In this school or in previous schools—it may be easier to answer in relation to previous schools—have you found a conflict between what you do as a VET teacher with, say, the mathematics faculty or the language faculty? People I have known who have worked in academia and high schools and who have tried to develop VET have often found themselves totally overrun by the faculty people in terms of where the money gets spent, where acknowledgment and recognition are made, where flexibility is known, et cetera. Has that happened to you?

Mrs Morrison—Because you get the support from the top level, from the principal, I think that recognition is right across the board. People recognise the worth of it because it is led from the top. At the top it is recognised as important. They demonstrate that it is important to them by the numbers—the sheer volume—that go into the program. In my own area, business, I find that we can be very helpful to the other areas just through the skills that the kids learn. I try to teach my students life skills, not just skills that are here and now, but life skills that they can take on into any area that they may choose to go on to. They develop a self-worth and a confidence so that they can go on to whatever area of interest they may have and feel that they can achieve the best that they possibly can. The VET area has that work placement and you have, in my area especially, hands-on things. They develop really good life and confidence skills so that they can go on to wherever they like. The fact that a lot of my students have gone on to university and are achieving in that area means that the value of VET is seen by the kids as well as by everybody else.

Mr Rowe—You mentioned before that there are systems that do not appear to embrace VET in schools as a concept. One of the things that I think about here is that we have people coming to the Territory from every system in Australia. We do not really develop our teachers all that much ourselves yet. That adds to a new way of thinking and a new concept. The whole thing, as Robyn is suggesting, has to be supported all the way through the school. If it is not, VET in schools is going to be nothing much more than an adjunct. I mentioned dual paradigms a while ago; if people think in terms of them being separate and distinct then that is the way they will stay and you will not get the support for it.

There is another really great advantage: you see the kids turn up to go to Tim's music class. The VET music is wonderful here, but no more than any of the other programs that are run here. Those kids are kept in school longer and the value of that is seen by any teacher who is worth their salt who is there for the education of kids. They see kids turn up for Tim's music and they

are still there for English or maths or something else that they must do. There is that concomitant value, not just from the music, which does have a career end, but also from the further development of other skills and capacities, as well.

Mr SAWFORD—What is the best structure for VET? Is it a comprehensive high school? Is it a vocational college at year 10, 11and 12? In New South Wales we saw a college called Bradfield which was a one-off. It was set up for political reasons and never duplicated. But it was a very great success. Kids came from all over the place and went to Bradfield. It was purely a vocational college. In New South Wales there are 20 senior secondary colleges too where the emphasis is on VET. But, again, they are not duplicated but kept just at the 20. Is there an ideal structure?

Mr Sinclair—I would ultimately like to see these courses go on to year 12. It is disappointing that some of these kids do some great things in year 11 music, but in year 12 there is no real continuation with the things that we do. The next level is university, so they have to put it on hold essentially for a year. There are students who are still performing and playing but they are doing it in their own time outside school hours, which gets pretty difficult.

Mr SAWFORD—Why is there not a year 12?

Mrs MAY—Do you lose students then?

Mr Sinclair—We lose some students to Casuarina but—

Mrs Morrison—They do drop out of the system.

Mr Sinclair—Some of them leave school.

Mrs MAY—Because they cannot continue on to year 12. They are losing that link.

Mr Rowe—They come because of the stuff that Tim runs—or anyone else here for that matter; there are diverse interests—and then they go.

CHAIR—Regarding those that drop out at the end of year 11, would that problem be resolved if you took up the South Australian board options where you have embedded VET courses? I know there would be other problems, but would that not at least address that problem?

Mr Sinclair—Yes, I think so. Do you mean running a year 12 VET course in a way similar to the way it is run in year 11? Is that what you are saying?

Mrs Morrison—No, they are a little bit different, aren't they?

Mr Rowe—The embedded courses are ones that are, if you like, Northern Territory certificate of education courses that have the VET modules embedded within the content of the program itself. They are not favoured by industry, up here anyway. They are viewed with a little bit of disdain. I think Rose mentioned that.

CHAIR—So we seem to have a bit of a problem, don't we?

Mr Rowe—There would appear to be one. We are a comprehensive school, and we like being a comprehensive high school. But there are very strong supporters of a 'university high school' which incorporates vocational training, university degree NTCE stuff, education by stage not age and access on the same campus—the whole range. It is being mentioned in our department again at the moment, and you already have two places that are similar to it—Casuarina Senior College and Centralian College. But there are some who argue strongly that a comprehensive high school structure with access to all of those things mentioned above is a superior educational institution.

Mrs MAY—Kim, you have touched on industry and what they feel on that. How many of your VET teachers have industry backgrounds and how important is that?

Mr Rowe—Seven.

Mrs MAY—So they all have industry backgrounds.

Mr Rowe—Yes.

Mr SAWFORD—Were they recruited out of industry?

Mr Rowe—Certainly Ross was. Tim often wants to go back to industry; he plays on weekends.

Mrs MAY—Is it difficult to attract teachers here with that sort of industry background?

Mr Rowe—In some ways, yes; in other ways, no. It is a funny one. Our biggest issue is that we are 40-odd kilometres out of Darwin and it costs people money to teach in this school, either to buy a property out here or to travel 400 kilometres a week to come and teach in this school.

Mrs MAY—We saw some new development on the way out.

Mr Rowe—That is all very well, but you are still going to have to buy in. Yet we have Ross who has a heavy skill background in engineering and that sort of thing. Kai is an entrepreneur in a range of different areas. We can get them, but we have to have the courses on offer. We have to have the facilities here. We have to find the funding. That skill centre down the bottom has made this place a whole lot more attractive. Block 15 and our ICT facilities there have made this place a whole lot more attractive as a facility to teach in, because obviously people want to have access to those sorts of quality things so that they can then show quality things and learning to young people. So it is a case of 'win on the swings and lose on the slippery dip' a bit, Margaret.

Mr Clemmens—I am one of those persons who comes from Darwin, so that is 40 kilometres per day. As far as VET is concerned, it is one day a week—I have a couple of jobs here. I take that travel with no remorse and without thinking, 'Oh, I've got to travel all the way out there.' I enjoy coming out here and the support, and I enjoy teaching the program. More importantly, I enjoy coming out to the students, because they love it. I have 15 students who absolutely love what we are learning. I love what I am learning with them as well. Forty kilometres is 40 kilometres—and besides, I like to unwind on the way home. But I do it because they love it. You can see it in their eyes. They will stay back to help me after school. These are students whom I knew last year in other areas and who would not have been keen to stay even a minute behind,

and they are saying, 'Sir, can we stay in at lunchtime or recess?' They love this course and, with that, I love to come out here. That is an edge which gets me out here.

CHAIR—You nearly all have industry backgrounds. What were the barriers in moving from your industry employment to teaching? Was there a financial disincentive? Did you have to take a pay cut to come into teaching?

Mr Pedersen—It was the qualifications thing.

CHAIR—The difficulty in getting the qualifications?

Mr Pedersen—It is just another commitment. I am a tradesman. He is a mechanic. You only have to do a teaching degree.

CHAIR—How did you do that?

Mr Pedersen—At NTU.

CHAIR—Did you have to do that before you started teaching or did you do it part time while you were teaching?

Mr Pedersen—I actually worked in the trade area at NTU, Northern Territory University, for a year. I started doing it then and then I was able to do it part time. It is a big commitment to take on if you have a full-time job and family, like everyone has.

CHAIR—Why did you do it then?

Mr Pedersen—It is just something different. It was probably better in my case than hanging off the end of a greasy spanner.

Mr SAWFORD—How long did it take to get your teaching qualifications?

Mr Pedersen—Four years.

Mr SAWFORD—So it is a big commitment.

Mr Pedersen—Yes, part time.

CHAIR—Do you think there are many others in your position who baulk at that commitment of having to do that study and therefore do not go into teaching where we have a teacher shortage, particularly in those areas where we ought to be trying to attract people?

Mr Pedersen—Yes.

Mr Rowe—There is another issue too that we find very difficult. It is exemplified by Ross, our revered and venerated elder statesman. Ross has worked for years and years and years but, when he came over to teaching, he could only get a certain level of recognition of service and

was therefore going to start at a lesser rate of pay. It was almost not worth it for him to do it. We have had that on a number of occasions—that there is not the recognition of prior equivalent learning or experience, and that to me is really a major impost on things. I guess it is a measure of having to work at times with various industrial groups—unions or something of that nature—but also HR branches in government institutions and instrumentalities.

CHAIR—So Ross had to start on a first-year-out teacher's salary?

Mr Anderson—Let me explain. I did 17 years teaching in South Australia and gained a teaching diploma in South Australia. Then I spent two years in New Guinea at the university of technology lecturing there. Then I was seconded—actually, I was poached—and went into mining, and I became a mechanical engineer. I had about 15 or 16 years as a mechanical engineer all around Australia and overseas. One year was in New Guinea. The rest of the time was in Australia and the last 4½ or five years was in Ghana, West Africa. I was doing teaching in terms of coordination and so on within the industry itself as well as doing my own job as a mechanical engineer. I was about to retire before coming back to Australia. A company, Warman Africa, approached me to be their area manager in Ghana, which I did for two years. That encompassed all of West Africa. I came back here to retire, but then I was encouraged to come here part time for a little while and then it sort of grew on that and now I am here full time.

But Kim is right. They put me in the too-hard basket and did not recognise, first of all, my teaching qualifications as such and then the industrial experience and managerial experience I gained during that time. I am past the retiring age of 65, and that seemed to be another too-hard basket problem. I was only too happy to come and help out in the crisis that there was in the Northern Territory last year with the numbers of teachers required. I enjoy it. We have more incentive now—Kim has probably told you about it—with the race cars and the incentives that the VET kids have in building and stripping down cars. I will keep doing it until Kim tells me: 'Go away! You're too old.'

Mr SAWFORD—This has been done before. In the postwar situation in South Australia, people in your position were given senior master positions after a six-month pressure cooker course. The director-general was John Walker.

Mr Anderson—I held senior positions in teaching before going into mining, but they put me in this category here—I think I started off at about T3 or something, which is the Neanderthal level of teaching. I went to a course last year and I thought, 'Gee, this is unusual!'

CHAIR—Kim, are there subject areas where you cannot get teachers?

Mr Rowe—There are areas where it is increasingly difficult to get hold of people. It is not all that easy to get special unit teachers or science teachers. You can get mathematics teachers, but we are talking about quality people here now. ICT is hard. People out in the industry earn $60,000 to $70,000 with no trouble at all. Teachers' salaries plateau and can go no higher than about $55,000 or $56,000. That is another issue that has to be addressed in the future not just for vocational people but for all teachers. They plateau after a certain level and let's face it, if someone can earn $70,000 or $80,000 in private enterprise, why should they come to a school unless they have a particular bent? There are reasons, I guess.

In all areas it is becoming increasingly difficult to get quality people. That is one of the reasons why I encourage the movement of older experienced people into education. These are mature age people, not people coming straight out of a university degree or something of that nature. There are shortages in every subject area these days. They are not training home economics teachers any more, they are not training industrial arts teachers—tech studies teachers—hey bingo. You get them where you can as a consequence. Both Ross and Kai are working examples of that.

Mrs MAY—Robyn was saying this morning that she interviews and the kids have to make an application to go into the business course. Does that happen with each of the courses?

Mr Rowe—I will pass that one to Rose.

Mrs MAY—Also, if that is the way they have to apply, how many kids are not getting into VET courses that would like to?

Ms Calland—For all VET programs throughout the Top End that are funded, all students have to apply and undergo an interview which, typically, is with the trainer. We quite often will have an industry rep there as well. They are welcome to bring someone along as well. The purposes of the interview are to make sure that the student is aware of what it is about, what is involved and what the requirements will be for them and also, as far as possible, to try to ascertain whether they are a suitable applicant. We look at things such as attendance, punctuality, that they do have a genuine interest in that industry area and that they are aware of workplace requirements et cetera. The majority of students would be accepted, I would say, because there is only so much that you can tell from a 10-minute interview particularly with Indigenous students from remote communities—you are not going to get them to open up when you have just met them. The majority of students do get in. They are also told that they are expected to perform otherwise we will say, 'You are not appropriate, you'll have to leave.' Some programs will have a waiting list. But between the end of the year when that is done and the start of the year you will find some students have moved interstate, you will have other students who have just arrived, so not all of them will necessarily go through that process. Some courses have entry halfway through the year if students leave or decide it is not for them or if they have not performed. So some have an uptake halfway through the year but with some courses, we have decided that is not appropriate. For example, in the workshop situation it is too difficult if you have kids coming in part way through the year they do not know any of the OH&S et cetera. Does that answer the question?

Mr SAWFORD—We have systemic failure in this country with vocational education. The mathematics just does not add up. We have had comprehensive high schools now for 30 years. Seventy per cent of our kids do not go to uni, only 30 per cent do. Thirty years after comprehensive high schools, in New South Wales, which is a state which says it has got vocational education down pat, only 30 per cent of the kids from New South Wales, and probably up here too, have access to accredited VET. This is after 30 years. That is an Australia-wide story. That does not make sense, does it? That 70 per cent of our secondary kids are subjected to academic courses with no access to any accredited VET. That is the reality and that to me is the legacy of comprehensive high schools. There are some recent things I do not agree with Tony Blair about, but one thing I do agree with is that he is determined to destroy the

comprehensive high school system in the United Kingdom because he says—as I am saying—that it has comprehensively failed.

In my view, the only time vocational education has been successful in this country is in rare schools. This is probably one of them. You might have heard of Peter Turner in Salisbury High School in South Australia. I am trying to think of the name of the guy in Gosford. Both of those principals were in interminable trouble with their own school systems. They were always in trouble in trying to set up vocational education, which they did very successfully. They used terms like you use, Kim, such as 'core business', when it was not popular, 15 or 20 years ago.

Mr Rowe—In 1991, a group of us at Sadadeen College, a secondary college, began to make the move towards what exists today. We encountered entrenched opposition from both sides: from the old TAFE system and from the education departments. I believe that it has been a long battle—and I use that word exactly—to overcome old, very much entrenched thinking and philosophies, almost down to ideologies.

CHAIR—That opposition or competition from the TAFE sector is still there, isn't it?

Mr Rowe—Yes, I believe it is, although I have not seen a hands-on circumstance in the last few years, so I could not give a comprehensive or thoroughly accurate response to that. It may well be there. I know it certainly used to be there. I found that the old department of education practitioners were more responsive to new ideas 10 years ago. What it is like today I could not say. I do not know.

Mr SAWFORD—Do you understand what I am saying about the mathematics? It is reversed.

Mr Rowe—You are saying that this place works comprehensively. It does, but—

Mr SAWFORD—You call it a comprehensive high school. I do not see any evidence of that. I see this as a vocational college.

Ms Calland—The percentage is just about reversed. We have 70 per cent of our year elevens doing it.

Mr SAWFORD—That is right.

Ms Calland—I will just make a couple of points that I think are critical. We do have that demand, as Tim said before, not just in music but also in auto and engineering to offer at year 12 a continuation in their VET program. That is subject to funding. The other thing about the way that we can accommodate both is that our teachers of traditional subjects are very accommodating and flexible when it comes to VET and having a student out for two weeks work placement here—

Mr SAWFORD—That is due to this fellow.

Ms Calland—and a week's work placement there. I think it has been part of the culture of the school for about four years.

Mr SAWFORD—If the person at the top does not do it, there is no way it works.

Mrs Morrison—That is right.

Ms Calland—It is valued by parents et cetera in the community. I have been involved in this for four years and I think VET in Schools has just become well known by, and familiar to, parents with families. Now they know that it is not a course about being a veterinary surgeon. They know what the options are. But it has taken that time to build it in.

Mr SAWFORD—They know they are not mickey mouse courses.

Ms Calland—Yes. In a number of areas, such as IT and multimedia, increasingly people are seeing that a degree program is not necessarily the way to go. Academic kids are going into those sorts of areas. Dean Forrest, who did not say too much before, did IT in year 10. He is currently doing a school based apprenticeship and a year 12 computing subject. He wants to get into the Defence Force Academy, in the area of technology. I think they and potential employers see as a value that cutting edge stuff that is happening out in the real world.

CHAIR—Rose, could you elaborate on the comment you made about funding issues preventing you from carrying on VET to year 12? In conjunction with that, how many kids drop out at the end of year 11 because they cannot do VET through to year 12?

Ms Calland—I could not give you exact numbers. I was talking to a few kids who came back into the office the other day, and they are still chasing apprenticeship options or trying to get further training in the area. It is a funding issue. For example, Ross and Kai are our tech studies teachers. They take three lines throughout the junior school, as well as their VET courses. We would have to employ somebody else. The problem is getting funding for teachers' salaries.

Mrs MAY—So you are doing two loads, really.

Ms Calland—Yes and the kids increasingly want to do more; they want to do it in year 12. You could almost run a full-time course for them at a cert II level.

CHAIR—And it could run to a certificate III?

Ms Calland—Yes, more like a mini-TAFE area. TAC, the industry advisory council, suggested that we do that. I suppose our first step next year might be to offer one line at year 12, if we can. I do not know; it would have an impact on resourcing.

Mr SAWFORD—Where is the nearest TAFE?

Mr Anderson—Coming from an industrial background, it would be more attractive if students had more exposure. For example, we give them certificate I. If they could continue and complete certificate II, they are much more mature and more competent when they go into the work force and the employers, particularly those who employ people for the mining industry, would take that student over and above somebody who had not done any of the VET subjects because they are very raw. In my opinion, if we could have a continuation of certificate I and II at this school, it would be a very attractive option for bringing in more people as well.

CHAIR—One of the comments made to us yesterday was that too much of VET is an endless merry-go-round of certificates I and II that does not lead to employment. That is not the message that I am getting here.

Mr Anderson—I have been out into industry to observe students that we have sent into work placements and the employers there are very keen to earmark them if they are available—maybe they can offer them an apprenticeship in one year or six months time.

CHAIR—And Indigenous students as well?

Mr Rowe—It is not quite as rosy for them but, in the Tennant Creek situation, we were running pre-VET and VET courses and we were getting kids employed as ringers on stations. I cannot speak as authoritatively here.

Mr Anderson—My observation of the Indigenous students here is that they do need extra help with literacy and numeracy. They need to be treated in a different way from the normal student here. They have two or three different languages that they are using and they need to have somebody—a minder, if you like—with them to coach them through the various stages. I have done this in my out of teaching time. It is very interesting. They know the words but they cannot spell them. When you have been through this with them a few times, they do start to flow on. But if they are just sitting in the background in a class, they will not come forward to accept that challenge. They need somebody, one on one, to help them.

Mr Rousell—With the rural skills course, I have seven Aboriginal students at the moment. We have just done a two-day program in first aid. It is not the senior first aid but it is two-thirds of the way there. The seven students failed the written test. The next week I followed it up and I did a half hour individually with each of those students to try to get them through. I managed to get one through. They have to accomplish a 75 per cent pass rate. They have been back to the Royal Life Saving Society. It happens that they have been working on this particular problem for some time and they have now devised a new written test which has graphics and so on in it, which is much more oriented to Aboriginal kids. That will certainly help them. As Ross says, I think a minder in the group, whilst we are doing training, would be a great help too.

Mr Rowe—That is one of the values of a competency based course. They do not have to do anything written to succeed. They can demonstrate their skill and capacity and, hey, bingo, there is something that they have previously not been able to achieve. If they can configure an arrangement on a screen, an ICT, or if they can play a riff on a guitar, they can do something on the farm. That is then something rather more than they have been able to demonstrate. Thirty years ago when I first started teaching, we realised that the kids might not be able to write the answers, but they could sure as hell speak back the answers or demonstrate them. These areas have not been properly explored.

Mr SAWFORD—Yesterday Aboriginal elders made the point that they felt they were better off in literacy and numeracy 30 years ago and that the last 30 years have been an absolute disaster. In metropolitan Australia, literacy and numeracy have failed pretty much since then as well. So it is not just in an Aboriginal community; it has been an overall problem in terms of not as much explicit teaching as there ought to have been. In other words, there is not a balanced education between implicit and explicit teaching. It has all gone one way.

We have just recently completed an inquiry into boys' education. It is quite obvious that the tendency in many of our schools is to have a one-sided education. There are many girls and a significant number of working-class and disadvantaged kids who just get wiped out when you do not have explicit teaching. For those people who have taught literacy before, just because the kids are Indigenous should not be a problem at all. Just because they have three or four other languages should not be a problem either. It is a convenient excuse. What has often happened is that they have never been taught explicitly. They have never been taught by analytical means in terms of what language actually is. Maybe we need to go back to a much better basis. I think those Aboriginal elders are right, and they are right not only for their own communities but also for mainstream Australia as well.

CHAIR—I am afraid the time has gone. There are some other areas that we would like to pursue but we have run out of time, unfortunately. Thank you for your very valuable input and congratulations on what you are doing. There are some really good things happening. Well done.

Mr SAWFORD—You need to know that. You are pretty rare bods. This is not the general situation, I can tell you.

Proceedings suspended from 10.57 a.m. to 11.18 a.m.

CRAMOND, Mr Barry, Chairman, Management Committee, Darwin VET in Schools Workplacement Centre

SPARK, Miss Shannon, Manager, Darwin VET in Schools Workplacement Centre, Northern Territory Industry Training Bureau

CHAIR—Thank you for coming. I invite you to make some introductory comments, after which we will proceed to questions.

Miss Spark—I gave you some background information on the range of programs and I can give you some statistics on students, if you like. Before I start I would like to say that there are some great programs happening, at least in our local area and across the Territory. I think it is important to say that because quite often when we are raising issues like this it can sound a little bit negative. You will see at Taminmin that there are some great programs, like the Automotive Cluster Program, being run here, so as we are raising issues just keep in mind that there are some good quality outcomes being achieved up here.

From the point of view of the work placement centre we service 11 high schools in the Darwin region for all of their structured work placements. We are servicing upwards of 60 programs this year. The core issues facing us are probably very similar to those you have heard about in other places. They are things like timetabling. We have great difficulty achieving flexibility in timetabling, not just for students to actually be released into their VET program but also for them to be released into their work placements. Most programs want their students to be released in week 10 of each term and this year we are looking at upwards of 600 students, which does not work very well. We have tried a few options this year to try to alleviate some of the pressure on employers, but it is very difficult for schools to take more time out of the standard timetable. We keep asking for more and they are not able to give more. So one of the things holding us back is the lack of 'out there' innovative approaches.

We have got, I think, one school—and Kathy can probably correct me—that operates a four-day-a-week timetable. They do not deliver normal classes on Wednesdays so students can go off to their VET class. I think they are about the only ones up here doing something a little bit different. So in terms of pressure on employers for work placement at the times of the year that students get sent out, that is a big challenge for us. We started this year trying some in school holidays and had a reasonable amount of success. It was the first time we had tried it.

Work readiness is the other major issue facing us. I am not sure whether you are familiar with the term 'work readiness'. For students to be placed through us they have to be work ready, and obviously there are a lot of issues that schools have to face in getting students to a point where they are work ready. We get a lot of students who are not work ready being sent out on placements. It causes problems for us in losing employers because students do not have the basic skill level to enable them to perform duties when they are on a placement. Attendance is poor, they cannot communicate with people—pretty simple sort of stuff.

The biggest challenge for us in work readiness is that, if we do not accept students who are not work ready or whom we deem not to be work ready, there is nothing to stop schools going off

and placing those students themselves. This is what we do not want because that will take us back to where we were three years ago when schools were doing all their own placements. An employer would get calls from five or six schools a day asking them to take a work experience student or a VET student and so on. That is a challenge and it is difficult to know how much to put our foot down because we know that, if we do not take the kids, schools are just going to do it themselves.

The other issue for us is probably the range of programs that are on offer. In terms of finding enough work placements in industry, we do not have a good range of programs. We have a high number of business, IT, multimedia and auto programs—reasonably traditional types of areas—and they just do not match either the employment needs locally and nationally or industry's capacity to cope. Multimedia is an example. There are four or six programs this year. We are lucky to have half a dozen employers who work full time in that area. So that is a real challenge for us.

Multiple enrolments is another issue for us, particularly in work placement and also with regard to what is driving student choices. We have had some students this year enrolled in up to five VET programs in one school. I question what is driving that. Is that a student choice or is that the way the school wants to go? Where is it actually coming from? What depth of knowledge is a student getting in each of those programs? It usually means that they can only do a work placement in one or two of those programs because they will all be scheduled at the same time—they cannot do one for each program. They are probably the core issues affecting work placement. You might like to ask me some questions and then I have some more general topics that we can raise if we have time.

Mr Cramond—I will support Shannon on a couple of points there. Since our organisation took over the contract to manage the work placements in the year 2000 we have doubled the number of work placements and doubled the number of active employers. That raises a number of issues. Obviously industry become much more aware of the facility and the service being offered and therefore their expectations rise as well. That is both good and bad.

One of the concerns that I am sure you would be finding throughout Australia would be that there is an expectation that employers have of the product coming out of the VET in Schools program versus our traditional, raw apprentice. As the programs grow and the awareness grows so the expectations, particularly of employers, grow. I think that has been highlighted by some of the comments that Shannon has made.

CHAIR—Thanks for that. Just for clarification, how does NTITB receive its funding?

Mr Cramond—We are funded through ECEF. Each year we apply for the contract to manage what they call the Darwin central model. We facilitate the work placements on behalf of the 11 high schools and colleges in the greater Darwin area.

CHAIR—There is no charge to the schools?

Mr Cramond—No.

Miss Spark—The NTITB also provides some in-kind funding, with a vehicle and a few other contributions, but it is pretty much 100 per cent ECEF funding.

Mr SAWFORD—I know you started the work placements in 2000, but when was NTITB first established here in Darwin?

Mr Cramond—The NTITB was established about five years ago. It was an amalgamation of a number of what were then the industry training advisory boards—now known as the TACs. At that time there were 11 ITABs here; there are now six training advisory councils. Of those 11, a number have decided to form the Northern Territory Industry Training Bureau to seek out further projects. The project that they sought and won was for the delivery of the New Apprenticeships Centre, which we ran for a couple of years. We then moved on to win this contract with what was then ASTF—the Australian Student Training Foundation, which is now ECEF.

Mr SAWFORD—Referring to the table, you were saying the number of active employees has doubled, the number of completed placements has more than doubled and the number of VET programs has doubled, but the number of students has increased by only 50 per cent. Is there a reason for that?

Miss Spark—No doubt there is. I would not have evidence of it, but I would suggest that lack of work readiness is one reason. There are a lot more year 10 students. When we started it was pretty much restricted to year 11 and year 12. ECEF's scope was for year 11 and 12; now it is for 14- to 19-year-olds. So we have a lot more year 10 students than we did. I also believe that the multiple enrolments have a lot to do with that. We had a lot of multiple enrolments last year—probably 40 or 50 students enrolled in up to four VET programs. Again, they can really only do work placement in one or maybe two of those programs.

Mr SAWFORD—So the 294 students may not be 294 people?

Miss Spark—Yes, there would be.

Mr SAWFORD—There are actually 294 people and not just 294 enrolments?

Miss Spark—Yes, that is right—students.

CHAIR—If that growth continues, how difficult is it going to be to get adequate work placements? For instance, a couple a states have mandatory work placement as part of VET courses. If we were to go down that path across the country, would it be possible to keep up with the growing demand for placements?

Miss Spark—Not in some industries. In some industries we have certainly not exhausted the capacity of industry to cope with placements. In others we are pretty much there, if not beyond the point. If we do not achieve a greater spread across industries, yes, that will be a real issue. If we start designing programs that are more relevant to local industry or employment needs—

CHAIR—Or is it a matter of trying to overcome some of the barriers that are there? You highlighted a couple of them in your introductory comments. If we were able to overcome those

barriers and make it easier for industry, do you think we would then get the growth in placements we need or would it still be impossible?

Miss Spark—No, it certainly would be possible to still have substantial growth, again with the exception of a couple of industries: IT, multimedia and music are a couple of the obvious ones. Even if we make a great deal of improvements in those issues, we have virtually exhausted some of those industries. There are just not more employers around, and that is it. But I think in the majority there is definitely still room for a lot of growth if we can deal with some of the quality issues, timetabling, and things like that.

Mr SAWFORD—I must admit, as a former principal, I am just amazed that timetabling is a problem when it is such a simple thing to do. I always find it difficult to just appreciate how people make it so hard.

Miss Spark—I find it difficult, and not having come from a school environment I have to be a little bit careful that I understand and empathise with what schools have to deal with. I continually get frustrated because you see other things happening around the country and you think, 'Why can't we do something a little bit better?'

Mr SAWFORD—You mentioned the four-day week. I went to a school when I was a kid that had a four-day week.

CHAIR—That is only because you were truant one day a week.

Mr SAWFORD—Basically they were non-examinable VET courses for both the academic and the non-academic streams. It is not a new idea.

Mr Cramond—Coming back to the growth factor, VET in Schools is a bit like a snowball, it is growing. We are faced with the national statistic that for every 10 students that leave school only three go to university. It would not be that high in the Territory. So it is a snowball; it is growing. One of the other limiting factors that we did not touch on is funding. Our funding from initially ASTF and then ECEF has not effectively grown, so we have been asked to accommodate twice the workload with the same money that we had in 2000.

Miss Spark—There is pressure as well to broaden the service from work placements to encompass more enterprising career education activities.

Mr SAWFORD—I would imagine that you have applied for more funding and you have a rationale for more funding.

Mr Cramond—We keep asking.

Miss Spark—ECEF money comes on an annual basis.

Mr SAWFORD—What is the response?

Miss Spark—'We will fund you the same amount as last year.' There is no increase.

Mr SAWFORD—Is that on a per capita basis or an overall basis?

Mr Cramond—I do not know what formula they use, they just say, 'You will get what you got last year.'

Miss Spark—I do not know what ECEF's funding formula is, but it seems to vary quite dramatically across the country.

Mr SAWFORD—So you do not know whether it is per capita—you do not know how it is made up?

Mr Cramond—Not really. Obviously the growth is before them every year, yet they still come back and say, 'You'll get the same amount as we gave you last year.'

Miss Spark—Since the first year it has been virtually interim funding and then transition funding. I forget which, but when ASTF changed over to ECEF—

Mr SAWFORD—You are only getting funds on a yearly basis?

Miss Spark—That is right—an annual sample, so we apply every year.

Mr SAWFORD—Are there problems with that?

Mr Cramond—There certainly are. When you are trying to establish a good, credible team around you like Shannon and her team—even in our case, as chair of a management committee—and trying to get industry to participate in a management committee that is overseeing a program that is only funded for 12 months, you do not get a lot of enthusiasm or excitement. When the organisation is trying to build up good people and retain and hold good people it is difficult.

Mr SAWFORD—What would be a better arrangement?

Mr Cramond—I would say a minimum funding cycle of three years, for a start, so at least you have something to plan for.

Miss Spark—The other issue with the short-term funding in my view is that we are generally approved around about September or October of each year, so if worse comes to worst and ECEF do not fund us again, we virtually have two months to go to schools and say, 'Sorry, you're on your own, you have to sort something out for next year,' which would be a fairly disastrous situation. We could not tell them any earlier than September or October, if that were the case. I hope it will never happen.

Mr SAWFORD—Is much energy spent in applying to continue the funding or is it just a standard procedure when trying to get the funding for the following year? Is there a lot of effort from your staff in order to put together a submission? On what basis do you get the funding?

Mr Cramond—It is a standard application that is offered to all programs throughout the country. A lot of programs are in-house school programs. We are probably a little different from

other organisations throughout the nation; we are a stand-alone, industry driven organisation delivering a service on behalf of ECEF. But there is a lot of energy and time put into preparing that application and providing supporting documentation.

Mr SAWFORD—How many person hours would it take to prepare that submission?

Miss Spark—It is difficult. I was going to say it is a reasonable amount of work but not too excessive. I would put more time into the reporting arrangements with ECEF, which I think have a few problems.

Mr Cramond—It is probably a good 40 hours, a good solid week.

Mrs MAY—So the application is supported with a report on the year's activities and what you have achieved?

Miss Spark—No, it is done at a separate time. We report twice a year, which in itself is not a major issue, but the initial report is a forecast, which I have never quite understood. So next month we forecast on our expected numbers for the year, not our actuals. At the end of the year we do our actuals, which I have always thought was a bit odd. Then we apply for the funding separately to that. I would spend more time definitely on the reporting than on the application for funding. It is a substantial amount of work.

Mr Cramond—The final report, which is in by 27 November, is also supported by an audit. Then you guesstimate what is going to happen between 27 November and the end of the calendar year, both in activity and expenditure, but the guesstimation is signed off by the auditor.

Miss Spark—There are many positives about that funding. One, for us, is that it is reasonably flexible in the scope of activities that you can undertake. ECEF are reasonably good in letting you do a range of things and they are not too restrictive on what you can and cannot do.

Mr SAWFORD—What about having a centralised work placement system? Is it obvious that that is a benefit or are there some things that we may not be aware of? Are there any drawbacks to having it?

Miss Spark—I have been told that from a school's point of view, and certainly from our point of view, one of the drawbacks is that we do not have interaction continually with the students. We rely on dealing with the teachers and we get to visit the students a few times, but we are placing students that we might have only spent about an hour with, as opposed to a teacher who is with those students day in and day out and, in the past, would go and organise the placements themselves. So that is a drawback, but it just means we have to put processes in place to help us overcome that—having good communications processes with the schools, workshops with the students, those kinds of things—so that when we are contact employers we know the students we are dealing with. But I think that drawback is definitely far outweighed by the benefits, not only for schools but also for employers.

Mr SAWFORD—Just for the record, do you want to outline some of those benefits?

Miss Spark—Sure. The major one for employers is the decrease in the number of calls that they get, not only about work placement but also work experience. Within one school you might have four different teachers trying to get students in their own programs—automotive, business and IT—and they might be ringing a large employer who could possible cope with all three. So employers are getting calls from three different people all talking slightly different language and jargon, and it is a nightmare and, at the end of the day, they say, 'See you later.' You have also got parents calling, you have got students calling—every person and his pet. So a lot of employers tell us quite frequently that it is much easier, and they will now say to people when they call: 'Sorry, ring the work placement centre and do it through them.'

Mr Cramond—One of the other advantages is that the personnel employed by the centre are all industry people, so they have a strong industry connection with the people they are dealing with in industry. They talk that language; they understand.

CHAIR—How many schools do you coordinate?

Miss Spark—Eleven—public, private and Catholic.

CHAIR—Do you see much variation between those school sectors in terms of the work readiness of the students and perhaps the support of the staff—between the Catholic and independent and the state schools?

Miss Spark—Probably, but not necessarily because of the type of school they are but more because of their clientele. Our two private schools—Kormilda and St Johns—have the higher Indigenous student cohort, and that in itself brings a lot of issues in terms of work readiness and student attendance. I would not say it is because they are private schools but because of their student cohort, and particularly because of the remote traditional Aboriginal students they have.

The other issue that does not necessarily directly relate to us but we get caught up in it is the RTO—registered training organisation—status of independent and private schools. Unlike public schools who are their own RTOs—Taminmin is an RTO—the Independent Schools Association and the Catholic Education Office are the RTOs. The Catholic Education Office is the overriding RTO for the Catholic schools; the Independent Schools Association is the RTO for its schools, so sometimes the information does not filter down, professional development opportunities are—

CHAIR—How does that affect you in terms of work placement?

Miss Spark—It affects us because the teachers generally are not quite as aware of things like the AQTF requirements of training packages. Sometimes those schools do not have training packages on site—they are sitting in the office of the RTO. Again, it is not necessarily directly related to work placement, but the quality of the course and the teachers' understanding of the AQTF and training packages is probably not quite as high as in those schools that are actually the RTO themselves and have to administer the AQTF.

CHAIR—What is the degree of difference in ease of placement for Indigenous versus non-Indigenous students? Is that a big issue or not?

Miss Spark—It is.

CHAIR—Could you elaborate a bit on that for us?

Miss Spark—Finding the placements is probably not the biggest challenge. We have quite a few employers who want to take on Aboriginal kids; they want to build up their Aboriginal work force. Actually getting students out into work placement because of work readiness is our biggest issue. It is the lack of attendance, and lower skill development or uptake of skill development is an issue, so quite often we do not even get to place the students because they are just not coming through as work ready. Last year, out of our 350 students only 90 Aboriginal students were placed into work placement, so it is fairly low. If we do get them we try and work with employers to have appropriate support in place—things like buddy systems, buddying them up with somebody in the workplace, and trying to send them out in pairs—but it is actually getting them there in the first place that is an issue. Attendance would be our No. 1 problem.

Mr SAWFORD—Do you do anything special to encourage attendance? Do you try other things?

Miss Spark—Again, it is more attendance at class than at work placement because, if they are not attending class, they are not picking up the skills and developing those work readiness attributes we need to then send them out. I do not have any evidence of it but probably the only other thing worth mentioning is that, for many Indigenous students, if you just say, 'Okay, we'll forget about the fact that you haven't been attending and you haven't strictly achieved work readiness—we'll send you anyway,' and they have a good experience, that will help improve some of those other issues. It is a bit of a risk, but you think, 'Well, if we just send this kid, they'll have a good experience,' and hopefully it will make some improvements when they get back to school.

Mr Cramond—Last year we had an Indigenous-dedicated staff member who was putting a lot of time into building those community relationships and mentoring those students. That was one of the reasons that we had a dramatic increase in Indigenous placements. That was a separate funding contract through ECEF that expired at the end of the year, so we no longer have that person. It is doubtful whether we could maintain that momentum this year.

Miss Spark—That did work well because the extra level of support that gets those Indigenous kids through covers things like: dropping into their houses and saying to their parents, 'Look you've got to make sure that Johnny gets out of bed next week and you take him to whatever'; actually meeting them there on the first day of their work placement; showing them through—sort of holding their hand—and maybe dropping in two or three times in the week.

Mr SAWFORD—All in a way that is not threatening.

Miss Spark—Exactly. It is that extra level of support that we really cannot provide just through our standard service.

Mr SAWFORD—It is a pity, isn't it? How long did that last—just one year?

Mr Cramond—Less than one year, actually. Nine months.

Miss Spark—Yes, nine or 10 months.

Mr Cramond—It was meant to be a year contract but for a number of reasons it did not start until the first quarter.

Miss Spark—One of the issues relating to that from ECEF's point of view is that they have a remote strategy for Indigenous students. But they believe that, because our urban Indigenous students are serviced through a project already, that is the end of it.

Mrs MAY—Is there a program?

Mr Cramond—There is our program.

Mrs MAY—Just your program?

Miss Spark—Again, it is through the work placement centre. And yes, there is service, but we cannot afford to give them that extra level of service that is required for them to get the same outcomes as our non-Indigenous students. We can place them, we can monitor them—we can do all the standard things we do—but we cannot do those additional things that are quite heavy on the resources, such as visiting students' homes and working with Aboriginal resource officers within schools to get them more involved.

Mr SAWFORD—Did you let anyone in the system know that you had had success?

Mr Cramond—Absolutely—ECEF.

Miss Spark—A few times.

Mr SAWFORD—What was their response?

Mr Cramond—Their response was, 'That particular project is finishing nationally at the end of 2002, and that's it.' Even though we could—and we did—put up some very good arguments and evidence was before them as to why it should continue, they said, 'Sorry, that's it.'

Mr SAWFORD—Did you seek alternative funding through the local Department of Education?

Mr Cramond—We certainly did.

Mr SAWFORD—And their response?

Mr Cramond—We are still waiting.

Miss Spark—We have got a positive feeling though!

Mr Cramond—Well, Kathy is smiling so may be she can tell us something here. No, she's not going to tell us anything.

CHAIR—Shannon, do you keep any records or do you have much anecdotal evidence about the links between the work placements and post school employment for these kids?

Miss Spark—Unfortunately that is a bit of a challenge for us. The destination surveys for this year are about to be released. We have done a bit of work with the School to Work Unit to try and improve that. The destination data is collected through ECEF. I had another quick look at the statistics from 2001 and our respondent rate was, sadly, so low that we do not get a look-in in most of it. I think there were 20-odd respondents to most questions, so the data just does not show. But anecdotally, in probably almost every placement block, we would get at least one or two students who are offered part-time or casual work or a new apprenticeship. We have just finished a block. We have one student picking up a school based New Apprenticeship and two picking up part-time work. That is fairly regular.

CHAIR—What area was that apprenticeship in?

Miss Spark—It was in hospitality, in kitchen operations at the Casuarina Club.

Mr Cramond—One of the considerations for destination surveys, particularly in the Top End, is that we have a high population of transient people. We have a lot of families of service personnel who might move around every couple of years. So chasing down students that have completed a program and left, even in the Territory, becomes a bit more difficult than, say, in the Eastern States—just in finding them to talk to.

Mrs MAY—Shannon, I would like to go back to one of the issues you raised in your opening comments, and it keeps coming through—work readiness. A lot of the evidence we have taken, even from students and the schools themselves, is that this is a great way of finding that job and even their work placement and this leading to something for the future. You are saying that a lot of these kids are not work ready. How well do the schools understand that, or even the people delivering those VET programs—the teachers. How closely do you work with them and give them feedback letting them know that industry is saying this? Are they aware of these comments?

Miss Spark—I think they are all very much aware of it now. Everybody should have been very well aware of their obligations as RTOs. The department has put out some supporting resources, including a checklist, to help people assess work readiness. At the beginning of this year we developed a kit and that involved meeting with every VET coordinator and their VET teachers to go over some of those things again, like the work readiness, to make sure everybody understood what the requirements were. We also built into our application form a declaration that the teacher must sign to indicate that the student is work ready. So I would be fairly confident now that all teachers understand work readiness—they know what it is about and what is expected of them. They are probably, in reality, struggling to apply it sometimes.

Mrs MAY—In what they are teaching?

Miss Spark—Yes, and even assessing it, because it is fairly subjective in terms of attitude and things like that. Work readiness is a funny one, because what we are not saying is that a student must have achieved competence in all these areas before we send them out. Obviously work placement is a lot to do with developing some of those skills like communication and what have

you, but in essence they must be able to walk in, introduce themselves and shake hands. They must know the basics of their OH&S responsibilities and pretty simple things like that. They must have had reasonable attendance at school. These are things we are finding are not happening.

Mrs MAY—Do you have an opinion on whether a school should be an RTO?

Miss Spark—I do.

Mrs MAY—Would you like to share that with us?

Miss Spark—Indeed. Like everyone, I think that there is probably a range of issues surrounding it. It is interesting that even a school I was at recently, which is an RTO and a very strong supporter of VET—it offers a lot of clusters and I think does it fairly well—is at the point of wondering whether it should rethink whether it runs the programs as VET or just runs them as normal school subjects. My main concern with schools as RTOs is their having to comply with the AQTF, which seems to take up 99.9 per cent of people's time in a school but it only applies to a fairly small proportion of what they do. That contrasts with a public or private provider for which the AQTF is applicable to the whole organisation. So the quality of the delivery is quite often very good but it is about everything else that goes with it.

Teacher training is an issue. One teacher I talked to had recently done a teacher industry placement. She said that it was fantastic, that it had given her a range of benefits and how wonderful it was, but finished up by saying that she would not be doing it again because of the extra work she had to pick up when she got back to school. She had a relief teacher, but they generally just relieve, not deliver lessons. She said that it was all too hard and she would not be doing it again. I tend to think that auspicing arrangements give you better arrangements outcomes. You can auspice through an RTO, let them take care of the AQTF and you just deliver.

Mrs MAY—Do all the paperwork.

Miss Spark—Yes.

Mr SAWFORD—This is a bit loaded, but what about in a school like this where they have VET as far more of a core business than a traditional school? I do not want to put you on the spot, but —

Miss Spark—That is okay. I think they still struggle with it. They do it because they value VET, but the work that gets done is extra work. Rose Calland would work an enormous number of extra hours a week just to maintain the AQTF paperwork and things like that. They do it because it is something that their students want, because there is demand for it and because they think it is important as part of the general school structure. But it is very difficult and I think that if you asked most schools they would honestly say, 'If we had a choice we probably would not do it.'

Mr Cramond—Taminmin are probably one of the more successful deliverers of VET in schools, because they have an enthusiastic principal, an enthusiastic VET coordinator and some very highly qualified teachers of VET programs. Industry supports that and they have good

success in their placements out of those programs, because they get good results, are in a growth area and are very aligned to the community and industry. So they are probably the shining example of how well VET in Schools can work. However, when we look at the number of programs that are being delivered in the Darwin urban area—some 60-odd that we are managing or are being delivered—by our TAFE system, there are about three or four. That gets back to the question: should a school be an RTO? We have an underutilised TAFE system and industry is starting to question that and say, 'Why aren't these students going through TAFE?'—meaning why isn't the TAFE RTO delivering this VET program? It makes sense too. However, I will hearken back to the fact that we have a really good example with Taminmin High School. They have excellent results.

Miss Spark—It is not necessarily that schools are not giving us as high a quality outcome as some of our public providers, because they certainly are; it is whether we achieve those outcomes and maximise resources. That is where I have a bit of an issue with some schools as RTOs. Hospitality is an example. We have a multimillion dollar hospitality campus at Palmerston, which is grossly underused.

CHAIR—That is a TAFE.

Miss Spark—Yes. I think we have four hospitality programs running four different schools, so each of those schools has to have equipment and resources. There is only one that has commercially available equipment. Their teachers all have to be trained and have an industry background. It is a mass duplication, in my view, of those resources.

Mr SAWFORD—Is that because the dialogue between the school and the TAFE is not what it ought to be?

Mr Cramond—It could be one of the reasons.

CHAIR—What are the other reasons? Why do you think that is happening?

Mr Cramond—I think there have been some historical differences of opinion between some of the schools, schools that are RTOs and TAFE. One would hope that with the changes that are occurring at NTU, with the amalgamation of the university and Centralian College, a lot of these historical happenings will be finished and we will see some more progression. Industry is certainly, because it is more aware of VET in Schools programs, more aware of the benefits of the products coming out of those programs. They are now questioning why more of these programs are not being delivered by the regular TAFE system. Industry generally will value a product coming out of the TAFE system—I will isolate Taminmin High School—more than a product coming out of the VET in Schools system.

Miss Spark—It is an attractive option for schools. If there is student demand, it obviously makes sense for their school to get into that area. It means they are going to get more students coming to their school and they are more of an attractive option. That has something to do with it.

CHAIR—That is from an overall view. If we are duplicating resources, that is not a sensible thing to be doing, is it?

Miss Spark—No.

Mr SAWFORD—The key is the quality of the educational program, isn't it?

Miss Spark—Exactly.

Mr SAWFORD—Whether it is TAFE or school.

Miss Spark—That is right. That is the other issue with schools and RTOs and indeed the range of qualifications. You hear it said quite often: 'Should we cap or limit qualifications?' From my point of view, if you are running a quality program, run an associate diploma or one unit of competency from a level 1. It really should not be here nor there, if the quality of the program is there. So I do not necessarily think we should go down that track. It is more the issue of quality. But in terms of schools and RTOs, there are some definite differences between cluster programs and what we call line programs. Are you familiar with the two? You get much greater benefits from clusters, whether they are run by a public school as opposed to the line programs.

CHAIR—Barry, do you think that industry preference is changing—is it easier for students who have done their course through TAFE to get recognition? Do you think, if we continue the way we are going, that they will accord the same esteem and credibility to school based courses as TAFE based courses?

Mr Cramond—I think in the Territory, with the future that we are facing and the major projects that are coming on stream, we really will in the trades areas. We will have no choice but for more of those trade based VET in Schools programs to be delivered by TAFE. I think it will be beyond the schools—with maybe the exception of those schools that have good skills centres, like Taminmin—to deliver a lot of those trade based programs, with the growth that we are facing.

Mr SAWFORD—They will all come very quickly and they may come from somewhere else, which would be a pity in a way for Darwin.

Miss Spark—Exactly, yes.

CHAIR—I am afraid we are out of time, unless there are any other burning questions. Thank you for your time and your valuable input. Unfortunately, time is up, as always happens.

Miss Spark—Thank you.

[11.58 a.m.]

HARRISON, Mr Michael John, Chief Executive Officer, Group Training NT

McCONNELL, Mr Paul Anthony, Business Development Manager, Group Training NT

CHAIR—I now welcome representatives of Group Training Northern Territory. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Harrison—Our particular interest in putting some propositions to you today is to do with our position as the largest employer of apprentices and trainees in the Territory, which gives us a fairly good insight into what is happening with the flow-on from the VET in Schools process. We are also currently involved in a fairly substantial initiative to build a number of school based New Apprenticeships in the Northern Territory, which is a DEST funded project. That has also given us some pretty good insights into this broad issue of your inquiry.

Mr McConnell—I manage, on behalf of DEST and the Group Training company, the school based apprenticeship program, which we started towards the end of last year—2002. I also manage an Indigenous employment strategy that we have going at the company.

CHAIR—Thank you. Did you want to make any further introductory comments, or should we proceed to questioning?

Mr Harrison—I might make a few comments up front. We did not particularly want to put forward a formal proposal; we wanted to really focus on probably half a dozen key issues as we see them, based on our experience, and then to open it up to questions. A couple of key points that we think are important to mention up front relate to the three core areas of our business. Firstly, as the largest group training company, we obviously attract a large percentage of young people, particularly school leavers, looking at commencing New Apprenticeships and traineeships.

Having listened to some of Shannon's comments, we also believe that we are dealing with a group of young people who, in broad terms, are generally unprepared for the world of work. That causes us concern and leads to some of the broader issues about why that might be the case. We believe that, in terms of the approach of VET in Schools as it currently occurs in the NT, it generally tends to be a tack-on to the day-to-day mainstream operations of the school. It depends very heavily on the individual commitment of the principal and the VET coordinator to make it a success. However, from a systemic point of view, I do not believe that it is necessarily producing the sorts of results we should be looking at in a general sense. That obviously then leads to broader issues of how we better equip young people for the transition from school to work. VET in Schools is obviously one part of that exercise.

The other area is our experience in implementing the school based New Apprenticeships initiative that we have in place at the moment, and perhaps Paul can talk about that in more detail. We have attracted some funds from the Department of Education, Science and Training for two years to build the number of school based New Apprenticeships in the Northern

Territory. We were the lowest performing jurisdiction in the country in terms of the uptake of school based New Apprenticeships. We have discovered that a range of systemic issues have got in the way of that occurring and it has provided us with a terrific opportunity to implement school based New Apprenticeships in a way that allows us to learn lessons from some of the difficulties that occurred in other states.

Some of the core issues around that which we think are important to focus on relate again to the issue of the preparedness of young people to move into school based New Apprenticeships and also more broadly to the opportunity to more effectively integrate. We are talking about a school based New Apprenticeship and that is a contract of employment. Young people are being paid and they are working in an apprenticeship whilst they are still going to school and there are opportunities to integrate what is happening in the world of work with what is going on at school. That involves issues such as the flexibility of timetabling and the programs provided at school which can better facilitate the movement from school to work. We certainly believe that there are some substantial opportunities to improve that range of programs and flexibilities that can apply.

We have also found that there is generally a fair bit of confusion amongst the school community—and I am putting aside VET coordinators at the moment. We should look at year 11 and year 12 coordinators and class teachers at year 10 level in terms of their broad understanding of the sorts of pathways available from school to work, whether that be work experience, VET in Schools, school based New Apprenticeships or other propositions. We should also look at the whole approach to careers information and advice that is provided inside and outside schools as that provision seems to have been de-emphasised over the past few years. That is an important aspect of the whole mix. Those are the key points we would like to mention.

The final issue relates to the additional kinds of support that are required to assist Indigenous young people to move from school to work in urban and remote settings. We simply cannot apply normal, mainstream approaches to that client group. We have to be much more innovative in the way we provide mentor support and additional tutor support and in the whole process of building support to assist young people to move from school to employment, bearing in mind that completion rates to year 12 for Indigenous young people are pretty poor and it is very difficult to work with young people when they have been at the other end of the system and have been unemployed. It is then difficult to bring them back to the stage where we can work through the Job Networks, Jobs Pathways and the other youth support programs. I believe that we are much better off doing the work while young people are still in school.

CHAIR—Paul, would you like to add anything?

Mr McConnell—Mike has mentioned most things. Just to put the DEST contract—the school based apprenticeship program—into some sort of context, we had a contract to place 50 students over two years. Out of those 50 students, 30 were to be Indigenous and 20 non-Indigenous. Out of the 30 Indigenous, we were also required to put on five students from a remote Indigenous area. At this point in time we have 60 to 70 students already placed, so we are 18 months ahead of the contract. We have already put in a request to DEST to have the contract extended and to allow for a continuance of the funding for that.

What I am saying is that the interest from schools, employers and parents—from all parties—has been outstanding. The support is there and the interest is incredible. We have already reached the target, so we have no problems there. We can only see that growth continuing in the future, especially if we follow what is happening around the rest of Australia as far as school based apprenticeships go. I have to reiterate what Michael has said already—that is, there is some sort of lack of understanding of the pathways that are available through the VET in Schools programs, through work experience and through school based apprenticeship programs. Not many parents, employers or teachers understand them; and I am leaving aside our career teachers—our VET coordinators—who are converted, if you like, and some other individuals who have been involved in the program. We have employers at the moment who have students turning up to do a school based apprenticeship program, and a couple of those employers perhaps do not think that the students need to be paid. I have had students on work experience or work placement for the last two or three years—what is the difference there? So we have a lot of barriers and things to break down, and that is happening.

CHAIR—At one of our previous hearings, it was pretty obvious that employers did not fully understand or appreciate the differences between traineeships and apprenticeships in terms of both their mechanics and their advantages and disadvantages. We had quite an interesting discussion with one group—I think you were there, Margaret.

Mrs MAY—Yes.

CHAIR—Could you outline for the sake of our records the relative advantages and disadvantages of school based apprenticeships and traineeships for employers?

Mr McConnell—The benefits include contract of training, where, firstly, there is a commitment from the student—in 99 per cent of the cases that student is going to be under 18, so you also have the parent or guardian involved—so there is contract of training between an employer and a student to undertake some structured training. You are enabling a student to work about one or two days a week for a two-year length of time to obtain their qualification. It is a bit different to perhaps other programs where a student might just do a one-week—or whatever—work placement. They are in that workplace for a length of time. So the employer therefore has the advantage of having that person as part of their work force, part of their normal team. They know that they are going to be coming in every Wednesday or every Thursday, or whatever it is, so there is that benefit.

The student is being paid a rate—$9 per hour, or thereabouts—so there needs to be a commitment from them and an understanding that they have to put in an effort and be productive. The employer is paying for that service, so they are not going to expect somebody to just sit around, twiddling their thumbs, or just do the filing all the time; they will expect some sort of return. The benefit is that you have students getting a qualification that is going to add to their NTCE. It is a stepping stone to their future career. We have a couple of students who are doing certificate II in cookery; they want to be chefs. So they will do this part-time school based apprenticeship over the next two years, during years 11 and 12; they will get their certificate II, which is equivalent roughly to stage 1 of their apprenticeship; and at the end of year 12 they are going to end up with a qualification—a certificate II—in commercial cookery, or whatever. They will then have the option of direct employment. That employer might say, ‘You’ve been working

for me for the last couple of years. How about coming on to work full time and becoming permanent?' That has to be a successful outcome.

That student may decide to go on to tertiary and higher education because they have seen there are other pathways there. We have not eliminated that pathway, that choice, from the options there. Two of the three students that we have placed this year want to be chefs. They have already commenced that. They are well on their way to completing their apprenticeships, so they will go full time. The benefits are just making that transition from school to work much smoother. You have all the spin-offs of knowing what work is like. Time sheets are a bit of a problem—

CHAIR—They are the benefits of apprenticeships. What about traineeships? What advantages do apprenticeships have over traineeships or vice versa? Don't those benefits you have outlined apply to traineeships?

Mr Harrison—Yes, they do. From a school based point of view, in broad terms the bulk of the school based New Apprenticeships delivered are at certificate II level, which are broadly traineeships. We have tended to use in the Territory the national badging of New Apprenticeships to incorporate both apprenticeships and traineeships.

Mr McConnell—We do not distinguish basically between an apprenticeship and a traineeship in the majority of cases. There will be an odd occasion where we will have a student doing what we would traditionally call an apprenticeship, in motor mechanics or whatever.

Mr Harrison—It is pretty difficult for a young person completing year 11 and 12 to also complete what would normally be a certificate III qualification, which would generally be a trade qualification, at the same time. They would need to be a particularly gifted student to do it, generally because of the number of training hours required to complete the certificate III qualification and get though year 12 at the same time.

Mrs MAY—We heard from one person—I think it was on the Gold Coast—a 14-year-old who was released as a school based apprentice to his father, who would never have stayed at school. I think what is coming out is the higher retention from keeping these children at school by doing a school based apprenticeship and finishing year 12. Would you say that is the evidence you have too?

Mr McConnell—Absolutely, keeping in mind that the minimum age is 15 to do an apprenticeship. If they are under 15, we have to go through the department. We have a couple of students in that particular situation. There is absolutely no doubt that, with the pressure of parents and community wanting students to stay on at school, this is one way in which they can actually achieve that.

Mr Harrison—It is a terrific career path for family businesses, full stop, but particularly for those in regional Australia. Those family businesses are able to take on their sons and daughters on the basis that they are going to complete a New Apprenticeship qualification at the same time as getting through a higher level of education. It is ideally suited to that. We also believe here in the Territory it is a natural product particularly for Indigenous students, where you have real difficulties in getting young people to complete year 11 and year 12. The capacity to be able to

build school based apprenticeships, or structured learning and employment together, during the last couple of years of school we believe will see a greater uptake by young people completing through to year 12.

Mrs MAY—You have had huge success then. In your six months, you have had 60 or 70 school based apprentices. Obviously, it has not been difficult working with industry and convincing them to take these young people on. Why has it been so successful?

Mr McConnell—There are a number of reasons. One is the financial commitment. Employers will always ask about the dollar for a start. If it was full time, they would want to know. That is normal. We are an employer ourselves. With a school based apprenticeship, it is only going to cost them one day or two days a week maximum, so you are looking at $60 to $120. So there is not the financial commitment. That is one of the pluses. They do have the option of having the person come in that one or two days a week. It differs from the north to the south of the Northern Territory. You have been made aware of the differences there in timetables and school systems and so on. We are different here in Darwin compared with Alice Springs. There is not that financial commitment. There are not the same sorts of pressures of having someone there full time. That is certainly one of the advantages. The other one, as Mike said, is where you have family businesses and there is the opportunity for someone to take their son or daughter on in their business.

The other thing that is important for employers is that you also have support. You are not taking somebody who has left school and, therefore, starting a new job, a New Apprenticeship for the first time. You have actually got the support of your VET coordinators, the school community, the classroom teachers, the RTO, the training provider and the parents. In our case, the Group Training company facilitates it. Somebody from our organisation provides monitoring and mentoring support. For an employer, there is a tremendous amount of support, as opposed to doing it completely by themselves or taking somebody who has just left school into a full-time arrangement.

Mrs MAY—Do you physically visit the work site on a regular basis?

Mr McConnell—Absolutely; every four weeks the apprentice is visited. Their workplace is visited beforehand to ensure that it has the facilities, the equipment and the right staff.

Mrs MAY—So the employer knows his responsibilities. Often, having that extra pair of hands does take time. You need to spend time with that young person.

Mr McConnell—You are right there, because one of the challenges that we are finding is that some employers are not geared up for this. For example, a young person turns up on their doorstep on a Wednesday—they have known that all along, but quite often it is not what they expect. Some of our educating and training is training those in the workplace as much as training the student. So they have to get themselves organised as well.

Mr SAWFORD—Michael, you said that careers advice has been de-emphasised in recent years. Why and how did that happen?

Mr Harrison—Let us look at it from a Commonwealth perspective, initially; let us put aside what is occurring in schools. Prior to working in this role I was a consultant for seven years. I was with the Commonwealth government for 20 years prior to that, in the Department of Employment, Education and Training. Prior to the CES network being contracted out to the Job Network, you had careers reference centres and also youth access centres working in most regions and work information centres that were provided as part of the core CES role. That no longer occurs. The Commonwealth's role in this whole issue of career education has been substantially de-emphasised since the Job Network was implemented. That is the first issue. The CES was outsourced to the Job Network, in simple terms. Centrelink, who had the responsibility for picking up what were called the old youth access centres, have substantially de-emphasised the management and the operation of those, as I understand it.

The second issue is that, typically, if you go to most schools you will find that the careers teacher's role in most schools is part time and on top of their current teaching role. Certainly going back 10 or 15 years ago, there was a much higher emphasis on careers education. There generally tended to be more support for the careers education role, and you had full-time careers teachers. If you did a survey now, I think you would typically find that most of the careers teacher's role in most schools is part time, on top of their additional load, and generally not seen as a high priority amongst most schools.

That is combined with the fact that, whilst there are some real success stories around the place, VET in Schools programs are generally seen as tack-ons in most schools, I would argue. They get external support, external funding for them, but they are not seen as the core business of the school.

Mr SAWFORD—This school is an exception, isn't it?

Mr Harrison—Yes. The whole issue of the school's role in preparing young people to go from school to work is not seen as core business in most schools. If you talked about the strategic direction of a school and the way it relates to a community in which it services itself, the focus is still too much on the 30 per cent of kids that are going to go on to higher education as opposed to 70 per cent of kids who are actually going to be looking for some alternative pathways into employment or further learning. We are not doing a good enough job to prepare young people for approaches to lifelong learning, given the fact that these days you are looking at much shorter periods when people are employed. People are going to undertake lots of different jobs during their lifetimes. A much greater emphasis on part-time and contract employment is going to occur. To me, that means that we have to provide better options and better advice to young people as they are moving through school.

Mr SAWFORD—What would you be recommending this committee does?

Mr Harrison—Firstly, you have to upgrade the provision of career advice in schools. Secondly, schools need to be encouraged to take on board the whole issue of school-to-work transition as their core business, as being equally as important as preparing young people for higher education. It is just as important to prepare young people to move into the world of work. We need to reflect the way schools are managed, the way that they put strategic plans together in terms of the way they relate to their community, to be able to do that.

Mr SAWFORD—What about doing it within the system? I am talking about the CES going—there was an alternative to what was happening in schools, wasn't there? It was something within the system. Would you recommend a continuation of that? What sort of format would do it?

Mr Harrison—I think we threw the baby out with the bathwater, quite frankly, when the Job Network was implemented. I do not think we actually thought about things like the careers reference centres and youth access centres service properly. As a CES service that used to be provided, that service should continue to be run throughout Australia—as part of Centrelink, as an add-on to the Job Network function or separately contracted out—as a way in which the Commonwealth could at least maintain a floor, if you like, in the marketplace to ensure that there are at least some alternatives available in those areas where the schools may, for lots of reasons, not be able to provide that sort of support.

Mr McConnell—We have noticed that, for whatever reason, a number of students that come through our doors to register, whether it be for full-time or school based apprenticeships, have quite a clear lack of knowledge of what occupations are available and the process that you need to go through. Maybe that is to do with the sorts of students that are coming to us, because we are an apprenticeship and traineeship employer—that is our area—but it may also indicate some other sorts of things. There is certainly a lack of information about how you prepare yourself. People come in and I say, 'What do you want to do?' They say, 'I want a trade.' 'What would you like to do?' 'Anything. What's available?'

CHAIR—You used the term 'students'. Are they all students? There are not kids that have left school as well?

Mr McConnell—These would generally be ones that have left school, but to some extent it is the school based ones, the ones that have applied to do a school based traineeship, apprenticeship or New Apprenticeship. One of the questions might be 'What's available?' That is probably a reasonable question for young person to ask, because a lot of us also do not know what is available.

Mr SAWFORD—You also made mention of integrating the world of work with the world of school. Is that a realistic aim, or should we be understanding the differences between the two?

Mr Harrison—Maybe 'integrating' is not the right word, but the whole issue of the transition from school to work—

Mr SAWFORD—So it is an understanding?

Mr Harrison—I think we have to do a much better job of that. There is no doubt about that.

Mr SAWFORD—That did not fit in with what else you were saying. That is all.

Mr McConnell—That is assisting teachers and the education community to know more about what opportunities are available.

Mr SAWFORD—I understand that. You just used the word 'integrate', and I thought that did not fit in with what you were saying.

Mr McConnell—I just need to pick up something quickly. Margaret, you remember that we mentioned that there has been a big uptake of the school based apprenticeship program? I want to talk about one of the other reasons for that. Getting the DEST contract has enabled Group Training to put on one person full time up here and another person full time down in Alice Springs to promote, market and draw it together. If you think of the parties that are involved in putting a school based apprenticeship program together, it is the students, the school, the principal, the VET coordinator, the parents of the students, an RTO and the host employer—or, in our case, employer. If there is no-one in the school and no-one outside who can bring all that together—coordinate and facilitate that—it becomes too hard. To be honest, one of the reasons there has been such a big uptake is that we have been able to put some resources into that area to bring all those parties together. We have had one person or a couple of people who coordinate all that and bring it together.

CHAIR—I want to ask a couple of questions about your organisation and your funding. You are funded firstly via that VET contract?

Mr McConnell—Yes.

CHAIR—Secondly, you charge a fee to employers to place—

Mr McConnell—No, we do not at the moment. The normal operations would be: if an employer wants to put on an apprentice through Group Training Northern Territory, there would be an administration fee for that and we would provide—

CHAIR—You do all the workers compensation, the paperwork et cetera?

Mr McConnell—We do all that stuff, and the monitoring and the support. Because of the contract with DEST, we have actually waived all those admin charges, so it is only costing the employer the bare minimum, which is the wage and on-costs, which are 20 per cent or whatever. The on-costs are the annual leave, workers comp and super. We use the national training wage and load it up by 20 per cent, and that is the wage that the student earns.

CHAIR—So it is only the on-costs—there is no commission in that at all for Group Training?

Mr Harrison—Because we have had support from the Commonwealth government to actually initiate that—

CHAIR—Because of that contract—

Mr Harrison—we have made a conscious decision not to go out into the marketplace and charge a fee. We think that would actually assist in getting the numbers up as well, and that has proven to be the case.

Mr McConnell—As for the Commonwealth incentives, we return those. There will be a $1,250 commencement incentive in most cases—we return that. Then there is the $725 special

New Apprenticeship incentive—we return that. Under the contract there is a $206 commencement fee that we can claim that is independent of anything else.

CHAIR—So they are all returned to the employers?

Mr McConnell—Except for that last $206 which we claim at the moment.

Mr Harrison—We come from a Group Training point of view. In a corporate sense, we are a not-for-profit business. We obviously survive on the basis of management annual fees.

CHAIR—Are most Group Training companies not-for-profit?

Mr Harrison—Yes.

Mr McConnell—The majority of the 180 that are part of the Group Training Australia network would be. There is another Group Training company in Darwin that is a for-profit organisation. But it is not part of that network.

CHAIR—One criticism that I have heard, not formally as part of these hearings, is that some of the for-profit Group Training companies are structuring their activities in such a way as to enhance their profits, sometimes at the expense of their clients. An example would be that they are running their own training centres—and I notice that you run your own training centre—and channelling the apprentices into their own training centre when there are alternatives available. Do you recommend that the apprentices you have undertake courses at your own training centre? Do you advise them of alternatives?

Mr Harrison—The bulk of our new apprentices are doing training with other RTOs, not with us.

Mr McConnell—In most cases it depends upon who the host employer's preference is. If a host employer says, 'We have a contract with such and such organisation. We like to use them and we've used them in that past,' then that is fine.

CHAIR—I have just one final question. You have obviously had a lot of success in getting placements and you have articulated clearly some of the benefits of school based apprenticeships. Why then is the take-up of school based apprenticeships much lower in the Northern Territory than in other states? Why do you think that is the case?

Mr Harrison—Prior to our involvement it was simply a matter of it just being too hard.

Mr McConnell—There have not been policies and procedures available. So if you wanted to put on somebody, you had to think, what is it—10 hours a week, 15 hours a week? Some of those issues have been clarified but 12 months ago we did not have a lot of those policies and procedures available. But there is an effort now and some funding available to get that done.

Mr Harrison—That Allen report that was done on school based New Apprenticeships late last year, which has been recently published, talked a lot about the fact that school based New Apprenticeships as a career path work best in certain situations. These included where you have

got a Group Training company, a proactive TAFE institution or a cluster of schools operating where you can actually get enough resources together to be able to initiate a lot of the coordination facilitation—just plain getting around, banging on doors, talking to people and bringing parties together in such a way that you can actually make a change to get things to occur. That has certainly been our experience in being able to bring people together to assist in doing that.

CHAIR—Rod, did you have any further questions?

Mr SAWFORD—I just have one last one—and if it was in your submission already, forgive me. How big is your organisation? How many staff do you have?

Mr Harrison—We employ 40 staff. We have got 280- to 290-odd apprentices and trainees in training.

Mr SAWFORD—So you are a big employer.

Mr Harrison—We also run the contract for the New Apprenticeships Centre NT wide. That is a different proposition compared to other states in that we, as well as delivering the Commonwealth functions delivered by New Apprenticeship Centres, also deliver about two-thirds to three-quarters of the state training authority role. It is actually a true one-stop shop. We have a joint contract with both the Commonwealth and NT governments. We also have a small training centre that mainly focuses on business and IT.

Mr SAWFORD—Do you have a big staff changeover, or is it constant?

Mr Harrison—Our staff turnover has been pretty stable over the last 12 months.

Mr SAWFORD—From where have you been recruiting your people?

Mr Harrison—Locally.

Mr SAWFORD—From any particular area?

Mr Harrison—Do you mean apprentices?

Mr SAWFORD—No, your staff—sorry.

Mr Harrison—Our staff are predominantly local.

Mr SAWFORD—What other areas would they come from?

Mr Harrison—A whole range of different areas. We try to build a platform of local staff.

Mr McConnell—A couple of staff in the field operations area have come from other group training companies. They have family here in Darwin. They have been away and have come back.

CHAIR—Earlier you said that you used the term 'apprenticeship' to cover both what used to be apprenticeships as distinct from traineeships and—

Mr Harrison—It is a generic Commonwealth term that has been nailed to this New Apprenticeship qualification.

CHAIR—Yes, it is a generic term. But do you only place those who are—using the older terminology—apprentices or do you also place trainees?

Mr McConnell—A lot of our information brochures use the term 'New Apprenticeships', because we have an obligation to use the generic term. But we often put in brackets 'apprenticeship/traineeship'.

CHAIR—And you place both?

Mr McConnell—Yes, absolutely. So when an employer or somebody says, 'What is the difference between an apprenticeship and a traineeship?', these days it basically gets down to the length of time it takes to complete. Generally speaking, traineeships take less time to complete than an apprenticeship. That is the easiest way to explain it.

CHAIR—Are there differences in the award rates that must be paid?

Mr McConnell—Yes.

CHAIR—Are there differences in the incentives that are paid to employers or are they the same?

Mr Harrison—They vary.

CHAIR—So putting those two factors together—the difference in pay and the difference in incentives—from a purely financial point of view, which is better for an employer, putting aside for the moment the issues of tenure and so on? Or does it pretty much balance out in the wash?

Mr Harrison—If you go back a couple of steps, certainly from the work we have seen and in the recent Commonwealth review of Commonwealth incentives, if you look at the reasons why employers put apprentices on in the first place, the size of the subsidy or incentive provided is generally a third or fourth level priority—

CHAIR—Sure, I acknowledge that.

Mr Harrison—or level of interest, if you like. It is more a case of: 'I want a young person who is motivated, has the right aptitude, attitude and approach to work in my business and displays a basic level of potential in these areas where I have a job available.' The incentive follows, rather than being the precursor.

CHAIR—Sure. Acknowledging that though, are there any substantial differences in the financial incentive of one versus the other?

Mr Harrison—Yes, there are, depending upon the qualification and duration of the new apprenticeship.

CHAIR—Can you say generally that those differences in incentives would favour apprenticeships or traineeships?

Mr Harrison—Apprenticeships, longer periods.

CHAIR—From an employer's point of view?

Mr Harrison—That is right.

CHAIR—And what about those group training companies that are for-profit? Is there a greater incentive for them to place students in apprenticeships or traineeships?

Mr Harrison—From 1 July there will be a level playing field.

CHAIR—So the level of commission or whatever is the same?

Mr Harrison—It is all the same.

Mr McConnell—There was a stage when traineeships were more beneficial because you could rotate the trainees. They were quicker. They were shorter term and you could move trainees through quicker, whereas if you put on an apprentice you had that person for three to four years and you got one commencement.

CHAIR—So you are saying that is no longer the case.

Mr SAWFORD—What is your completion rate?

Mr Harrison—We run at about a 60 per cent completion rate at the moment. Shannon made the point before about how you actually measure that. That is a bit of an issue at this point. The way NCVER construct their statistics and how you measure successful completion is something I frankly feel we need to do a bit more work on so that we can compare apples with apples.

Mr McConnell—I have one final point with the implementation, the take-up. I am thinking of a couple of other employers. One of the reasons why there has been a lot of interest in it is that some industries have traditionally found it hard to attract students and they see this as an opportunity perhaps of providing a bit of a stepping stone. I am thinking of child care. The interest shown by them has been tremendous. We find it really hard to attract school leavers, but here the student can stay at school and do their qualifications. So there is that aspect as well as promoting their industry as a career path.

Mrs MAY—Have you seen a change in the type of apprenticeships? I am trying to think of different trades, emerging industries. Would you have anything to say on the VET courses that are being offered in schools? Are they keeping up with what is needed out there in industry?

Mr Harrison—Off the top of my head, I would say no. The whole issue of the development of new training packages and the review and introduction of revised training packages—I think at the moment there are about 500 different New Apprenticeship and traineeship qualifications available on a national basis. In regard to the offering of those at a school level in a VET program, it is pretty tough to expect a school to be able to deliver the lot. Coming back again to the earlier point, it is more a matter of the school being able to reflect what is happening in its local community in terms of trends that are occurring in the local labour market, and then being able to put together those national training packages which are going to more accurately reflect the needs of those employers within that area, or more generally.

Mrs MAY—I think it was the department yesterday which was talking about a labour market analysis, which will be completed next month—

Mr Harrison—It is due now.

Mrs MAY—which would give you a better indicator of the sorts of jobs that are out there and the sorts of industries that are looking for young people.

Mr Harrison—As Barry mentioned before, with the onset of oil and gas here, the Darwin market is going to move from what is now substantially a service, defence and tourism economy to becoming substantially more industrialised over the next 20 years. We need to be looking forward—

Mrs MAY—You have to be ready for that.

Mr Harrison—Yes, we need to be looking forward to that.

Mr McConnell—The industrial relations issue is an important one. Many people in the education community—and this is understandable—are not aware of the industrial relations issues. So they will ring us and say, 'Paul, I have a young person who wants to be a cabinetmaker, an electrician, or a plumber.' We have to explain to them, 'You can't do that on a part-time basis; the award doesn't allow for that.' Those sorts of issues have an impact. That is the difference between an apprenticeship and a traineeship, and there are other implications there.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your input. Let us hope that the success rate that you have seen in the last 18 months continues.

Resolved (on motion by **Mrs May**):

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

Committee adjourned at 12.37 p.m.