

Skills for Victoria's Growing Economy – Rural Considerations

Buloke Shire & North Central LLEN

June 2020



The North Central LLEN, together with Buloke Shire, welcome the opportunity to respond to the 'Skills for Victoria's Growing Economy' discussion paper. While the North Central LLEN has a target cohort of 0-21 years of age, Buloke Shire is interested in skills development from the perspective of all who live, learn, and earn in Buloke. Our two organisations collaborate frequently with each other where there is a focus on engagement in learning and improved life outcomes resulting in stronger, more vibrant, and viable communities into the future.

There are many opportunities for the State Government to invest in building stronger rural communities. Past investments into advocacy around this issue include the Rural Living Campaign where we believe rural communities "are worthy of a specific minimum level of services"; a critical service being access to education and skills training contributing to positive employment outcomes.

Our communities including business, industry and schools are pro-active. Through opportunities such as the Buloke Workforce Development and Training Report we have consulted, engaged, and collaborated to identify the barriers and the opportunities to address identified challenges in skilling our workforce with focused investment. Together with the rest of Victoria we know our challenges are now increased in the context of COVID-19.

We trust that our response to this discussion paper is considered in light of the comprehensive consultations and available evidence that is presented in the attached report as well as our comments in this response.



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What are the education and training needs for jobs in Victoria over the next ten years?

CHALLENGES

The biggest challenge for employers is finding workers to fill the available jobs in their businesses. The unemployment rate for the Buloke shire is 3.2% which is much lower than the broader Mallee region and the state at 4.2 % and 4.4 % respectively¹.

Students need a positive experience of quality vet provision and accessibility needs to start in secondary school where students and families understand the value of vocational education and feel confident in the pathway to further VET options in rural settings: this requires a culture / attitude shift in many schools, families and communities where VET is perceived as a lesser outcome.

Workforce challenges are accentuated by young people (and adults) leaving the region and relocating to urban centres to pursue further education, training rather than training locally and or transitioning from entry level jobs to skilled jobs due to the lack of education and training accessibility

Young people will be the most impacted by the economic impact of COVID- 19. Consideration of the need to develop skills to meet the post –COVID-19 emerging employment markets including the need for STEM to be incorporated into almost all new employment landscapes is challenging for rural communities and providers.

SOLUTIONS

- Education and training provision linking to available employment pathways, need to be accessible (including geographically) and affordable to residents of Buloke.
- An investment in education and training is required to meet current and projected employment demands, be available/accessible to students in Buloke, Loddon and Northern Grampians and include: Stem & Agriculture, Community Services, Hospitality and Tourism, Manufacturing
- Localised provision can be delivered at the North Central Trade Training Centre (NCTTTC) which can host face to face training in trades, agriculture, stem, allied health, and virtual learning for Buloke and the surrounding shires of Loddon and Northern Grampians.

- Community use of school buses and adult access to Cert II & III courses at the NCTTC requires innovative funding models and attention to legislative and bureaucratic hurdles that need to be overcome by state government
- Flexible VET delivery funding models that ensures equity through affordable access in thin markets and market failure areas
- A focused investment into rural careers education initiatives for young people- increasing the knowledge of parents, young people, and teachers to develop skills and a passion for the breadth and depth of new opportunities in emerging industries and employment opportunities.

¹ Pre- Covid- 19 data

What reforms are required to meet the skills and capability needs of industry, employers, government, and the community over the next decade?

CHALLENGES

Current funding models for education and training delivery including 'contestable markets' / Skills First and Free TAFE (and the previous TAFE Guarantee) have repeatedly and will continue to fail in Buloke Shire and other thin or 'market failure' areas where geography and transport are barriers to participation.

"Buloke is at significant risk of becoming disconnected from the tertiary education system including Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education. Employers are unsure of who to contact and engage with to meet their requirements. TAFEs who were previously active in the Buloke Shire have largely exited. Some private RTOs (located within and outside the broader Mallee region) have filled part of this gap but there are many needs that are not being met"²

The Local Government Act requires councils to "work in partnership with the Governments of Victoria and Australia in order to achieve the best outcomes for the local community" and to "improve the overall quality of life of the people in the municipal district." This responsibility is not being met by these partners under the current fiscal arrangements." [3] Access to education and training is missing in Buloke and skills development and employment needs to be viewed as essential to the 'quality of life' equation in rural communities.

SOLUTIONS

- Rural communities and rural education and training provision needs to be exempt from population-based funding models.
- A long term commitment (not one off funded grants) must be made by government to trial and fund models in partnership with the North Central Trade Training Centre, providers of training (none currently with a visible presence outside of secondary college provision e.g. TAFE or RTOs) and industry to create flexible and accessible training models for rural access: this is critical to the economic future of small rural communities. RSTF grants (now in recess) were one way we were investigating to

test and trial various options; however small communities cannot sustain testing models without assurances for on-going support until suitable/ sustainable models are agreed on for accessible provision.

- The Government must invest in innovative models that include an ‘equity and access’ provision for rural communities.

² Nous Report on the Buloke Shire Workforce Development and Training needs of Buloke Shire
<https://www.buloke.vic.gov.au/workforce-development-and-training-needs-in-buloke>

³ Rural Advocacy Strategy – Buloke Shire <https://www.buloke.vic.gov.au/rural-advocacy-strategy>

What reforms are required to build industry investment in skills and workforce development, including apprenticeships and traineeships?

What reforms are required to improve access to Higher Education and VET for students that are entering the workforce, and those seeking to reskill or upskill later in life, no matter their background?

CHALLENGES

Buloke Shire, local industry partners and the North Central LLEN supported by RDV and the Office of the Victorian Skills Commissioner have undertaken the work to identify the workforce development and training needs across the Buloke- resources are not available within existing stakeholder budgets (small rural) to coordinate and implement the 'evidence based' and agreed recommendations of this report.

Government together with peak industry bodies often invest in the *identification* of the challenges, but do not include resources for the **implementation** of the identified solutions. In the past, peak bodies have seldom invested in rural industry engagement with the exception of agriculture.

SOLUTIONS

- Fund the implementation of the Buloke Workforce Development plan. Align and coordinate all current funded government funded initiatives such as the Agriculture Workforce Plan to support implementation and identify and address

critical gaps in equity: where these already funded initiatives are not able to be implemented in rural settings, allow flexibility to ensure equity.

- Local and State Government lead by example and commit to a minimum level (pro-rata targets) employment of apprenticeships and trainees (5% minimum - 10%= good practice) and ensure local access to training for these employees.
- Government funded health services engage in pro-rata targets for trainees and apprenticeships, thus providing a pipeline of employment opportunities for employees who being already engaged in employment are likely to be willing to skill up (with organisational support and incentives) to meet the future workforce needs of the health sector.

What reforms are required to ensure relevant, high quality teaching and VET courses that produce job-ready graduates at all stages of their career?

CHALLENGES

Uniquely, small rural schools in the North Central region across three LGAs are currently pooling their Careers Education funds (DET) to partner with the North Central LLEN in providing expert careers advice with qualified careers practitioners to support students ,staff and parent awareness and access to all post school pathways⁴ : the challenge ahead is the financial viability of this model as school communities (enrolments decline) this would put rural young people back into a pathways support void creating further rural disadvantage

SOLUTIONS

- Fund the implementation of the Buloke Workforce Development plan. Align and coordinate all current funded government funded initiatives that can support its implementation and identify and address critical gaps in equity: where these already funded initiatives are not able to be implemented in rural settings, allow flexibility to ensure equity.
- Local and State Government lead by example and commit to a minimum level (pro-rata targets) employment of apprenticeships and trainees (5% minimum - 10%= good practice) and ensure local access to training for these employees.
- Government funded health services could also engage in pro-rata targets for trainees and apprenticeships, thus providing a pipeline of employment opportunities for employees who being already engaged in employment are likely to be willing to skill up (with organisational support and incentives) to meet the future workforce needs of the health sector

⁴ Careers Education Partnership – formerly known as MIPs
http://www.ncllen.org.au/uploads/9/4/0/9/94099509/mips_partnership_showcase.pdf

What reforms are required to improve pathways, and connections, between TAFE and other VET providers, adult and community education providers, universities and other non-university higher education providers, schools, and employers, so students can easily understand and navigate the post-secondary system and update their skills throughout their careers?

CHALLENGES

“TAFEs who were previously active in the Buloke Shire have largely exited. Some private RTOs (located within and outside the broader Mallee region) have filled part of this gap but there are many needs that are not being met”⁵

In addition to exiting the adult education provision space TAFE as providers as the RTOs the North Central Trade Training Centre (TTC) have also exited this space or are unaffordable in their provision having negative impacts including:

A significant impost on the management of the TTC having to negotiate and source multiple RTO's (often based on affordability rather than quality being the only deciding factor), this involves multiple contracts and relationships for small numbers of students

A loss of relationship with regional TAFEs, lessening the partnerships and confidence of local stakeholders including industry partners when looking to expand the offerings at the TTC to an adult market or co-design / innovate to meet employment and training needs locally e.g. in the health services sector

SOLUTIONS

- Incentives and initiatives provided to TAFEs that rely on contested markets and critical mass should not be supported in rural communities – TAFEs / RTO's should have geographic footprints in which the provision of education and training is not optional, but rather a requirement of their receipt of government funds (taxpayer dollars). This might include a provision of a minimum number of fixed priced subjects aligned to evidence-based skills shortage and employment data in specific LGA's.
- Reinstate a grants based program similar to RSTF– however a priority focus must be on provision in small rural communities: this would enable the development of stronger modes of delivery (including online, blended and the use of shared use of community resources) that can support small communities and those experiencing populations decline.

⁵ [HTTPS://WWW.BULOKE.VIC.GOV.AU/WORKFORCE-DEVELOPMENT-AND-TRAINING-NEEDS-IN-BULOKE](https://www.buloke.vic.gov.au/workforce-development-and-training-needs-in-buloke)

What reforms are required to improve the funding arrangements of Victoria's VET sector?

CHALLENGES

The RSTF grant was available to meet the needs of localised employers in regional Victoria and is available to training providers who hold a current Skills First VET funding contract. However, with the absence of TAFEs in the Buloke Shire, the fund is not currently able to be applied for / and or utilised to deliver training for Buloke's industry needs as it is only available to an established training provider or RTO. A coordination of resources is required to ensure this fund is being utilised and is working to deliver training for regional areas. This fund can be used to coordinate the delivery of training in-place, leveraging the facilities and resources already available in the shire. It should also be used to subsidise the additional out of pocket expenses employers incur due to the need for employees to travel for study.

SOLUTIONS

- Partner with neighbouring shires or learning networks to get the numbers to attract TAFEs to the area in order to overcome class sizing limits that prevent access and participation to training. Explore options to take training to individual employers where possible and blend online with face to face training.
- Reform requirements to meet eligibility for RSTF to enable isolated areas to provide opportunity for youth to access training.

For more information on this submission contact:

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