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REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND
FORESTRY

Reference: Rural skills training and research

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FORESTRY

Wednesday, 1 March 2006

Members: Mr Schultz (*Chair*), Mr Adams (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Martin Ferguson, Mr Michael Ferguson, Mr Forrest, Mr Lindsay, Mr Gavan O'Connor, Mr Secker, Mr Tuckey and Mr Windsor

Members in attendance: Mr Adams, Mr Michael Ferguson, Mr Forrest, Mr Schultz, Mr Secker, Mr Tuckey and Mr Windsor

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

- The availability and adequacy of education and research services in the agriculture sector, including access to vocational training and pathways from vocational education and training to tertiary education and work.
- The skills needs of agricultural industries in Australia, including the expertise and capacity of industries to specify the skills-sets required for training, and the extent to which vocational training meets the needs of rural industries.
- The provision of extension and advisory services to agricultural industries, including links and coordination between education, research and extension.
- The role of the Australian government in supporting education, research and advisory programs to support the viability and sustainability of Australian agriculture.

WITNESSES

**DUNLOP, Mr Gordon Leslie, Treasurer, Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association of New South
Wales Inc..... 1**

**GORDON, Mrs Susan Catherine, President, Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association of New
South Wales Inc..... 1**

Committee met at 5.02 pm

DUNLOP, Mr Gordon Leslie, Treasurer, Isolated Children's Parents' Association of New South Wales Inc.

GORDON, Mrs Susan Catherine, President, Isolated Children's Parents' Association of New South Wales Inc.

CHAIR (Mr Schultz)—Welcome. I declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry for its inquiry into rural skills training and research. This is the 13th public hearing for this inquiry and it is part of an extensive program of public hearings and visits designed to gather information from the people directly involved with the main issues of the inquiry. I welcome the witnesses from the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of New South Wales. I thank the witnesses for taking the time to travel from Young to speak with the committee. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Dunlop—I am also the immediate past president of the association.

CHAIR—Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament. Consequently, they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. Do you wish to make a brief statement in relation to your submission or some introductory remarks?

Mrs Gordon—Regarding rural skills training and research, the ICPA is concerned about the low retention rates for students completing years 11 and 12. The limited subject choice and peer support in remote secondary schools make it even harder for students to compete for university places. In fact, 75 per cent of students who attend universities across Australia live at home. Education of children is a primary source of the drift of isolated and rural families to metropolitan and larger regional towns. The recommendation from the Isolate Children's Parents' Association is that the Australian government stop this drift of isolated and rural families to these areas. Why must isolated communities lose professional and trade skilled families or risk their child not fulfilling their educational potential because they cannot give their children the choices and opportunities of education in these rural communities?

ICPA wants to keep rural communities viable. Access to education is the key element of maintaining this viability. If a student, on reaching secondary school and finding the local school not to be appropriate, is denied assistance to choose, it is the experience of communities Australia wide that the entire family will relocate to be close to a school that does meet the student's needs. This will move the younger siblings from the primary school and takes away professional and trade skills vital to the health of the local community. A family unable to relocate and unable to support their child to choose an appropriate school without some financial assistance risks the child simply giving up study and not completing secondary school, with a similar result for some students if they have to travel long distances by bus if it is available. This disadvantages the student and, in turn, the community in which they live. A four-year trial on

choice of schooling in Queensland concluded that schools become more competitive, very few additional students exercise their choice and professional people stayed in the community.

The introduction of more locally based apprenticeships or traineeships and increased student incentives would alleviate the skilled labour shortage in the long term. Retention of children is valuable to rural communities and should be acknowledged by state and federal governments. Rural students are the most practical and economical solution to providing services for rural and remote communities now and in the future and are well worth supporting. In fact, 85 per cent of teachers who have experienced rural based schooling stay in a rural community.

ICPA feels a need to voice its concern at the disturbing 40 to 50 per cent drop-out rate of apprentices, especially at a time when rural towns are experiencing an increasing skills shortage. Some issues appear to be major factors, such as the low wage in the first two years, especially when young people hear of much more generous wages their peers can earn working in mines, as contractors in the grazing industry or even just in casual employment. And, of course, the lure to the coast is a strong attraction, as there are broad recreational choices.

The Australian government has recently highlighted the shortage of skilled workers, with a plan to introduce 24 Australian technical colleges in areas across Australia over the next few years. The government's aim is to get more young Australians into traditional trades and provide them with this choice in years 11 and 12. However, these colleges will have no significant benefits to isolated families if there are no residential facilities attached to the colleges. Families must have their school aged children board in a safe, supervised facility with duty-of-care accreditation.

ICPA New South Wales had major input into the inquiry into Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture in 2004. This college is now called Murrumbidgee Rural Skills Centre. There were six recommendations from the New South Wales Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5. These were released on 21 October 2004. The most important one for ICPA was:

That the Department explore with other agencies innovative ways by which the residential facilities at the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture can be reopened, recognising that residential facilities are essential for isolated students ...

ICPA has been lobbying governments and departments to establish a senior residential at Murrumbidgee Rural Skills Centre, to be administered by the Department of Education and Training and closely modelled on the Western Australian colleges of agriculture for years 11 and 12. It is hoped that the proposed college will offer skills based training in agriculture and related trades for students from isolated areas.

This submission calls for the reopening of the full-time residential facilities at Murrumbidgee Rural Skills Centre to accommodate senior high school students who wish to pursue a career in agriculture and related industries and who do not wish to continue with the traditional school curriculum. The curriculum would see the students graduate at the end of year 12 with HSC equivalent English and maths, and a certificate III level of competency in agriculture modules of sheep and wool production; beef; dairy; cattle production; grain production, both dry land and irrigation; pasture management; and horticulture—to name but a few. They would also obtain

occupational health and safety competencies in the operation of chainsaws, all terrain vehicles, motorbikes, tractors, four-wheel drives et cetera that would equip them for any job in the pastoral industry.

We feel the terms of reference for this inquiry go beyond the scope of ICPA's expertise. However, the focus of ICPA has always been access to education, as access is a limiting factor in rural and isolated communities. For the purposes of this inquiry access needs to be addressed in the form of accommodation, as most students or trainees will be too far away for daily commuting and/or will not be old enough to hold a driver's licence. Like other trades, agriculture is facing a dearth in young skilled people wishing to leave school and gain employment.

The fear of prosecution under the OH&S legislation is another factor that prohibits this employment. If the employee had already been trained to a certificate III level of competency and had been trained in the use of basic equipment and basic skills then employers would feel less threatened. The school leaver would also have confidence in his or her ability to do the job.

ICPA New South Wales believes that this is a very practical and innovative use of the empty facility located at Yanco and would give students the opportunity to further their knowledge and skills in an industry that will be their career and where traditional schooling has ceased to be relevant to them. The new-look Murrumbidgee Rural Skills Centre provides a secure environment for this to happen. ICPA New South Wales suggests that only the Australian government can make this happen.

CHAIR—Do you want to make a contribution, Mr Dunlop?

Mr Dunlop—No.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Sue. It is very important from this committee's point of view that we hear these sorts of issues from the community. I am well aware of the Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture's problems. As you know, I am not far from it and it disappoints me that a college of that background that has made a significant contribution to agriculture over the years has been placed in the position that it has been placed in. However, that is a decision outside our control. It is purely and simply a state government issue. When you talk about joint funding in the proposals that you put forward, what sort of joint funding are you looking at? Are you looking at an overall package of funding that is broken up in separate ways; and, if so, how would you describe the way that funding would occur?

Mr Dunlop—We have been lobbying our state government for this funding, and they have said that there is no money in the budget, that they are broke. Minister Carmel Tebbutt and Minister Ian McDonald asked me to ask the federal government for funds. That is why we have come to you.

Mr TUCKEY—An often repeated phrase, I might add.

Mr Dunlop—So we are at a standstill. We have worked so hard on this, and we hold the student funds in trust until it reopens for the full-time residential. We put this submission at the same time as the Australian government were thinking about Australian technical colleges. We

did not know what they were talking about. This is really a similar model to a technical college, so we were hoping for some federal assistance.

Mr TUCKEY—I am the member whose electorate covers all those agriculture schools in WA. They are run by a board. I do not know what the facilities at Murrumbidgee are like, but the schools in WA have a couple of thousand acres of land and the machinery companies virtually give them or loan them brand new machinery. They have quite significant revenue. Does this school have a curtilage, does it have land around it that can be farmed?

Mr Dunlop—Yes, there is a certain acreage there.

Mr TUCKEY—It strikes me that if the state government was prepared to gift this property—I have not seen it—to your board you could then be a private school and entitled to all the funding that is now available to private schools. This is just an observation. I do not believe the Commonwealth would break its fundamental arrangements and send you some money as a state government school because of the precedent it would establish.

CHAIR—It is a cost shifting exercise which is being carried out by the states right around Australia.

Mr TUCKEY—If they gifted you the property, okay, there would be fees involved but the kids pay fees in WA to go to those schools. They do not get there for nothing. It might be a model worth pursuing. I know you have come here to tell us your problem, but it strikes me that if it were a private school they could give you a 99-year lease on the buildings and whatever. If they were good hearted, they might do them up for you. There are capital grants, there are very substantial grants and all that under that scheme.

Mr Dunlop—In its original condition before it closed the federal government used to fund so much to the college under grants. Since it has ceased those grants have stopped.

Mr MICHAEL FERGUSON—The federal government provides grants, capital improvement grants, to government and non-government schools around Australia.

Mr WINDSOR—It wasn't a school, was it? I think you had better explain that.

Mrs Gordon—Traditionally, it has not been under the department of education, it has been under the department of agriculture as an ag college, for post school students.

Mr TUCKEY—What sort of money do you believe—

CHAIR—That is what I was getting to when I asked the question.

Mrs Gordon—What is it worth?

Mr Dunlop—There are 100 full brick accommodation rooms there so that is not going to cost—

Mr ADAMS—Don't worry about the capital. What does it cost to run a school? Have you done any figures?

Mrs Gordon—I did a few basic figures based on some teachers and some supervisory staff and I came up with a couple of million dollars as an annual budget.

Mr TUCKEY—I have schools in my electorate, Christian schools and all sorts with 20 or 30 pupils funded under the private school criteria. You have recurrent funding for each student and capital funds available. I know some of those private schools have got some fairly hefty fees but a lot of the Christian schools and that have not and they still survive. If you had the addition of some revenue off the farm because you do not have to buy the headers and everything, if you have a decent lot of students, the John Deeres and that of this world hand them over.

CHAIR—Has the issue that Mr Tuckey has raised cropped up amongst the board or the concerned people that were there about the government handing over the college to a board and then the board seeking funds similar to the funds that Mr Tuckey has referred to?

Mr Dunlop—No, because we still want it to remain under the Department of Primary Industries and we were just having a sideline of the Department of Education and Training taking responsibility for the accommodation.

Mr TUCKEY—How do you have a school if they are there? Do they have research facilities or something there?

Mr Dunlop—There are research facilities. It is a very sustainable building. It is first-class accommodation and all the tutors are nationally accredited for all the short courses. As far as the costing goes, they are employing half-a-dozen full-time tutors there and the other tutors come in on a casual basis.

Mr TUCKEY—Have they got people moving into that accommodation for that course and moving out again? If so, where would your students go?

Mr Dunlop—There are 100 spare rooms available there. They have church groups coming in and they do not stay in those facilities. They have motel accommodation also for the short course program but these 100 rooms are sitting there with no-one using them.

Mr ADAMS—I think that Mr Tuckey has put up some good ideas. I do not necessarily want to get bogged down on this one issue. We are dealing with broader issues. Changes have taken place and this committee has been hearing a considerable amount about that. Mr Tuckey has put up some ideas regarding needing a business plan of where you want to go. Perhaps there is a group there that wants to take this over. But I would rather move on to a broader picture.

Mr WINDSOR—Following on from that, and so that we have got some clear-cut definitions in place, are you essentially arguing for a years 11 and 12 agricultural college?

Mrs Gordon—Correct.

Mr WINDSOR—You might be able to help us. Could that fit the definition of a school? It is not going to be a normal, HSC years 11 and 12 college; it is going to be for a younger age group, learning about four-wheel drives and a whole range of other associated agricultural things.

Mr TUCKEY—But they do their standard TEE subjects—the basic subjects.

Mr WINDSOR—I do not think that is the proposal. That is the point I am making.

Mrs Gordon—We would certainly want them to have HSC English and maths; they would do those two core subjects. The other ones would be more agriculture related things that you could go to TAFE and do. There are courses written—

Mr TUCKEY—I do not think you would be ineligible on the grounds of the curriculum, as long as it had some of those standard subjects in it. I refer to the ones in my electorate. Of course, the kids get up at six o'clock in the morning. There is quite an intake now of kids from the Perth metropolitan area. Some of the girls get shearing tickets. You should see some of the beautiful carpentry and mechanical work they do. It is all part of the curriculum. When they come out of there, some of them go down to Muresk—which is the tertiary college—and then start to do agricultural business diplomas and degrees. They come out with sufficient TEE marks to do that if they want to. That model is a state school in WA.

Mrs Gordon—I know. It is an excellent model. A couple of our members went to visit Cunderdin and they were just blown away with what the kids were doing there. The excellent thing about it was that there was 100 per cent take-up of those students—to the university, into employment or into an apprenticeship.

CHAIR—On that note, are you aware of the percentage of isolated students who cannot access adequate education in years 11 and 12? Are you sure, on that basis, that you would be able to fill the vacant rooms that you have there with sufficient numbers?

Mr Dunlop—Since the closure of Murrumbidgee College for full-time residential study, only one student out of 39 has transferred to Tocal. The others did not have access to Tocal because of the distance. Tocal is 15 kilometres out of Maitland, so it was not appropriate for school-age children who did not have licences; they could not access it. ICPA New South Wales has put a survey out. We have had 50 responses to that survey and they were very positive.

CHAIR—You have a market there to tap into, so you think you are pretty right?

Mrs Gordon—That is right.

Mr TUCKEY—The one at Narrogin has a deal with the Farm Machinery Dealers Association and they have a big course training mechanics. So the sky is the limit under that model, with each having different responsibilities. The one at Denmark used to do a bit of dairying; they were more focused. You could use the broad model but maybe seek federal funding under the private schools issue. That might mean that you would have to have some lease deal over what is necessary. If you were then to hire teachers from the agriculture department as part of your business plan, I could not see that that would be seen as cost-shifting.

The government is very sensitive in education and these other areas. It has its programs. If they were prepared to give you a tick as a technical college—remembering that they are probably all allocated—there could be a combined opportunity there, although I am not sure what it is. The business community could be part of that or it could be privately run. But I can see no reason, in principle, why it could not be run, as I say, as a ‘private school’.

Mr WINDSOR—Perhaps, Chair, there is another avenue there as well, which is running parallel. There will be more tech colleges, and they do run in conjunction with private enterprise and the community. Maybe there is an avenue that you could go down, too, with a year 11 and a year 12 skills based tech college.

Mr TUCKEY—Usually, people come here to tell us how they run something—you are certainly identifying a need—but it is seldom as specific as: ‘We want a school here.’ Part of our job might be to make a decision that we should ask the minister for education to have a special interview with you people to discuss what the options are under federal funding, if you would be willing.

Mr Dunlop—I had a long meeting with Minister Hardgrave yesterday about Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture.

CHAIR—What was his response?

Mr Dunlop—We had to write a letter stating what we were offering.

Mr TUCKEY—I think the minister for education is your better option. Mr Hardgrave deals with training. I do not know how much money he has, but he will tell you. The WA Agricultural College is half private. It is funded by the WA education department, but it has a board. It has separate revenues. Its farm is quite big and it sells cattle. It wins prizes at the show; it does all sorts of things. It does not make an overall profit on the whole curricula, but it has significant revenue.

Mr SECKER—It covers some of their costs.

Mr TUCKEY—Yes. I cannot see why you could not design a model that would attract available funding.

Mr ADAMS—What do you think about that?

Mrs Gordon—It sounds like a lot of work.

Mr Dunlop—I am well aware of Western Australia’s funding because we have had a lot of information from their DET.

Mr WINDSOR—What about South Australia? Urrbrae and Lucindale are very much agricultural high schools. I think the only other subject they do is English.

Mr SECKER—Agricultural stuff, which is welding, mechanics, as well as sheep, cattle and cropping.

Mr WINDSOR—Who advanced that?

Mr SECKER—It is an interesting set-up. Urrbrae was set up under a bequeath from PJ Waite to the university, but it is now funded by the state. The land was given by P J Waite, but it is funded by the state. They cover some of their costs, as Wilson was saying, from their activities. They have horticulture—a little bit of everything. Lucindale, though, is totally funded by the state and that is mixed in with a high school—as is Urrbrae for that matter—and it is a very similar model, based on the grants and it is growing. It has on-site places where about 20 kids can stay.

Mr ADAMS—I understand that some of the isolated children need accommodation, but why isn't it happening in Murrumbidgee now?

Mr Dunlop—Because our state government is broke.

Mr ADAMS—They are not funding you? There is a lot of pushing and shoving going on in this area, and there are a lot of changes taking place in the politics of this area of training and whatever in Australia. I am not from New South Wales, so I do not exactly understand, but I take it you are not being funded there for years 11 and 12 at present. Is my understanding correct?

Mrs Gordon—There is absolutely nothing there. It was a college where students went—it was post school—and they did a pastoral property management course. Then they closed it down, citing that there were insufficient numbers to keep it going.

Mr ADAMS—There was a state government TAFE fee for that, the same as there is for everyone else?

Mrs Gordon—There would have been a fee—for accommodation and that sort of thing—to attend the college. This is just a proposal that we came up with to utilise the facilities.

Mr ADAMS—You need a business plan. I agree with Wilson that the federal government has money and you can go and ask for it.

CHAIR—Can you get a business plan put together along the lines that we just mentioned? There seems to be a problem about that proposal. What is the problem?

Mr Dunlop—ICPA is a voluntary organisation. We will lobby a government. In the New South Wales inquiry we were asked to do a prospectus, but we feel that that is really the responsibility of the Department of Primary Industries and the Department of Education and Training.

Mr ADAMS—I do not think they are going to do it, though.

CHAIR—No. I sympathise with the position you are in. But whilst you are in that position there is absolutely no way in the world you are going to get any funding from the federal government, because the federal government will just see it as a cost shifting exercise. The state government, no deference to my colleague on my left, is going through a cost cutting exercise. It is cutting money to organisations like the Murrumbidgee agricultural college because it is easy

to do because it is in a less populated area and there is not much noise coming from it. The bottom line is that nothing will change the attitude of the federal government unless the New South Wales state government lives up to its obligations to continue to fund the infrastructure that is there and the administrative side. Then we then get back to the original point.

Mr ADAMS—In response to that, I think the New South Wales government is facing some of the changes that are facing regional Australia and dealing with some of those issues while having the changing nature of training in regional Australia to sort out.

Mr TUCKEY—The reality is that, whatever the political colour of state governments, their common response to everybody that seeks help is, ‘Go and get some money from the Commonwealth and we’ll see what we can do.’ Private schools are virtually the responsibility of the Commonwealth. There is a very minimal contribution from the states. That is why, if you want to talk to the Commonwealth, direct your talk to where the money is. Creating new money is a long-term project.

Mr ADAMS—You have to get a licence.

Mr TUCKEY—Assessing an existing program is much easier. Might I add, in terms of your overall concerns, and admittedly they are both ‘government’—in inverted commas—I now have in some of my towns the ag colleges, Morawa, for instance, and the high schools swapping students on certain courses, to their mutual benefit. Instead of having 10 kids in an English class here and 10 kids there, ag kids go over to the high school for English or maths periods and some of the high school kids go over to the ag college and do carpentry. If they do not have big numbers in the high school—and, in my electorate they often do not—that makes the numbers more viable for the high school. You get the interaction as part of the deal. That certainly would reduce your costs in certain areas. All those are options. My strong thought is that you need to talk to the education people about a private school with the facilities, for which you pay peppercorn rent to the state. They are there and they obviously will deteriorate through lack of use.

Mr ADAMS—Do you know how many isolated students that get to year and 11 and 12 cannot get—

CHAIR—I basically asked that question.

Mr ADAMS—training? Do you have any figures in relation to that for the New South Wales? How many isolated kids, who I understand you will be dealing with, want to finish their education and cannot do years 11 and 12? Do you have any figures?

Mrs Gordon—I have not got any figures; they are probably available. New South Wales have what are called ‘access schools’. If you are not going away to board, you can do year 11 and 12; but, more often than not, there is no face-to-face teacher there. So it is basically done by correspondence in the school system.

Mr Dunlop—There are only 25 access schools in New South Wales, and the majority of those have only one or two students doing year 11 and 12.

Mr ADAMS—What about VET programs?

Mrs Gordon—All the high schools offer the VET program. I think the emphasis in a lot of the regional high schools is on the VET courses as opposed to the traditional sorts of subjects that will lead kids to university. Again, a lot of those are by distance education as well.

Mr ADAMS—How many isolated students return to their region when they finish years 11 and 12 or university?

Mr Dunlop—We quoted in our submission that 85 per cent of teachers who have experienced a rural based schooling stay in the rural community, so we can relate that back to students.

Mr ADAMS—Mr Dunlop, to tell you the truth, that is playing with words. Do 85 per cent of students who come from isolated areas go back to those areas when they finish their education at a university, TAFE college or wherever? Can you give me those figures? I am about what is true; I am not about playing with words. We know that professionals who come from rural areas will go to a rural area more easily than someone who was born and bred in the city.

Mrs Gordon—They are certainly more inclined to, but I have also heard statistics—which I do not have at my fingertips—that a lot depends on the partner they find.

Mr TUCKEY—I do not think there is any doubt about that. A new regional campus in my electorate held its first graduation the other night, and 60 per cent of those graduating in nursing courses were mature age students. Why? They were women who were married at probably 19 or 20, who had a family and who in no way could go to Perth to pursue a tertiary education. Now that there is a tertiary institution in their town, they have. They have typically taken courses in an area, say, that they can use to get work at the local hospital. We have a program for doctors to do their internship and registrarship in the country. The first experience I had of that situation in my electorate involved a lass who had gone there as an intern and married the local farmer. I guess we have a doctor for a pretty long period of time! That is historically what happens, if you can get the people out there or give them those opportunities. Anyhow, you have said it.

As to the point about attendance, I would say that 20 to 30 per cent of students graduating from the agricultural colleges that I know about are sourced from the metropolitan area. The parents pay to send them there. The kids reckon it is great.

Mr WINDSOR—I would encourage you to take up the point that Mr Tuckey made about talking to someone in the education area. Surely this committee could help there. I know the answer to the question I am about to ask, but I think we need to put in on the record. Why can't schools like Farrer and Yanco—which are in New South Wales, for the benefit of the other members—provide the sort of education that you are talking about?

Mrs Gordon—To start with, they are full. Plus, like a lot of schools, they get caught up in the TER hype and getting kids off to university. So they are focusing on getting the kids to do all the top-level subjects and they are not encouraging them to do the more VET type courses. They advertise that 60 or 80 per cent of their students go off to university. That is part of their advertising ploy.

Part of this plan was to pull the kids out. Take Yanco Agricultural High School, which is across the road from Murrumbidgee. Its principal said he could send 10 or 15 across the road straightaway, which would then free up space to bring in the kids who did want to go on to university. So he could bring them in and then the ones who want to pursue a more veterinary type of course could go across the road to Murrumbidgee and pursue that.

Mr TUCKEY—That is the way it works.

Mr Dunlop—It does keep the family unit together. If you have got three or four students with two wanting to pursue a curriculum and go to university, they can attend Yanco Agricultural High School and the other siblings can attend the Murrumbidgee Rural Skills Centre.

Mr TUCKEY—They are a great earner for the local community too. There are the jobs. Once you have got residential colleges, you have got to have cooks and all those sorts of people.

Mrs Gordon—That is right. It is security too. The kids could also leave school and just go to TAFE, but where are they going to live? Some of them are only 16 or 17, they do not have a licence and their parents are wanting a secure environment.

CHAIR—So the point that you are making is that there is a resource that you can tap into but, because of the constraints on you through a lack of finance or whatever, you cannot take advantage of that. So it is depriving young people in years 11 and 12 of the opportunity to have an education that will help them keep the skills in rural and regional Australia alive and, more importantly, help them take skills out there and earn a living from them.

Mrs Gordon—Absolutely, and they can feel as though they are getting on with their lives as opposed to wasting time at school.

CHAIR—The suggestion that was made by Mr Tuckey at the outset—and we all seemed to agree on it—is that you need to talk to somebody in the education department to see whether anything that they have got can fit into what you are proposing. But I do believe you should think very seriously about getting the facilities off the state government at a peppercorn rent under the auspices of a board of directors running the facility for you. I think that he is quite right: there are significant amounts of grant money out there that, with a mix of private money, can assist you to run the facility—without the fear of being in the position that you are in now—and fulfil the objectives of the reason for your coming here.

Mr TUCKEY—If Mrs Gordon and Mr Dunlop are willing, we could make some representations to the minister.

CHAIR—Yes, we would be happy to do that.

Mr TUCKEY—I think what you really want is a senior officer of the department to come out there—

CHAIR—and talk to you—

Mr TUCKEY—with a bit of encouragement and not with a negative attitude. If you have got the capacity to run a school—and I do not think we have quotas on private schools—there is a range of financial assistance that you are entitled to—and we generally provide it.

Mr Dunlop—The New South Wales Department of Primary Industries are willing to have a roundtable discussion with the federal government.

Mr WINDSOR—I bet they are!

Mr TUCKEY—But you have got to realise that this idea of ‘please send money’ will not work, whereas if you have an independent board you then become an independent school.

CHAIR—You have got to create the trigger that will take the politics out of the problem that you have got. That is why the suggestion put forward at the outset by Mr Tuckey has got a great deal of commonsense attached to it, because if you undertake to set up a board under the umbrella of the suggestions made then you will move away from the politics. The reality is that the cost-shifting exercise does not gel well with the Commonwealth. But if the state government recognise the fact that they cannot for whatever reason or do not intend to for whatever reason continue to fund you to keep going, then they have to be reasonable in terms of complying with a reasonable request from you to take the property off them at a peppercorn rent, put a board of management in there and apply for funding elsewhere.

Mr FORREST—There is a similar situation in Victoria with the wholesale closure of seven campuses. That is probably one of the reasons why I fought so hard to get this inquiry. We are reeling from the repercussions of that, but one outcome that has been quite encouraging is the involvement of industry. Particular regions have different local industries. There is dairying in one area, but at Longerenong, which is the college I am concerned about, it is broad grain agriculture. Some ownership by the industry is the key to access to some real funding. It is another way to link in with what Wilson Tuckey has suggested, and I would encourage you to explore that.

Mrs Gordon—Last year I rang Longerenong College and spoke to the principal. They are at some advantage in that they are already under the auspices of Education. I have not spoken to them for about six months, but they were trying to put forward a proposal exactly the same as what we are proposing for Murrumbidgee College, which is to take in year 11 and year 12 students. They were working together with the local high school as well to get students across and swapping over. They could do the traditional subjects at the high school and the agriculture subjects out at Longerenong. It sounded very workable.

Mr TUCKEY—That is what is happening in my electorate now because of the declining population. But you have the residential facility and you will find that kids will travel quite some distance if the courses are right. Again, taking John’s point that I mentioned earlier, you have a farm machinery dealers association in both your region and your state and, if you ask them if they want to sponsor a segment of that, they might pay the wages for a mechanic or something, or part thereof. So you have all sorts of options, which are all evident in the schools in Western Australia. While the local farmers do not fight to get on the board, it is quite prestigious to be on the board of one of the colleges there. They take the board interests, but of course you employ a principal—someone has to run a budget, employ staff and so on.

Mr FORREST—The real benefit is that the outcome is trained youngsters that the industry needs. Industry constantly complains that they have never driven a tractor or shorn a sheep. The involvement of industry gives them the right to manage a bit of the curriculum.

Mr TUCKEY—The easiest way to get Commonwealth money is to have an independent school.

Mr Dunlop—With the support of the local industry around the Leeton area I was on a working party with Kay Hull for the TAFE colleges. All the Riverina were supporting the proposal.

Mr FORREST—You have a wealth of options—rice, horticulture.

CHAIR—Even if you go down the independent schools path, there is nothing to stop private enterprise and the ag industry from making a donation to help.

Mr TUCKEY—It is no different from the church raising independent money and giving it to a school: it is an independent school and we pay them so much per student. Since the election, in my electorate I have seen a whole school of 500 or 600 kids created, primarily without capital funding. It happens to be an Anglican school. It does not have to be religious, but it has to be an independent school. You should see some of the buildings they have put up. They may have sourced separate funding into the bargain, but we make very substantial capital grants—I have brass plates all over the place!

Mr WINDSOR—You've got your patron!

Mr TUCKEY—That is the way it works.

Mr Dunlop—If there is a board and we are renting the accommodation facility from the department of primary industries, what position does that put us in for federal funding?

Mr TUCKEY—No problem. The school I just mentioned started off by renting an old Catholic school. The Catholics had amalgamated their girls school and their boys schools into a single school. They rented that, and that is where they were operating from. Then they started to get capital grants and they built a Taj Mahal.

Mr WINDSOR—Is it fair to say that there is nowhere in New South Wales that actually delivers what you are talking about? I cannot think of anywhere.

Mr Dunlop—Tocal is full so there is nowhere else in New South Wales.

Mr FORREST—Where is Tocal?

Mrs Gordon—It is up around the Newcastle and Maitland area.

Mr Dunlop—It is 15 kilometres from Maitland.

CHAIR—So there is a window of opportunity obviously there, which I alluded to before, in terms of you identifying the resource. All you need to do now is to have a look at what is being suggested. We will certainly talk to the appropriate people about your problem and see what we can do to get somebody to talk to you. Thank you for coming in today. We as a committee, if I can speak for my parliamentary colleagues, wish you well because it is important to ensure that our young people stay where they are and do not continue to haemorrhage to the eastern seaboard. We trust that the information that has been given to you today has been sound advice; I will not say from some very learned, mature members of parliament who have seen a lot of things happen in their time but it has been sound advice from all of the members here. I think you should very seriously consider it. I thank you for coming here today. Have we got a copy of that particular document? Is that relevant to what you have been talking about?

Mrs Gordon—The document I just read from?

CHAIR—No, the brochure.

Mrs Gordon—You may have that.

CHAIR—That might be helpful to the committee. If you would like to table that we will receive it. Can I ask the committee to resolve that submission No. 106 be accepted as evidence and authorised for publication?

Mr TUCKEY—I so move.

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

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

That this committee authorises publication of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 5.52 pm