Workforce North

A submission to the

Queensland Skills and Training Taskforce

5th September 2012
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Background of FNQ

The Far North Queensland (FNQ) region is a diverse and geographically dispersed region incorporating the Cairns, Cassowary Coast, Tablelands Regional, Yarrabah Aboriginal Shire Council local government areas, the Cook Shire Council, the Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council, and the Torres Strait Shire and Torres Strait Islands. The FNQ region also includes the Cape York Peninsular communities of Aurukun, Hope Vale, Kowanyama, Lockhart River, Mapoon, Napranum, Pormpuraaw, Wujal Wujal Aboriginal Shire Councils and the township of Weipa.

Population

The total population of the FNQ region was estimated at 271,471 as at 30 June 2010 or 6.01 per cent of the Queensland population. Of the FNQ population:

- 212,833 or approximately 78 per cent is over 15 years of age and deemed of working age
- Indigenous Australians make up 14.6 per cent of the region’s population, compared with a 3.6 per cent Indigenous population across Queensland. 58.7 per cent of the Indigenous population of the region are based in the sub-regions of Cairns, the Cassowary Coast and the Tablelands areas with a further 6.3 per cent of the Indigenous community in close proximity to these local government areas at Yarrabah.

It is estimated that the FNQ population will grow to 323,452 by 2021 and further to 368,379 in 2031.¹

Employment and Labour Market Participation:

At the end of May 2012 the largest employing sectors in Far North Queensland were Retail, Health Care and Social Assistance, Construction, Tourism and Hospitality, Agriculture and Public Administration and Safety. Over the last five years the top five growth areas have been Health Care and Social Assistance, Agriculture, Tourism and Hospitality, Administration and Support Services and Utilities (refer to Appendix 2 for full details).

Within the sub-regions of FNQ employment trends vary considerably, for example the top five employing sectors in order of largest to smaller on the Cassowary Coast are Agriculture, Retail, Manufacturing, Construction, and Health Care and Social Assistance (HC&SA).

Labour market conditions remain subdued in FNQ, despite a fairly steady decrease in the unemployment rate since June 2009.

- In July 2012, the unemployment rate for FNQ stood at 8.5 per cent, well above the comparable Queensland average rate of 5.6 per cent, averaged over 12 months.
- The youth unemployment rate in FNQ stood at 12.2 per cent of the civilian population in July 2012, significantly above the comparable Queensland average rate of 5.8 per cent. The fulltime teenage unemployment rate at 38 per cent gives an indication of the challenge for 15 – 19 year olds in the FNQ labour pool who are unskilled.²
- The Indigenous unemployment for FNQ is 15.1 per cent, marginally below the 15.6 per cent for Australia.

¹ OESR Regional profiles accessed August 2012
² DEEWR Labour Market Information Portal accessed August 2012
Although the region’s average duration of unemployment is 27 weeks (below the 37 weeks average for Australia), the region has recorded a 72.9 per cent increase in the number of unemployment benefit recipients since September 2008, well above the average increase for Australia as a whole (37.5 per cent)\(^3\).

In addition, it must be recognised that unemployment rates within FNQ sub-regions and communities vary widely and ranged up to 21 per cent in Hope Vale in September 2011 (refer Appendix 3).

The employment participation rate for the FNQ region was 66.5 per cent averaged for the 12 months to July 2012 compared with 69 per cent the previous year. Historically though, FNQ has had a consistently higher than state (with the exception of 2006) average participation rates over the last ten years.

Refer to Appendix 3 for further details of the FNQ population by location, age, Indigenous status and unemployment rate.

**Education**

Educational achievement levels vary widely across Regional Council, Cape Community and Torres Straits areas. As would be expected in the region’s major centre, Cairns generally has a higher educational achievement rate which lifts the overall percentages for the region.

Overall in terms of skills and education levels, the FNQ region has:
- a lower than state average percentage of the working age population who have achieved Year 12 or equivalent;
- a lower than state average achievement of bachelor degrees or higher; and
- a higher than state average achievement in certificate-level qualifications, indicating a focus on entry to industry-level qualifications\(^4\).

Factors that influence education participation and achievement for people in sub regions such as the Cassowary Coast, Tablelands and Yarrabah include the lack of regular public transport across the Tablelands area and between council areas and the need to relocate to access tertiary education opportunities.

**Vocational Training**

Within the FNQ region between 2007/08 to the 2011/12 year the following industry sectors have attracted the largest numbers of students. In descending order the top ten are: Health, Business, Construction, Tourism and Hospitality, Manufacturing, Primary Industry, Retail, Mining, Industries and Transport sectors (DET, Jan 2012).

To further understand the region covered by Workforce North we refer the Taskforce to:

\(^3\) DEEWR Administrative data (bluebook database).

Key Labour Force Statistics:

- Total Labour Force – 146 700\(^5\)
- Post school qualification 51% (Qld 50.4%)\(^6\)
- Qualification Levels:
  - Certificate I to IV 38% (Qld 35.5%)
  - Diploma & Advanced Diploma 11.9%
  - Bachelor Degree or higher 19.4%

During the development of the FNQ Industry Workforce Development group, employers acknowledged the value of training/up-skilling new and existing staff, particularly as a retention strategy in the current competitive labour market. Employers also raised a number of concerns with the training system, these included:

- a lack of connection between training investment and industry training needs, for example the preference for skills sets rather than qualifications in some occupations;
- difficulty accessing funding support for training existing workers; and
- the importance of flexibility in training delivery, industry experience opportunities and ensuring consistency of assessment.

Consultation also identified a range of issues impacting on the availability of a skilled workforce including:

- an ageing workforce particularly in Agriculture, Road Transport, Health and Civil Construction
- a downturn in apprenticeship commencements
- poor attitude and work ethic of jobseekers, and
- difficulties attracting and retaining employees.

In the development of this response these factors have been reiterated and expanded on with issues and opportunities for improvement identified across the spectrum of vocational education and training from youth to older applicants.

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\(^5\) ABS Regional Labour Force Data July 2012
\(^6\) ABS Census 2006
FNQ Employer and Key Stakeholder Context:

FNQ industries within our region interact across the entire VET sector – from schools to mature aged workers, public and private RTOs and with numerous peak bodies and advisory groups.

To ensure our competitiveness, our industries are focused on productivity. We are strongly supportive of VET delivery that provides skills and knowledge (competence) that adds value to our businesses. This may be in the form of single units of competency, skills sets or full qualifications (where these match industry/employer needs).

Due to our regional and remote locations, we often need staff with a broader range of skills and knowledge than those employed within larger organisations and centres, or defined by a single qualification and/or training package, for example rural industries.

We have a demonstrated willingness to continually train our staff to meet best practice within our respective sectors. We fully understand the workplace costs of training undertaking significant training in-house (both formal and informal) and externally. We are aware however that many businesses in this region are training and loosing staff due to the seasonal nature of work or to the resources sector on a regular basis, and that this cost is burdensome.

Overall employers support interaction with school students through school based work experience, traineeships and apprenticeships. However the quality of the interaction varies considerably dependant on the VET Coordination model within a particular school, and the results have been varied across industry sectors.

Within FNQ an Alliance of employment service providers can provide data on the numbers and types of roles recruiting to support targeted training.

As employers and key stakeholders in the Vocational Education and Training sector, we have identified the following issues and make the following recommendations:

**Priority 1 – The Interaction between Industry and the VET Sector**

**As Employers:**

a. We seek greater involvement in the design of our RTO’s training delivery and assessment including:
   - a focus on ‘on the job’ training and assessment. This includes the use of our equipment and facilities and the use of our own personnel in the delivery of training and assessment arrangements
   - VET scheduling that is more reflective of our operational needs and regional characteristics (i.e. the wet season, agricultural and tourism seasons)

b. We support, with employer input, Certificate II level training and training in skills sets as an entry point to employment for example in Welding.

c. We are often impacted by the region’s seasonal activities and would like to see training that is reflective (i.e. more training during low periods and less during peak periods).

d. We have experienced a reduction of commencements in apprenticeship/traineeships. Some employers have shown a preference for engaging mature age apprentices as opposed to school leavers while others are challenged to manage and train staff with the resources of a small business. (i.e. a lack of employer’s knowledge and skill). The personal development, mentoring and other management requirements of
apprentices and trainees are a challenge for small to medium enterprises without specific resources to undertake such activities.

e. For our region we agree with and support the findings of the Cassowary Coast Skills Survey undertaken in 2010 by the Cassowary Coast Regional Council and the Department of Education and Training, which identified the following preferences as ‘Skills Development Strategies’:
   - Localised, on-the-job training delivery
   - Training tailored to enterprise needs
   - Skills gap training to existing workers
   - Accreditation of employees existing skills, and
   - Online training delivery.

Our Schools:

a. We observe in students leaving school deficiencies in their:
   - language, literacy and numeracy skills, and
   - general employability skills and work readiness

b. We believe there is a ‘disconnect’ between industry and schools in terms of knowledge/awareness, work experience opportunities and career advice. We do however also note that there are cases of best practice occurring in our region.

c. We are aware of school students who have achieved a Certificate III qualification while at school being unemployable as they lack true workplace experience and are (as now qualified) ineligible for training funding with a new employer.

Individuals Entering the Workforce:

a. We observe that many new entrants:
   - lack general employability skills,
   - often demonstrate poor attitude to employment, and
   - have low work socialisation skills.

b. We observe that these attributes are more evident in certain demographics (i.e. Youth and Indigenous).

c. We feel that those who have disengaged from school or employment, and who are in need of training to re-engage, are not supported by the VET system which is now seeking higher qualifications which are potentially above their current ability.

d. We have experienced a reduction of apprenticeship/traineeship numbers within the region due partly we believe to the employee’s unreliability.

e. Low apprentice wages are affecting attractiveness and viability of an apprenticeship for those living away from home or able to take up work in the resources sector.

f. Lack of physical access (transport issues) to work and training environments also limit the viability of apprenticeships and traineeships in our region.

Our Recommendations to the Taskforce:

1. Improve careers advice from early high school. We would like to:
a. ensure there is a balance between the in school promotion of the University pathway and VET pathways, which better reflects the workforce needs of the region.
b. build the value of VET outcomes to students, parents and school staff including reinforcing the pathways from VET to higher education, business ownership or other sectors,
c. ensure those giving Career Advice in schools have current knowledge and experience of the sectors they are promoting i.e. what are the skills levels employers look for in new apprentices, and
d. ensure any VET Coordinator role within our schools is a dedicated person with relevant industry connections, experience and understanding; as opposed to a teacher who has not worked outside of the education system recently or also has classroom responsibilities.

2. Ensure that teachers have accurate information on regional industry skill needs and pathways to be well equipped to prepare students.

3. Improve school student access to work awareness/readiness skills training.

4. Provide pre-employment programs for those currently not participating in school or employment (disengaged):
   a. Provide a funding arrangement that would support low level qualifications (Certificate I or II) or skills sets for regionally identified, non-participating cohorts (i.e. Youth and Indigenous).
   b. Ensure such training leverages off actual local industry needs thereby ensuring true job outcomes and active participation (i.e. not directed to training in programs which are solely determined by the individual’s or training provider’s preference).
   c. Maintain a focus on Language, Literacy and Numeracy support in addition to skills training.

5. Funding of VET Training:
   a. We highly value Certificate II training and would like to see greater funding support for such programs when focused on industry needs as a pathway to employment and further training.
   b. We require greater flexibility in the funding of existing and older workers to retain or broaden their skills to meet current regional skills shortages (even if they have an existing qualification) or structural changes in our region’s economy.
   c. We would like to see the linking of the training agenda to regional economic strategies.
   d. We would like the Queensland VET system allowing our regional industries to have a say in the directing of existing VET funding towards our industry’s needs.
   e. We would like to see the TAFE producing graduates and delivering programs that are needed by the region and not just demanded by the students, preferred by the TAFE or peak industry bodies, many of which are disconnected with regional employers.
   f. Allow for the funding of multiple skills sets rather than full qualifications. Due to the high proportion of small to medium enterprises in our region many of our industries require staff to be skilled across several training packages however the current preference for fully qualifications does not allow for this limiting training support and employability.
6. Funding to the Region:
   a. We strongly support a methodology that enables our industries direct input into the allocation of our region’s public funding ensuring it is industry focused and not just individual or provider driven.
   b. Funding arrangements that enable a greater diversity of skills training including single units of competence, skills sets as well as full qualifications.

7. That apprentices/trainees and their employers are supported with mentoring and coaching resources to improve the reliability and resilience of the apprentice/trainee and capacity of the employer.

8. The FNQ Apprenticeship and Traineeship Taskforce have identified that while there is a range of mentoring resources available within the region they are not always aligned with individuals and employers mentoring needs.
Priority 2 - The Strategic Direction of TAFE:

We recognise that our local TAFE is unable to meet the entire needs of our region and we therefore interact with both public and private providers. Our selection of an RTO is based on the value the provider can bring to our business and/or clients.

We often witness a disconnect between the needs of our local industries and the programs and qualifications offered by our local TAFE. We have a general perception that our regional TAFE is bound by restraints (i.e. funding models) that result in it being inflexible to industry needs, slow to respond and overly bureaucratic.

We observe government infrastructure (trade training centres, schools and TAFE) being underutilised, for example outside of hours and during holiday breaks. We also question whether the co-location of TAFE with schools is enhancing or inhibiting the use of TAFE facilities and the expansion of TAFE delivery. We are advised that there is industry support for the Great Barrier Reef International Marine College to deliver more flexibly and responsive to industry and achieve greater commercial use of the facility. Under the current operational arrangements this is restricted.

We support the expansion of the use of ‘state of the art’ technologies in delivering training to smaller group numbers in communities outside of the main centres. We also support an improvement in the quality of distance/flexible/on-line training options for example by taking the trainer to the workplace via technology and complementing this by up-skilling workplace based supervisors as trainers. We also support in-house training delivery and assessment and combinations of on-the-job/in-house and TAFE based training.

As Employers:

a. Due often to our regional nature in which staff need cross skilling, we have an immediate need for increased flexibility in trade training to enable combined discipline training without the need to complete one discipline prior to the starting of the next.

b. We are often impacted by the region’s seasonal activities and would like to see training that is reflective of our needs (i.e. more training during the wet season when construction is reduced) and not those of the TAFE or its staff.

c. We would like to see the TAFE play a more active role in workforce development planning to assist us identify our learning needs. This would require the up-skilling of existing TAFE staff and greater flexibility.

d. We do not see significant use of technology in VET delivery and assessment. Such technology would assist with small group numbers; students located outside of the main centres and save travel time for VET personnel.

e. We have difficulty motivating staff to complete entry level training where content is out of date and demotivating for industry based students who must complete a Certificate III as the entry level qualification for example the Information, Communication and Technology sector.

f. The cost to employers of block training for apprentices and trainees away from home threatens the viability of job creation.

g. Where training programs have been developed by industry to meet industry needs, we would like to see a streamlined process to recognise the program and attracting appropriate funding.
Our Recommendations to the Taskforce:

1. That our regional industries have far greater say in the training offered and delivered by our regional TAFE based on industry's needs and not individual student desire or TAFE preference. This may need a change in funding models to the TAFE which:
   - could see an industry group being responsible for the allocation of a set percentage of a TAFE’s funds to directly target industry needs (i.e. by sector, by qualification level and skill set). The allocation could be determined by TAFE’s governing body, in consultation with the local employer advisory group and local TAFE,
   - can accommodate the delivery to either thin and/or expensive markets. We have often observed much needed programs cancelled in the past due to low numbers (which do not fit the current funding model). Low numbers are more a reflection of our dispersed population rather than a lack of need.

2. That public funding for foundation skills (pre-employment work readiness and social development) across Queensland should recognise local population characteristics. We believe local measures such as the unemployment level, number of jobless households and language, literacy and numeracy levels should all be considered if participation rates in any region are to improve.

3. That training is structured more around our operational situation (i.e. workplace based, seasonal) than funding models considerations.

4. That the turnaround time for updating and implementing training packages and learning resources be improved.

5. That consideration be given to restructuring the entry level training model. For example in the ICT industry is a full Certificate III required or simply specific skills set which are then built on by Industry Certification and workplace based training?

6. Recognise in funding priorities, the workforce needs and economic trends of our region and not just the national or state agenda.

7. Improve industry access to public RTO facilities for ‘just-in-time’ training needs by reducing operational constraints.

8. That system restraints be removed from the TAFE to encourage:
   - greater use of technology in delivery and assessment
   - the opening up of TAFE facilities to industry needs (i.e. hours of operation and holiday periods)
   - greater use of external facilities/sites linked with employers which assist in hands-on practical application of learning beyond apprenticeship model
   - financial models become more reflective of the region (i.e. small group numbers).

9. Provide a ‘one-stop shop’ for information about VET within the region, to be developed from the end users perspective, i.e. a potential student or business enquiry from outside the larger centres.

10. That market driven training should not result in a range of quality and that a regularly updated preferred provider list be made available by state government.

11. We support the model operating from Castaways resort at Mission Beach as a venue for sub-regional training in tourism and hospitality as a method of training and assessment that overcomes travel and accommodation costs for attendees.
Priority 3 - The Role and Function of Queensland’s VET Statutory Bodies:

Due primarily to our Far North Queensland location, our regional industries do not interact significantly with the two statutory TAFE’s or the other statutory VET bodies.

As Employers and Stakeholders:

a. We support stronger regionally based engagement between providers of VET and industry.

b. We support the recognition within the VET system that the funding model must have the flexibility to respond to regional industry/employer led VET training requirements as well as individual development.

Our Recommendations to the Taskforce:

1. That a Regional Industry Advisory Body comprising representation for both FNQ employers and a small proportion of Peak Body representatives be established to work with the body governing the delivery of VET funding in this region, to contribute to the direction of VET funding to meet regional needs.

2. Continue to provide funding that is open to a broader base of employees (i.e. existing workers, part-time, casual and seasonal) and a wider array of outcomes (i.e. skill sets). This would assist career development and therefore generate entry level positions at a greater frequency.

3. In any restructuring of funding, recognise the two elements that TAFE and others have previously provided and that these may need separate funding models:

   a. Training of vocational and trade skills, and

   b. Foundation skills for those that lack work readiness and experience which are the two highest barriers to participation in the workforce (i.e. youth and indigenous).

4. The maintaining of a Skills Queensland type body to ensure funding of industry driven training for employment programs.

5. Through Skills Queensland, or an equivalent:

   a. Provide funding for workforce development activities which are often the missing precursor to well-structured and valuable training (e.g. Skills Formation Strategies)

   b. Continue to communicate both national and state agendas to our region.
Additional Recommendations

1. We recommend for effective change to occur in the VET sector there needs to be greater involvement of people actually engaged in industry's frontline and not solely from Peak Bodies representing sectors. This could include membership on the Board of Skills Queensland, on the Queensland Skills and Training Taskforce or any party established to implement the Taskforce’s recommendations.

2. In the development of improved VET delivery strategies, consider that:
   - the range of environmental and demographic factors that influence the delivery and viability of training in communities of varying sizes and locations across the region, and ensuring training accessibility in smaller centres
   - the majority of businesses within this region are small businesses with less than 20 employees and often some distance from main training delivery centres such as Cairns or Townsville, and that small businesses have less resources and capacity to support training
   - training models that focus on larger scale businesses do not prepare jobseekers for the diverse often cross disciplinary skills sets required for employment in small regionally based businesses, and
   - due to the seasonality of work, training in skills sets and/or tailored qualifications that equip students to be multi-skilled and work across sectors will assist with the development of a flexible workforce and retention issues.

3. To build the capacity of regional areas, ensure rural/regional communities are well connected to the VET sector to respond to short, medium and longer-term demand thereby supporting economic resilience and innovation. Linking the training agenda to economic strategies should be a major priority

4. To build the capacity of small business in the region as a source of employment, develop training for small business creation, workforce management and training.
## Appendix 1. Parties to this Submission:

### FNQ Industry Workforce Development group

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<tr>
<td>Lloyd Everist</td>
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<td>Mal Roos</td>
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<td>Naomi Chapman</td>
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<td>Robert Friskin</td>
<td>Direct Employment Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steve Eaton</td>
<td>Cairns Accident Repair</td>
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<tr>
<td>Therese Muller</td>
<td>Break Thru People Solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Neville</td>
<td>Mission Beach Business &amp; Tourism Association</td>
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Appendix 2: FNQ Industry Sector Statistics

### Appendix 3. FNQ Population Statistics:

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 – 14 yrs.</td>
<td>15 – 24 yrs.</td>
<td>25 – 44 yrs.</td>
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<td>341</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cairns</td>
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<td>22 396</td>
<td>52 443</td>
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<td>Cassowary Coast</td>
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<td>Napranum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern Peninsula Area</td>
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<td>395</td>
<td>667</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pormpuraaw</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>68</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tablelands</td>
<td>9 146</td>
<td>5 187</td>
<td>10 835</td>
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<td>Torres (Shire)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*More Small Area Labour Markets Unemployment rates at September 2011:
- Cairns, Douglas 6.0%, plus 8 Cairns sub-divisions ranging from 5.1% to 10.5%
- Cassowary Coast, Cardwell 4.6%, Johnstone 9.0%
- Northern Peninsula Area, Bamaga 15.6%, Injino 15.6%, Seisa 15.4%, Umagico 15.7%
- Tablelands, Atherton 7.0%, Eacham 6.0%, Herberton 11.6%, Mareeba 11.5%