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Regional Skills Trends and Learning:

Training in relation to the growth of Health and Community Services employment

Report for Regional Australia Institute

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February 2020

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1   Introduction

Training for employment in the regions is a challenge. It is not clear how training programs underpin the take-up of jobs that are available or what are the most efficacious processes at work in regions. To provide an insight into these relationships, this report aims to explore how training may influence and even shape regional employment.

The 2018 work package provided an overview of the programs in place in the study regions that were connecting residents to employment opportunities. The 2018 RAI research program and *Diversity in Regional Growth and Development* (Toner and Douglas 2020) report found that employment growth in the regions was predominantly within the Health and Community Services sector. For this reason, this report focusses on how training delivery has responded to employment growth in this sector as an exemplar of broader processes that may be promoted.

1.1   Research Objectives

The objective of the research is to develop an understanding of the salient factors for success and failure in addressing unemployment and skills shortages in regional and remote areas. The 2018 research indicated that multiple programs have been initiated and are operating in the study areas. This report also provided insights into interactions between social and familial expectations, training providers and employers in connecting people to employment opportunities. In particular, the West and Northwest Tasmania research highlighted how aspirations need to be fostered and the employment opportunities made available by training need to be understood before successful transitions into new employment can be made (Barton *et al.* 2018).

This report addresses the following research question:

> How can regional workforce policy and education help meet the challenges of changing job trends and employment conditions?

To answer the question three sub-questions guide the research:

1. What training is offered and to whom?
2. How are program outcomes evaluated?
3. Where do the students end up?

1.2   Methods

The research for the report involved three sets of data and analysis.

1.2.1   Contextual Data

The program of work undertaken by the CPOW-RMIT team focuses on six selected regions. Drawing on data produced in other work packages, the employment trends in each region are presented, along with an account of the training provisions that are available. This data allows the more detailed focus of three regions to be understood against the broader backdrop of regional Australia.

As noted in the introduction, this report draws on the conclusions from *Diversity in Regional Growth and Development* and the addendum that investigated regional mobility patterns (Toner & Douglas 2020; Denham 2020). Also, this report builds on the conclusions from the projects reported upon in the 2018 report for the Regional Australia Institute, *Future Jobs and Regional Workforce Development: Foundations and Analysis* (Fairbrother & Denham 2020).

1.2.2 Field Research Data

Three study regions are surveyed in this report. In two cases, researchers have spent time in the region, developing on-the-ground understandings of the training infrastructure and the ways in which the training program operated. Publicly available data, comprising policy initiatives, reports and the like were analysed.

Interviews were undertaken with eleven key training staff from these regions, including representatives from TAFE institutes, training organisations and one careers advisor from a regional high school. Three representatives participated in a joint interview. Four interviewees had cross-disciplinary roles and the other seven were engaged only in the Health and Community Services sector.

The interview participants were senior members of organisations involved in the delivery and planning of training programs in the study regions. Interviews were sought from those who have been involved in program development, monitoring and review and where available, drawn from the programs reviewed in the 2018 project. The participants have worked in regional training for at least two years, and gave an overview of transitions and new challenges in training.

Where possible, the interviews were conducted face-to-face, in locations suitable to the interviewee. As the interview participants were located in more than one State and in regional areas, interviews were conducted by telephone in some instances. Participants were guaranteed anonymity. Nonetheless, with agreement, the Executive Officer of the Geelong Region LLEN is named. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Key content analysis has been applied to the transcriptions, using the research questions listed above as a framework for the analysis.

In addition to the interview materials, three examples of innovative programs associated with regional training are provided: Queensland's Big Red Truck, the Rural Aspire youth networking program in Victoria, and the Geelong region's *Careers in Health and Community Services* program.

1.3 Structure

The report is organized as follows. First, the focus of the study is explained, presenting a brief survey of the thematic concepts that underpin the analysis. Second, regional training and employment is reviewed, noting the role and place of TAFEs in the process. Third, the implications of the massive growth in Health and Social Care employment is presented, drawing out the salient dimensions of this growth. Fourth, the assessment of the relationship between training and employment is discussed, addressing the response of training to this growth in the Health and

Social Care; the outcomes of and monitoring of training: and the barriers and opportunities for training in the regions. Fifth a brief conclusion is presented.

2 The Focus

The analytic background to the research, includes studies from the previous year that provide the foundation for this project, as well as insights from other studies into regional training.

2.1 Themes

The research sought to understand what the research team termed 'the learning puzzle' (Fairbrother and Denham 2019). Thus, the CPOW-RMIT *Future Jobs* provides the thematic foundation for this investigation into regional training systems and outcomes.

As with the 2018 report, this research uses a political economy of skills approach to regional employment and training, conceptualized as the 'learning puzzle'. The central issue is the misalignment of regional employment demand and supply, as well as the pathways between them fostered by education and training. The political economy perspective includes regulatory, institutional and social factors for the analysis of regional labour and training markets, enabling observations that would not become apparent in a skills gap approach.

2.1.1 Lock-in and Learning

The Lock-in and Learning study indicates the importance of developing an understanding of the emerging opportunities within a region and how training can link residents to those opportunities (Barton *et al*. 2018). Manufacturing had been a primary source of employment in northwest Tasmania until closures of major employers in recent decades. The study indicated that sections of the community had not changed their view of education from that era. The emerging employment opportunities in health care, advanced manufacturing and agriculture require a higher level of training than the region's traditional sources of employment, but sections of the community had not changed their employment expectations or understanding of the need for higher levels of educational attainment. The steady improvement in high school retention rates and employment outcomes in the region provide the basis for further research into the outcomes from the region's training and employment preparation programs.

2.1.2 Regional skill shortages and learning

This project focused on learning pathways into emerging employment opportunities within the Big Rivers region of the Northern Territory, to provide insight into the complex relationship between learning and skills strategies (Boyle *et al*. 2019). One notable achievement in the region has been a range of initiatives that make VET programs more accessible, along with promoting the facilitation and development of working relationships with industry/employers (Boyle *et al*. 2019).

The *Regional Skills Shortages and Learning* project also found that while there was a high proportion of employment in public services, including Health and Community Services, there were difficulties in attracting and retaining staff, even with financial concessions and incentives. A pertinent observation from the project was that the

opportunities provided by public sector employment need to be compared to those in other sectors, based on educational requirements as well as pay and conditions.

Given the focus of the 2019 research, of particular note was the conclusion that "research efforts that aim to resolve the conflicts in need for regional training, the sustainability of regional delivery or the costs of out-or-region relocations for training purposes are essential". While research does not provide detailed responses to this need, it does outline factors in successful TAFE training delivery.

2.1.3   Innovative Practices of Victorian LLENs

The Local Learning and Employment Networks were established across Victoria in 2001, with two objectives:

a) To engage in community building through cooperative approaches to community renewal and coordinating of service delivery;

b) To support and build shared responsibility and ownership for post-compulsory education and training for 15-19 year olds (www.llen.org.au)

The 31 LLENs are embedded within their communities and broker training and employment opportunities – they do not deliver training programs. The 2018 review indicated a range of LLENs initiatives that respond to local training needs and employment opportunities in innovative ways. The embedded position and long-term tenure of the LLENs enables them to provide insights into the dynamic relationships between students, training and employment at a regional scale, which would be of benefit to other organisations involved in training and employment (Vincent *et al*. 2018).

2.1.4   The Learning Puzzle

As with the 2018 report, this research uses a political economy of skills approach to regional employment and training, conceptualized as the 'learning puzzle'. The central issue is the misalignment of regional employment demand and supply, as well as the pathways between them fostered by education and training. The political economy perspective includes regulatory, institutional and social factors to the analysis of regional labour and training markets, enabling observations that would not become apparent in a skills gap approach. An example of this is found in Northwest Tasmania, where the need to engender employment aspirations in the regions' secondary education students was an important first step in connecting the community to employment opportunity (Fairbrother & Denham 2018).

This work package continues the political economy of skills approach by focusing on the experiences of training organisations in connecting regional residents to employment opportunities.

2.2   An Approach

These case studies of regional training and employment systems indicates that there is a need to review what has and has not worked in regional. In each of the case studies, there appeared to be a lack of review and reflection on what has been crucial in providing successful regional training outcomes, as well as what has been

learnt from less successful programs. An example of this is found in Northwest Tasmania, where there appeared to be a need to engender employment aspirations in the regions' secondary education students as an important first step in connecting the community to employment opportunity (Barton *et al*. 2018). This work package continues the political economy of skills approach by focusing on the experiences of training organisations in connecting regional residents to employment opportunities.

3   Regional Training and Employment

A key objective of regional training is for TAFEs to facilitate and enable pathways for regional residents to employment and in some cases further education.

3.1   Regional Training

The opportunities provided by TAFE training are seen as vital in regional Australia, due to the accessibility, aptness for regional employment and as a pathway for further education and training. In a recent review of regional, remote and rural education in Australia, Halsey (2018, p. 53) concluded that:

> TAFE has to be put back into the regions, closer to people, places and the heartland of much of Australia's productivity.

The implication is that the geography of training is important, as the majority of university education is provided in the major cities. TAFE's role in connecting people to employment in regional areas is also particularly important at a time when economic activity is concentrating in Australia's major cities (Kelly *et al*. 2014). As a study on regional youth concluded, regional TAFE:

> … was found to offer an important pathway for young people's entry into education and training as well as being a significant mechanism for the re-engagement of young people not in education, training or employment (Webb *et al.* 2015, p. 8).

These insights into the role of TAFE in the regions provide support for the focus of this research, in developing an understanding of how TAFE is adapting to the changing nature of regional employment identified in the *Growth and Diversity in Regions* report (Toner 2020).

3.1.1   TAFE in Regional Communities

One of the key conclusions of the 2018 Lock-in and Learning project was the importance of how the community understands contemporary employment markets (Barton *et al*., 2018). In Australia, this is compounded by the view that TAFE is a somewhat lesser post-secondary education pathway than university education, and in regional areas:

> … the value of a vocational pathway is not fully understood and the potential income levels for those with higher vocational skills and qualifications are not widely promoted compared to earnings for most university graduates (Halsey 2018, p. 55).

Halsey suggests that this may be a result of the teachers within the secondary education system who provide careers advice having university degrees and thus little understanding of the TAFE system. More broadly, Dufty-Jones and others (2014, p. 27) note:

the role of peers, institutions and other important influences shaping young rural people's ideas and expectations concerning future careers and, accordingly, places to live.

In this context, Webb and others (2015, p. 16) highlight the role of parents in determining what young people consider as possibilities, reflecting geography and economic considerations:

> Young people's dispositions towards their socioeconomic-geographic location are largely inherited from their family situation and affected by their wider community, meaning therefore that parents often emerge as a key influence upon young people's choices and trajectories.

The reference to choices in the quote above is of note. As discussed in Section 2.2.1, individual choice has been central to education policy in Australia in recent times. However, the notion of choice in regional contexts has been questioned, as the options open to people are restricted by location, information and socio-economic factors (Nairn & Higgins 2011). The view amongst regional educators that education policy is 'metro-centric' and there is not equity of opportunity between metropolitan and regional areas is of note in this context (Downes & Fuqua 2018).

Within Gippsland, one of the six study regions for this RAI research program, the low aspirations of the region's youth was linked to the "educational expectations on the part of families and the low educational attainment of parents" (Dow *et al*. 2011, p. 52). Also from research in Gippsland, Webb *et al*. (2015, p. 39) provide an example of the importance of parents in determining post-secondary paths is particularly strong for males:

> In the industrial area of Westvale[1] in particular, young men's career expectations and aspirations draw strongly on the traditions associated with the locality and with their families' histories in that locality, especially the employment history of their fathers. For some young men, the expectation is frequently that they will remain in the area and enter the same trade as their father or other male family members, as Jay explains: 'my brother is now a 4th Year Boiler Maker … he's out at the power station so he's doing really well for himself, so Dad wants me to get a trade and he wants me to be an electrician'. Ted also appears to be following in his father's footsteps, although closer attention to his story suggests that he is open to other opportunities.

They also find that females are also likely to aspire to gender-typical roles, such as Children's services, Arts and Administration (Webb *et al*. 2015, p. 60).

This discussion indicates the role that community considerations play in training uptake and outcomes, that is not just the geographic location, but it is also social and familial contexts that determine the breadth of options open for consideration. The implication is that it is important to make sure that the employment transitions

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[1] This is the name used in the research to describe the place that the interviews were undertaken, in order to protect the anonymity of the respondents.

illustrated in the *Growth and Diversity in Regions* report are understood by the communities in which they are occurring (Toner 2020).

3.1.2   Dealing with Distance

Given the distances and low concentrations of people in much of regional Australia, online delivery has been used to provide training delivery for a range of courses. As demand for qualified workers in the Health and Community Services sector is widely distributed, online delivery has been used as a way to enable access to a wider constituency. However, the online delivery of training has been problematic in some instances.

A recent review of online delivery of VET qualifications in Australia found that the outcomes were comparable to those of other modes of delivery; however they were subject to higher rates of withdrawal and lower rates of course completion (Griffin & Mihelic 2019). With relevance to regional training, the advantages of online delivery cited by trainers in the research by Griffin and Mihelic (2019, p. 24) were:

- Flexibility: students are able to study at any time and at their own pace. This is particularly useful for those with other commitments, such as family or waged work.

- Access to study from anywhere (provided they have internet access): this is particularly useful for those who live remotely, are travelling or want to study while at an external workplace or at home.

- Preference for the learning style: this may especially suit students who are uncomfortable in a classroom situation, as well as those who want to learn at their own pace.

- Lower cost: online courses are often less expensive (with no additional costs for travel, car parking etc.).

    The disadvantages were a result of limited contact with trainers and other students, technical difficulties such as internet outages, and "the requirement for immense self-discipline" (ibid.).

It is of note that similar conclusions were reached in earlier research (Kilpatrick & Bound 2003). The reduced costs associated with training without travel or relocation was seen as important benefits, along with the development of trainees' computer skills and increased self-reliance. The barriers were also found to be a result of limited interaction with trainers and peers, and technical issues, with the addition of the costs of computer hardware.

3.2   Upheavals in TAFE

The TAFE sector across the country is being repositioned. There has been a growing recognition that the TAFE provision across the country has resulted in poor outcomes. Research has attributed this circumstance to competition initiatives and increased private sector delivery as well as the introduction of consumer sovereignty

and choice into Australian education systems (Hager 2016; Misko & Wynes 2009a; Quiggin 2017; Shreeve & Palser 2018).

The changes involve structural reorganization, underpinned by financial concerns. In New South Wales, the *One TAFE* reform has centralised the administration of the system, and in doing so reduced 10 separate institutions to one with 5 regions (Shreeve & Palser 2018). This means that the training needs of the Central Coast region are no longer met by the Hunter Institute, but by a regional grouping centred in Newcastle. In practical terms for this report, this reorganisation has made the identification of suitable people to interview in the Central Coast difficult, as informal discussions with TAFE teachers from the region indicate that planning and review have been consolidated in Sydney. Also, earlier reports on the successes and issues facing TAFE training on the Central Coast have less relevance (Misko & Wynes 2009b for example). Similarly, from July 2017 TAFE Queensland has operated as a single *Registered Training Organisation* (RTO); previously it had been structured as 6 regional RTOs (TAFE Queensland 2017). There have been reports that the TAFE sector has contributed to financial issues at Charles Darwin University's, with the rising costs of delivery seen as a factor. Representatives from the University have also cited changing government funding as a concern (Gibson & Heaney 2019).

These diverse pressures have had a political impact, as illustrated by recent developments in Victoria. The Victorian vocation education system has also been through upheavals in the past decade. In 2008, the State Labor government introduced contestable funding to the State's vocational educational system, which had led to an increase in private providers and impacted on the sustainability of the public system (Long 2012). As a result of the financial state of the system, in 2012 the Victorian Liberal-National Government reduced the state's TAFE budget by $300 million, leading to campus closures and reduced public sector training (Maslen 2012). The impact on the State's TAFE sector, and the Labor Party policy to reinstate TAFE funding were seen as instrumental in the change of government at the 2014 election (Noonan 2014).

These changes are likely to have affected regional residents' access to training in stark ways. Two aspects may be noted. First, it is likely that smaller campuses have closed as a result of funding stresses in TAFE, and second, for those that have remained open, it may be the case that there has been a reduction in the range of courses on offer. As Halsey (2018, p. 53) noted:

> … it is also important to recognise that high quality VET, where it is available, is playing a crucial role in helping young people develop the skills and knowledge they require to gain employment, build careers, start their own businesses and much more. The trouble is the major variability in access, availability and affordability and also the complexity of how to negotiate and navigate the way into and through a high quality VET pathway.

Examples of this problem provided by Halsey (2018) were the necessity of apprentices to travel from Mount Gambier to Adelaide and from Kalgoorlie to Perth for theory aspects of their apprenticeships. Previously such provision had been available locally.

3.3   Summary

The focus of this report is on how training providers link regional residents to employment opportunities. The context for the report is that employment in regional areas is changing - traditional sectors of employment are in decline, while there is rapid growth in employment in Health and Community Services. At the same time, policies and budgets for TAFE training have also affected the sector, leaving regional organisations to negotiate concurrent and complex transitions in both their local industries as well as their operations.

Yet, within this evolving framework, regional TAFE training organisations provide an important, if under-recognised, pathway between secondary education and employment. Online delivery has been used to provide training opportunities to a wider range of regional residents, but has also been associated with higher rates of student attrition and non-completion. Although access to training is seen as a problem in parts of regional Australia, the review here indicates that community and social factors are also limiting the uptake of training in regional areas, including familial experiences and expectations, and the social and institutional 'normalisation' of university studies as a post-secondary pathway.

4 The Regional Context

This study of regional training delivery and challenges focusses on how training providers are facilitating the increase of employment in the Health and Community Services Sector in three regions: Geelong, Latrobe-Gippsland and Toowoomba. These three regions provide distinct cases due to their social, economic and geographic circumstances, as outlined in this section of the report.

4.1 The growth of Health and Community Services employment in regional Australia

The *Diversity in Regional Growth and Development* highlights the increasing importance of the health and community services sector as a provider of employment in regional Australia (Toner 2020). Across the six study regions for this research[2], the Health Care and Social Assistance sector employs nearly 20,000 more people than the next largest sector, *Retail Trade* as shown in Figure 1.
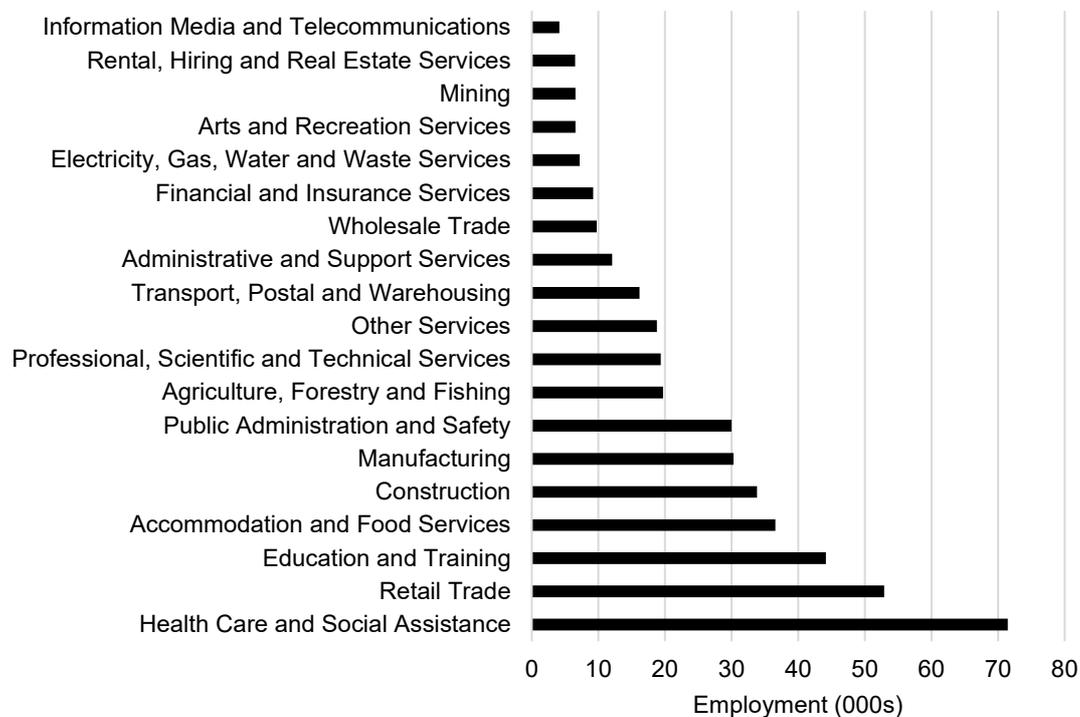
Figure 1: Employment by sector, RAI study region SA4s, 2016

Source: ABS (2016), ANZSIC 1 industry of employment.

As reported in *Diversity in Regional Growth and Development*, Health Care and Social Assistance provided 41.1 per cent of employment growth for females in the study regions between 2006 and 2016, and 17.2 per cent for males.

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[2] Central Coast, Geelong, Latrobe-Gippsland, Toowoomba, West and Northwest Tasmania, Outback Northern Territory.

The differential growth rates are representative of how this growth, as well as employment declines in traditionally male-dominated sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture, are changing the employment opportunities on offer in regional Australia. A substantial part of this increase in employment is a result of the ageing of regional populations. As of 2016, Aged Care Residential Services was only behind Hospitals as a provider of employment within the Health Care and Social Assistance industry sector, as shown in Figure 2.
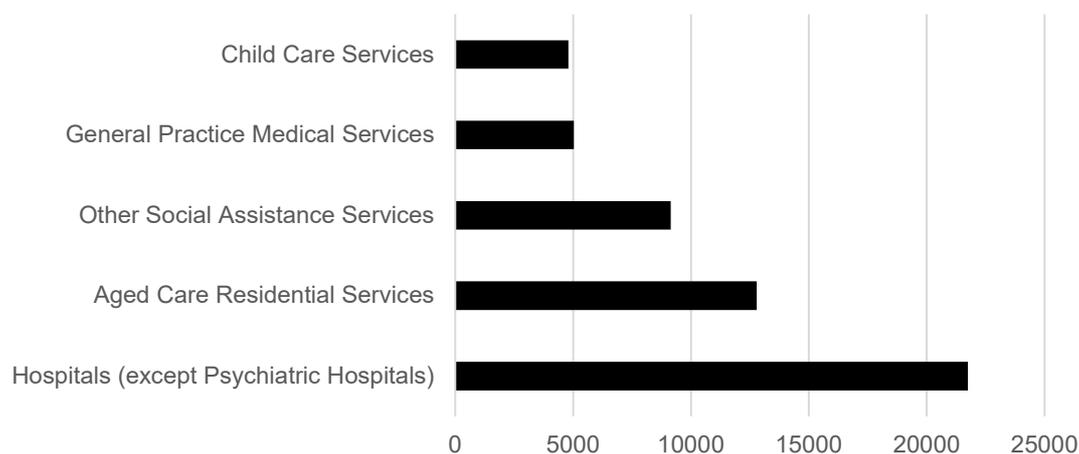

Figure 2 Top 5 industries of employment in Health Care and Social Assistance ANZSIC level 4, RAI study region SA4s, 2016

Source: ABS (2016).

Further discussion on the implications of these other changes to employment in regional Australia can be found in *Diversity in Regional Growth and Development*, which also notes that it is likely that there has been additional growth in employment in this sector since 2016 due to NDIS funding.

Given this increase in employment, it is instructive to consider the government reporting of skills shortages in the regions. The data is collected by surveying employers who have recently advertised positions, regarding types of vacancies, applications and the length of time taken to fill positions (Department of Employment 2017). While not comprehensive in its reporting, the data indicates that there is an unmet demand for health professionals in the regions. As employment in Health and Community Services has grown, opportunities in traditional regional employment sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing have been in decline.

These patterns are evident in different States. For Victorian Health Professions, "regional employers have been experiencing an annually declining trend in the average number of suitable applicants per vacancy since 2015" (Department of Employment Skills Small and Family Business 2019b, p. 1). Specific occupations facing regional shortages were Medical Radiation Therapists, Sonographers, Pharmacists and Occupational Therapists. For Queensland, only 54 per cent of regional vacancies were filled, compared to 70 per cent in the metropolitan area (Department of Employment Skills Small and Family Business 2018b), while in New South Wales there were shortages across all health professions and regions in

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(Department of Employment Skills Small and Family Business 2019a). In the Northern Territory, "overall there was less than one person per vacancy considered suitable in all occupations", with the situation worse in regional areas (Department of Employment Skills Small and Family Business 2018a, p. 1).

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019) and Four Corners (2019) have reported on problems with regional health provision. On face value these reports of problematic regional health care contradict the evidence presented here of employment growth in the Health and Community Services sector. However, as *Diversity in Regional Growth and Development* reports, much of the employment growth has been in low-level and part-time employment in the sector, whereas the issues regional areas have experienced are a result of a shortage of specialists and experienced medical practitioners.

4.2 Study Regions

4.2.1 Geelong

Geelong is classified as a Regional City within the RAI typology and is located approximately 75 kilometres southeast of central Melbourne, in Victoria. The surrounding Geelong SA4 had a population of 278,930 in 2016, an increase of more than 28,000 from the 2011 population, indicating rapid population growth in the city and its surrounds.

 While the end of automotive manufacturing in Australia, and particularly the closure of the Ford factory in Geelong, has led to a decline in the traditional employment strengths in the city, total employment in the SA4 has grown in recent years. As shown in Figure 3, the additional 3,968 jobs in Health and Community Services between 2011 and 2016 outweighs the 2,658 jobs lost in Manufacturing. The changes in the industrial composition of the regions' workforce also indicate a transfer from outwardly-focussed manufacturing industries to the sectors associated with population and population growth: health, hospitality, education and construction. *Diversity and Growth in Regional Development* (Toner 2020) reports that these changes to the region's industry composition are associated with transitions to in the types of employment and the demographic structure of the regional workforce. In particular, there has been an increase in the proportion of part-time work, as well as greater participation by females and older workers.
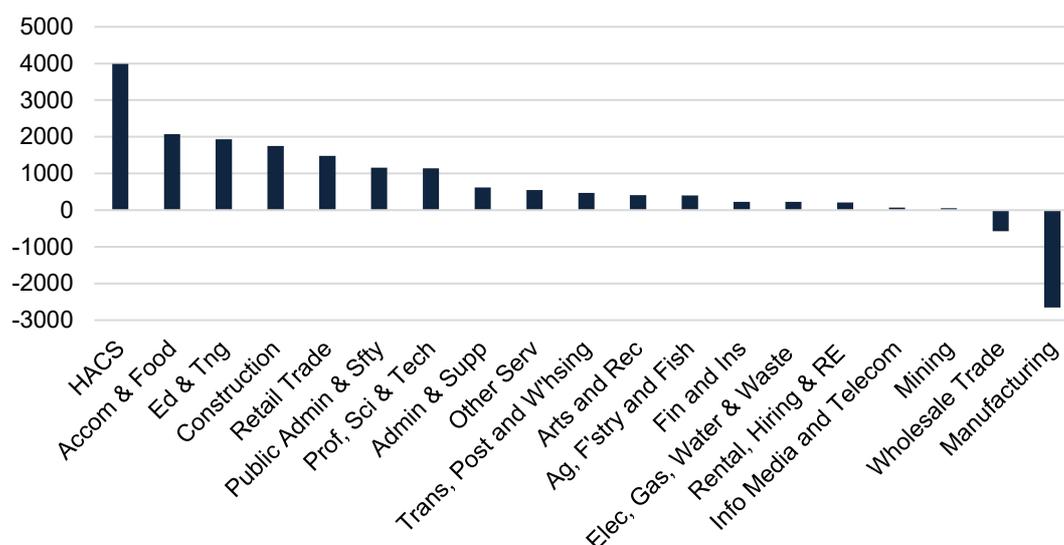
Figure 3: Contributions to employment growth, Geelong SA4 place of work 2011-2016

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011), Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016), study region place of employment by SA4.

Therefore, Geelong provides an example of a region where changes in employment have occurred between two sectors with strong connections to the TAFE system: health and manufacturing. *Factors in Regional Mobility* (Denham 2020) has also provided indication that the strong regional educational institutions in Geelong encourage retention and attraction of younger people, albeit primarily for higher education. The region also benefits from metropolitan proximity, as workers are able to access Melbourne employment markets. Therefore, TAFE in Geelong, and particularly training in the Health and Community Services sector provides an appropriate region for investigating how training helps communities navigate changing job trends and employment conditions.

4.2.2 Latrobe-Gippsland

Latrobe-Gippsland is classified as an Industry and Service Hub in the RAI typologies. Similar to the Geelong SA4, the Latrobe-Gippsland SA4 population increased between 2011 and 2016, from 255,858 to 271,413. However, as Fairbrother and Denham (2020) indicate, the growth is predominantly in the west of the region, close to Melbourne, while the far eastern section declined in population in the intercensal period. Latrobe-Gippsland has also been subject to prominent industrial closures, the Hazelwood power station is a recent example, and the steady decline of sawmilling and paper manufacturing in the east.

Health and Community Services was the prominent industry in terms of new jobs in the Latrobe-Gippsland SA4 between 2011 and 2016 as shown in Figure 4 providing more than half of the total increase in jobs by sector.

Figure 4: Contributions to employment growth, Latrobe-Gippsland SA4 place of work 2011-2016

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011), Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016), study region place of employment by SA4.

Further evidence of the diverging fortunes within the region is included in *Day-to-Day insecurity of low-income regional households and labour markets* (De Silva & Banks 2020), as shown in Figure 5. Of note are the high rates of unemployment in Orbost and Morwell, which are where the sawmilling, coal mining and energy generation sectors are located.
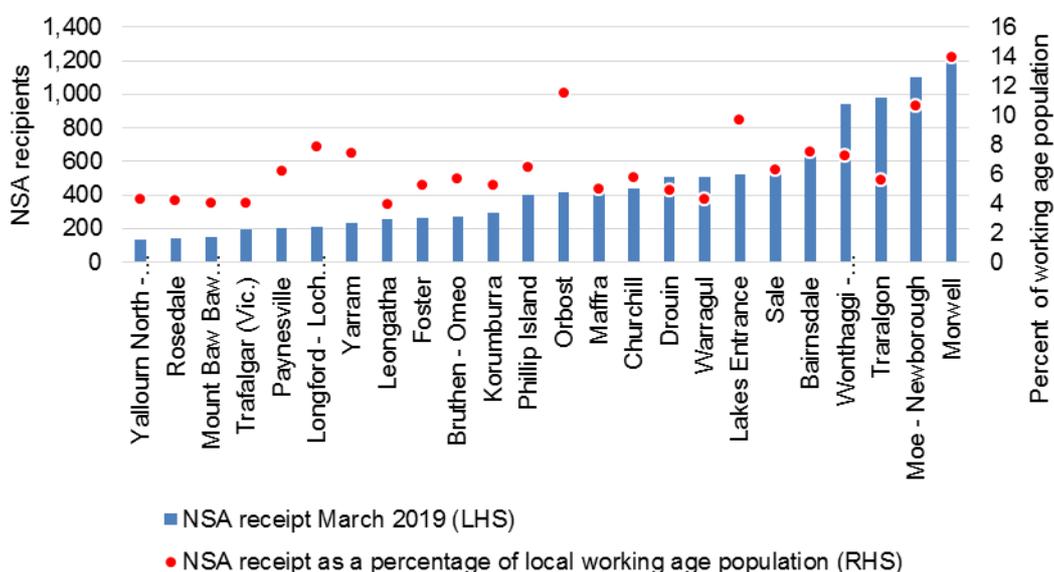
Figure 5: NSA receipt within the Latrobe-Gippsland Region

Source: WP3: Day-to-Day insecurity of low-income regional households and labour markets BS, 1410.0 - Data by Region, 2013-18, Population and People, data.gov.au, DSS Demographic data.

While there are similarities to Geelong, Latrobe-Gippsland is a significantly larger region, with a wider distribution and divergence in the population and economic trends within the SA4. Latrobe-Gippsland has a university, but it is smaller in scale and the range of programs on offer in comparison to Deakin University in Geelong. As such, *Factors in Regional Mobility* (Denham 2020) reports outflows of post-secondary students from the region to take up tertiary education. Therefore, TAFE training providers are negotiating an increasing demand for workers in the Health and Community Services sector in the context of pockets of disadvantage – some of which are remote – and a workforce with uncertain futures in many cases.

4.2.3   Toowoomba

Toowoomba, like Geelong, is considered Regional City within the RAI typology. The population of the SA4 also increased between 2011 and 2016, from 140,220 to 149,513. Toowoomba provides a study region distinct from both Geelong and Latrobe-Gippsland in that it has not had major industry closures in recent years and can be seen as the central service hub for the Darling Downs, a region with a rich agricultural sector. Toowoomba also differs from Geelong due to its location further from the State capital of Brisbane.

As shown in Figure 6 over the page, Health and Community Services employment grew within the Toowoomba SA4 between 2011 and 2016, accounting for 25 per cent of the additional jobs. While still the largest sector of employment increase in the region, Health and Community Services growth was not as predominant as in Geelong or Latrobe-Gippsland.

Toowoomba has a strong education sector, with growing employment as shown above. The city provides education services for a much wider area than the constituent SA4, and provides insights into regional training delivery in areas removed from capital city influence and the transitions associated with large-scale industrial closures.
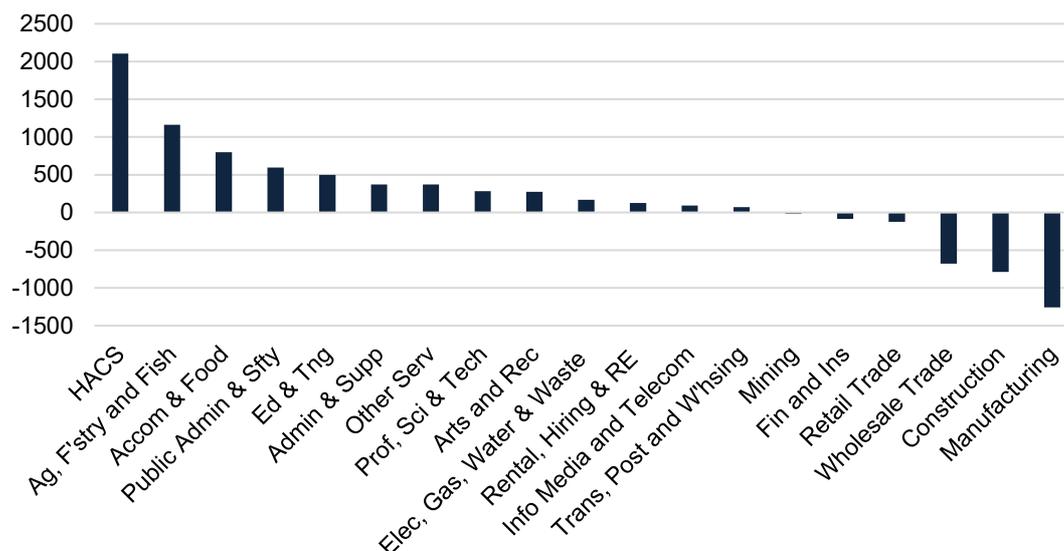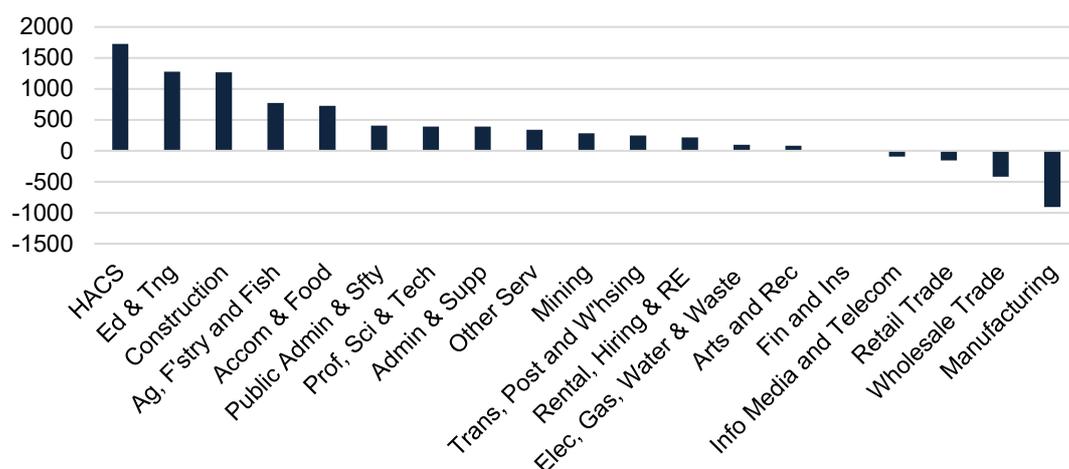

Figure 6: Contributions to employment growth, Toowoomba SA4 place of work 2011-2016

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011), Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016), study region place of employment by SA4.

4.3   Summary

The focus on training in the Health and Community Services sector reflects that it is the predominant source of jobs in the study regions, providing more than 70,000 jobs across the six study regions in 2016. The research undertaken in this work package focuses on three of the six regions – Geelong, Latrobe-Gippsland and Toowoomba. These regions provide a range of contexts for this study across social, economic and geographic domains, but share the importance of Health and Community Services as an important provide of jobs and jobs growth. Thus, the study of TAFE training and organisations in the Health and Community Services sector in these regions provides insights into how regional education systems are recognising and responding to transitions in regional economies and employment opportunities.

5   Trends and Patterns: Emerging Questions

This section of the report provides analyses of the interview materials collected as a result of the methods described in Section 1.3. The structure of the section reflects the underlying research objectives: the impact of the growth of Health and Community Services employment the response of training to this growth; barriers and opportunities for training; and, the outcomes of and monitoring of training.

TAs the results section of the report, anonymised quotes from the 11 interview subjects are provided to provide insights into each of the research objectives, organised by theme. In addition to the interview materials, three examples of innovative programs associated with regional training are provided: Queensland's Big Red Truck, the Rural Aspire youth networking program in Victoria, and the Geelong region's *Careers in Health and Community Services* program.

5.1   Training Responses and Student Uptake

The transitions in jobs, work and employment underway in the regions, as reported in **WP2 Diversity and Growth in Regional Development** and particularly in Health and Community Services, provides the impetus for regional TAFE providers to realign their delivery. This section of the report provides insights as to how regional TAFE providers have responded to the changes in employment and opportunity. There are two aspects to this section of the report. This first considers regional training responses to the growth in Health and Community Services employment, and the second provides insights into who is taking up the training offer.

5.1.1   Recognition of Change

TAFE providers have recognised the shifts underway in relation to jobs and employment in the regions. In particular, the substantial growth in employment within the Health and Community Services sector is acknowledged, concurring with the *Growth and Diversity in Regions* report (Toner 2020) and the data presented in Section 2.2.2 of this report. New service providers in one region had created additional staffing demands:

> We've got two brand new aged care facilities here …. with hundreds of
> beds … Another organisation has opened a 120-bed facility here and
> then you've still got your [other providers] They've been here for 40 or 50
> years (Interviewee 5).

The growth in the Health and Community Services sector has been particularly evident in relation to aged care:

> The ageing workforce and the ageing population certainly is coming more
> to the fore with a lot of people entering the aged care system. Then
> you've also got those as well who prefer to stay at home in their own
> homes, and then you've got your nurses … trying to help them as well.

> *… So, yes, I should imagine the industry is growing quite a lot*
> *(Interviewee 5).*

In summary, the experiences within the study regions conform to the results of the employment data included in *Diversity and Growth in Regional Development* (Toner 2020). In addition, the interviews undertaken for this report not only provide 'on-the-ground' confirmation of these transitions, they also indicate that the TAFE sector is alert to economic transitions and are responding to them, as further discussed below.

In one of the regions, students are still aspiring to apprenticeships, even though there has been a reduction in employment in primary and secondary industry sectors. Also, apprenticeships have become extremely competitive, with hundreds of applications for each position offered.

5.1.2   TAFE Initiatives

There have been substantial increases in the delivery of Health and Community Services training programs in the regions. This expansion is connected to the growth of employment in these sectors and to some extent the transitions of workers in other sectors to Health and Community Services employment.

One trend is to consolidate TAFE into larger regional jurisdictions to increase the transferability of training outcomes, via the standardisation of programs. A further benefit is that it made TAFE more able to quickly respond to industry needs, as it is more likely that the training providers will have training on scope and access to teaching staff able to deliver the training.

As the ageing of the population is occurring across regional Australia, aged care and to a lesser extent health provide employment opportunities in smaller and remote communities. Therefore, mechanisms that enable the sustainable delivery of training outside the larger regional centres provide an opportunity for people to connect to employment opportunities while remaining in 'place'. However, as established in the 2018 report, training delivery to small and remote cohorts can be financially unsustainable, and interviewees have referred to retention problems for online delivery models (Boyle *et al*. 2018).

The demand for training can lead to novel modes of delivery, as illustrated in one case in Queensland.

> **Example: The Big Red Truck**
>
> The Big Red Truck, officially called the Outback College of Hospitality Trade Training Centre, has been operating since 2011 (Harris). The B-double truck provides a mobile hospitality training service for students in Queensland's central west. It includes a full-size commercial kitchen and provides Certificate II in Kitchen Operations to five schools over an area of approximately 500 km^2. In addition to

providing a training facility, the truck is used to provide hospitality at events in the region, providing further opportunities for students (Department of Education 2019). As the truck is still providing training after eight years of service, it indicates that it has been a successful model for delivering training to small and remote communities, particularly for training that requires access to specialised facilities and thus cannot be solely delivered online. Whether similar models can be developed to deliver specialised training in remote communities, in hospitality as well as other training sectors, would be worth exploring further given the difficulties in delivering training to dispersed and small cohorts.

Such initiatives were not evident in the Health and Social Care sector. Rather, the training providers often remained committed to conventional modes of delivery, and financial cross-subsidy. One training provider runs training programs in more isolated locations, essentially subsidised through larger cohorts in the major centres. A particular example involved delivering aged care training in one small community. This provided opportunities for local people to take up the new employment opportunities and remain in their 'place'.

> *So, they have an aged care facility in their community. Well, it makes sense to go to them and say, if you want to keep people in your local area or community members so they don't move to a different city or something, tell us how you want to run your aged care facility and what skills you want them to do? We'll make that program better for you so that you have the chance of retaining those people within your community rather than going off seeking somewhere else to find work … they run an aged care program, they have a new intake every semester. Yes, they're finding that community members are taking up the program and they're the ones that are getting jobs within the community aged care facility, rather than relying on people coming from … other locations to pick up the work (Interviewee No.2).*

Such an approach can have a positive impact on employment possibilities in regions.

In contrast in another region, the State's recent consolidation of TAFE into larger organisations has meant larger training cohorts could subsidise delivery in smaller towns, fulfilling what the training provider saw as a community obligation. However, there was also a view that such consolidations had also made TAFE providers less responsive to issues specific to local contexts, such as industry requirements.

Also, in another region the view was expressed that where regional youth are located nearer metropolitan areas, then they were better off since they could commute to

study and seek work opportunities there. This situation accords with the data in the mobility report, which indicates that Geelong in particular retains and attracts more people of school-leaving age than the other study regions, as reported in *Factors in Regional Mobility* (Denham 2020). The challenge is that it only applies to a section of the youth population, those in commutable distance to a metropolitan centre, and where they can so commute. For others, these possibilities do not apply. Furthermore, it should be noted that commuting out of a region, even for training, does not enable regions to build their own capacities in relation to this cluster of employment related activities.

Online delivery of training provides a resolution to delivering training to dispersed and distanced populations in regional areas. One interviewee thought that enabling people to train in their smaller communities, through online delivery, increased the likelihood that people would remain there. However, online delivery was also an area where training providers had some difficulty in retaining students, as they disengaged with the program over time. In one example, where students were expected to come to campus three days per semester:

> *… we wouldn't even get the students to the point where they would go out on vocational placement … and go to work in one of those workplaces, because we'd lose them. Because they wouldn't come into campus and they had to be responsible largely for their own learning with prompts mostly through email and phone by their educators, they really felt out of the program (Interviewee 2).*

In turn, this led to training providers developing online training modes to meet the needs of those who could not attend face-to-face sessions. Even so in one such case, the provider experienced high attrition rates and had to review the teaching model. Another provider had introduced weekly on-campus sessions:

> *In the health and community services, community services especially, we've had to really tie that down. We used to - or we still do this year - run a solely online programme, but the completion rate has been absolutely atrocious. People have all the best intentions to study, but work and family gets in the way. So, we've tightened that up and we're now doing the compulsory one day a week workshop to go with our online study, because we just couldn't get the completion rates that we need (Interviewee 7).*

So, online delivery enables training providers to reach more people, particularly those in smaller and more remote communities, but has been relatively unsuccessful when completion rates are taken into consideration. The adoption of mixed modes, whereby online delivery is augmented with regular face-to-face contact, has been adopted by two of the training providers and has resulted in improved retention rates.

As indicated, the development of this mode of training is in process, and providers are likely to continue to experiment with delivery modes. The question that then arises is how providers can continue to develop this work in beneficial ways, for students and providers, and how can they be supported and encouraged in this process.

5.1.3   Connecting people to employment

As indicated in the discussion of community expectations above, one emerging theme is how to facilitate a broader understanding of the changes underway in regional employment and the job opportunities in Health and Community Services in particular. Our informants predominantly thought that more could be done to make people, and particularly those in secondary school, more aware of the employment opportunities in Health and Community Services. They also reflected on the role of training in responding to and recognising these opportunities.

There would appear to be three main ways in which providers are increasing community awareness of the opportunities available in the Health and Community Services sector. The first is through industry expos, where training providers and industry hold events for secondary students to foster an understanding of opportunities within the region.

The second is through online employment opportunity hubs, for example:

> *.. online labour market hub called … - so it's an online labour market and career hub or one-stop shop, linking young people to information about the labour market and to employers who are growing and developing and putting it all together … (Interviewee 1).*

Industry expos and online hubs were also reported on in the 2018 report on the project *Innovative practices review of Victoria's LLENs activities and their outcomes* (Vincent *et al.* 2018).

The third method is through work experience programs, which are discussed in more detail in Section 5.3.1.

The implication is that TAFE organisations are working to increase the understanding of the opportunities for Health and Community Services employment in regional areas, but there is more that could be done.

5.1.4   Health and Community Services Workers

There is some indication that more mature-age students than school leavers are undertaking TAFE studies in these fields. It appears to be more for career changers, with the exception of nursing. There was a view that it may not be appropriate for school leavers to work in aged care, given the responsibilities and experiences that are central to work in that sector. There were also concerns raised about whether school-leavers were mature enough to respect the privacy of patients in the Health and Community Services sector, particularly in smaller communities. The tendency,

and preferences in some cases, for mature workers in the Health and Community Services sector reflects the reporting in *Diversity in Regional Growth and Development* (Toner 2020). The analysis of 2011 and 2016 census employment data included in that report indicated that the increase in Health and Community Services employment was associated with greater workforce participation by older people, as well as females.

The demographics of the regional workforces reported on in *Diversity in Regional Growth and Development* (Toner 2020) are supported by the field research for this work package, in particular the low workforce participation of younger people, and the increased older people and women in employment:

> *Nursing, we might get I'd say maybe 20 per cent who are school leavers. In the Diploma of Community Services, or Certificate IV of Community Services, maybe 10 per cent are school leavers, but the rest are mature age (Interview 7).*

And:

> *Across the entire sector. Our diploma in nursing, our counselling, our mental health, our community services, child, youth family intervention - very much dominated by female students but so is the industry as well … more mature [students] - I would probably suggest maybe 70/30 mature to school leavers (Interviewee 5).*

The low younger demographic uptake of opportunities may also be a result of the qualification requirements within the sector, at least in one of the study regions:

> *For young people trying to get a job in health, unless they have some formal qualifications, is just near impossible. We can't even get kids into the health sector to do a work placement. To tell kids that's where the opportunity is, is really saying that unless you go to university and get a degree, that's the entry level … (Interviewee 11).*

One interviewee suggested that industry preferred mature workers:

> *I don't think industry, and particularly the private sector, are interested in employing young people (Interviewee 9).*

In one case, this preference was linked to the need to maintain privacy of patients:

> *It's a rural area, everyone knows everyone, you can find out stuff about people, and that's a real conflict for the service providers, because it's*

important for their reputation that they maintain that level of integrity. So,
to find roles for students to come in and be placed in a way that they can
be insulated them from that personal information about people is really
important … [but] privacy, its often a convenient excuse for engagement
but I can see why it's also a real risk factor for organisations (Interviewee
8).

However, this interviewee also noted that they did not see why students were any different to staff members in this regard.

These insights provide further support for the conclusions of Diversity and Growth in Regional Development (Toner 2020), including the impact of the economic transitions in regional areas on the demography of the workforce. In particular, the growth of Health and Community Services employment is being responded to with increased training by females and older people, which aligns with the increase in these cohorts in regional workforces.

Not taking up training, or not sticking with training, can result from not choosing the right program, as per the discussion about work experience suggested (Section 5.3.1). It may also be a result of life circumstances as well. TAFE is also seen as an accessible pathway out of disadvantage, it is available in many localities, inexpensive and links to employment opportunity (Hosken *et al.* 2013). This pathway was discussed in detail by one interviewee, who noted that while training can improve people's lives and access to opportunities there needs to be support for people from disadvantaged or difficult backgrounds:

The way that we make sense of this is to talk about this continuum of
support from early childhood all the way through to age 25, and that there
needs to be a structured platform of support … housing, health and
wellbeing support, connection to culture and community. It's your social
determinants of health ... Then we look at how do young people move
through each of the many transitions in the early years, the transitions in
the school years, and then the transitions in the post-school years?
Where are the major places that the data shows us that young people fall
through the cracks? How do we manage this system? (Interviewee 1).

Connected to this was the observation that for some people, the training in community services was a result of wanting to gain a better understanding of their life experiences – to the point that there was no intention of working in the sector following the completion of training. Interviewee 1 noted that some people had entered community services training to gain a better understanding of their own life situations. This was also associated with low retention rates in community services training:

I think it's the cohort that we put through, even though we interview and everything. A lot of people come with their own lived experience and so sometimes the course can trigger significant issues that someone may have (Interviewee 7).

These examples indicate that the uptake of and success in training may be due to more than the connections to opportunities and aspects of the training program. This appears to be particularly the case for those who are attracted to work in Health and Community Services. One way of achieving such engagement is via regional employers.

5.1.5   Industry Engagement

Regular contact with industry was seen as an important aspect of developing and delivering training in the Health and Community Services sector. Regular meetings with industry provided trainers with information on industry employment needs, as well as the skills requirements of those entering into their employ. Strong connections with industry were also seen as valuable for ongoing placement opportunities.

Interviewee 5 indicated that they are in frequent contact with industry, they, the provider:

… run breakfasts with the employers just to check that what we're running is still in line with industry needs. Most of the time it is. Sometimes there's a couple of tweaks there.

An example of how this works:

Some of our hospitals are moving to a more computer-based situation, moreover than paper-based documents, so that's something we need to move towards. Not everyone's there at the moment because of the cost of it, but we'll need to move there into the future (Interviewee 5).

This indicates that the connection with industry is ongoing and will be fed back into training activity, providing better alignment of training with local industry needs. In this sense, it is a further example of the importance of training organisations being embedded within their community and having an understanding of local employment requirements.

A longer-term engagement between students and employers was seen as:

… extremely important, because it really should underpin everything that we do. So, we have many events and we even have things called think tanks where we invite our industry in and, because a lot of the workplaces take our students for vocational placement, we're always communicating with them and saying, how's the program, what do you think it needs, what's missing, what can we do better? (Interviewee 2).

This engagement was understood as a response to the high levels of demand for workers in this region's Health and Community Services sector. A similar process was underway in another region:

> There's been substantial progress I think, with the employers and the service organisations – the hospital and so forth – now are talking about all the hospitals working together, all the health services working together, to plan for their workforce, to plan for their service delivery, to plan for their specialisations so that as they become more organized then that becomes a framework for students to plug into … (Interviewee 9).

The point was that as the industry develops plans, training providers can respond to the projected needs. However, as one respondent noted, some parts of the industry prefer to 'poach' employees from other regions rather than engage with the training system, which reduces the opportunities for regional residents to connect with employment opportunities.

Relationships between TAFE providers and industry enables an alignment between delivery and the emerging opportunities in the sector. In one region, aged care in particular had attracted students:

> We've never had as many students as we do have now in aged care. I would have thought that perhaps with the Royal Commission into Aged Care, that it might have made people shy away from doing training in that industry. But I think, yeah, it's just going crazy with the number of enrolments we have in that (Interviewee 2).

Thus, industry, that is the Health and Social Care sector, is important for the determination of training needs. In one region this had been a long-term process:

> That's created, I guess, an emphasis for training to be more responsive than in the past. Now one of the things that's been really interesting in this area is that that increase in health and community services has been something that as a collective the region key stakeholders have been coming together about now for probably really close to about a decade. So, in recognition of the increase that was coming, we've been working on that for about a decade (Interviewee 4).

This suggests that responsiveness by the TAFE sector to the demand for trained workers is a feature of critical practitioners (employers and state officials) working together to promote training.

> But there's actually such a thing as a local economy, which doesn't look like the state economy and it doesn't look like the national economy, and

that's one reason why place-basedness is really important (Interviewee 1).

Nevertheless, the overarching view is that more could be done to make people, and school students in particular, aware of the opportunities for employment in the Health and Community Services sector and how TAFE training provides access to those.

5.1.6 Summary

Regional TAFE providers have responded to the increases in Health and Community Services employment within their regions in a set of diverse ways. The outcome is that TAFE training organisations have increased the delivery of courses with nursing and aged care related courses frequently mentioned by the interviewees.

Training numbers have increased, mainly for females and mature workers. The training trainers had also grappled with the need for qualified workers across their regions, where smaller and more remote communities had some demand for workers but there it is difficult to sustain delivery to small cohorts. Providers had introduced online delivery modes but had found that without regular face-to-face and on-campus contact, attrition rates were high.

Industry engagement has informed responses to the increased demand for Health and Community Services training, which can be seen as a result of the industry's need for skilled workers. Industry engagement with training providers had also intensified due to the competition for students. Examples of the types of interactions with industry are regular meetings, involvement in selection interviews and providing work experience and placements for trainees. These interactions become critical for the long-term success of training initiatives in the sector.

5.2 Outcomes and Monitoring

Given the overarching focus of this report is how training organisations are responding to economic transitions in regional areas, this section is concerned with how providers track student outcomes and the suitability of their training offer for regional employment.

5.2.1 Students

On the whole, the interviewees had little understanding of where their trainees went after their courses had been completed, either geographically or the employment they had obtained. Nonetheless, as the pathway from school through further education to employment crosses through a range of different organisations and government departments, developing an understanding of these transitions is difficult. As one interviewee noted this segmentation increases the likelihood of some people falling out of the system:

… no one sector is responsible for moving a kid through their school transitions and their post-school transitions to that end game… So, we're talking about an ecosystem. How do you mobilise an ecosystem of

players to support the kids? Who are the sectors that need to be brought
together? (Interviewee 1).

There was no adequate mechanism for keeping track of students once they finish training. Aside from anecdotes from students that they have kept in touch with, there is no understanding of the outcomes of training for students. Whether students remain in the region, work in the industry or move on to further education is largely unknown. As one interviewee noted:

TAFE essentially, they do student surveys and things like that. But I'm not
– I don't believe they'd have a good outcome information to say who's in
work, who's, that type of thing, that's not something that I believe TAFE
does well, and that's my personal opinion, because I never get to see
that data. Because absolutely it's only where our teachers maintain
relationships with their students that you'll hear the good news stories
come through of, oh, that person did their placement at that aged care
facility at [smaller community] and now they're working there. We don't
gather that sort of data (Interviewee 2).

This presents a major issue for training providers and those interested in the outcomes of training provision in regional communities. While datasets such as the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth and the Survey of VET Outcomes (NCVER n.d., 2020) provide broad indications of the post-training pathways of students, they cannot provide insights into the outcomes for specific programs and regions. This is a result of the declining response rates over time reducing the capacity for interrogating the data for small areas, and if the data at this level of detail is collected, it is likely to be not publishable due to privacy considerations.

5.2.2   Training Improvements

There is evidence of processes where student feedback is being used to improve program delivery. One example is in the case of online teaching programs where low retention rates and poor results prompted training institutes to rethink their delivery models.

At one regional training institution feedback from students was important for monitoring program quality:

… If we have, for example, a program where we find that half the
students have withdrawn from the program, then we go back and want to
have a look at what the cause of that is. Is it because it's just the way that
group is? Or is the teacher, you know, is there an issue with the teacher
and how they're teaching? So, it's more feedback and complaints and
that type of thing. Often no news is good news (interviewee 2).

Similarly:

> *Every semester the students are surveyed, so when they first start they're surveyed to say how did you find out about the course, how did you find the induction, how is your first couple of weeks going and those sort of things. They to our quality people and then at the end of the semester they're surveyed again … When they're on vocational placement they're asked to provide some anecdotal feedback to us as far as how they got on … The teachers are able to read that and just see the growth in them (Interviewee 5).*

Thus, these training institutions are collecting data from students during their programs to improve teaching quality and student retention, but this does not extend to post-training. As noted in the introduction to this section, this aspect is a result of people moving through areas of responsibility as they transition through school, training and work. The usefulness of student data in improving training programs evidenced in this discussion indicates that post-training data may also serve to improve training, particularly its capacity to connect people to employment.

5.2.3   Post-training Outcomes

One institution did track post-training outcomes.

> *… I think we ran 100 students through the first semester … From the last day of our class, I think we had something like 35 students already employed, and then another percentage that were fixing their resumes or going for a job or fiddling around after that … So we had 100 enrolled, 80 finished and 35 had jobs within the first week of finishing (Interviewee 7).*

This tracking was due to the employment of a high proportion of students prior to the end of the training program. It can be seen as a result of the demand for trained staff in the Health and Community Services sector within this region, which had led to organisations within the industry sector competing for students. As noted, elsewhere providers had only anecdotes of post-training outcomes, usually through the individual experiences of students that had remained in contact with training staff.

The absence of such data means that providers are not in a position to assess the outcomes and achievements of their programs in rigorous and evidence based ways. In turn, this circumstance means that course development is largely based on anecdotal evidence relating to the possible destinations of students. It does not lead to informed developmental programs relating to training needs and employment opportunities.

5.2.4 Industry

While there was evidence of on-going engagement between industry and training providers, this was largely at the level of securing an alignment between perceived industry needs and course development. It was not in relation to expanding course provision, improving the student experience through work placements and practical experiences as part of course content.

The nature of industry engagement meant that some prospective employers participated in prospective student interview panels, work placements, student employment as well as playing a part in training priorities. In one example, the training provider was:

> *… saying to organisations, come and be involved in the lifecycle of the students. For example, [organisation], they're wanting to come and be involved with - from the interview stage for our courses, right through to the placement and then employment outcomes. So, we're building relationships with organisations to have that first contact and ongoing contact with our students, before they lose them to another organisation. So they're starting to actually compete for the students as well (Interviewee 7).*

This step is very much training provider led. The uptake is uneven and partial in critical ways. For example, it was noted that industry did not support practical work experience and placements in the region:

> *But if we then approach them and say, how about you come and do a training session with our students, or spend half a day watching them do some prac and inviting some of them to come and be involved in your workplace, or whatever it be, it might be even much simpler than that. We find we can't get them off second base. So, industry will always be very vocal about what they haven't got, but they won't take that step to make it happen (Interviewee 7).*

This indicates how TAFE and industry can work together in regions to align training and employment outcomes and put content into industry engagement (Section 5.1.5). One problem is that industry organisations have variable commitments to the public training provision and it means that providers often do not have a full picture of industry needs, more generally. As noted it is important that training providers cross-validate organisational advice to ensure that training meets the needs of the industry, not just an organization:

> *But obviously if we've got one industry partner that has provided some feedback – and you know, all of our educators have to maintain their*

industry currency, so they have a good idea of what's going on in the industry. You might have one organisation give you feedback, and the teachers go, well, you know what, I reckon that's pretty valid what they're saying. Well then, we'll go and draw on our other industry partners and get them to verify or give us some feedback on that so we can look at delivery changes (Interviewee 2).

Of-course, such cross-validation is not an easy task.

The overarching impression is that regional TAFE providers have developed connections with the Health and Community Services industry in their regions, which has enhanced the links between training and employment outcomes. This appears to be a response to the highly competitive labour market for trained workers within the Health and Community Services industry, which has driven organisations to develop links to trainees during their studies. However, there is a view that while this has been to the benefit of the Health and Community Services industry, the organisations that make up the industry have not supported training more people, and improving the experiences of those undergoing training, through work placements and experiences.

5.2.5 Summary

Regional TAFE institutes do not have access to detailed data on the employment outcomes of their students, including their post-training employment or whether they relocate from the regions to find work. A greater understanding on these outcomes may improve training delivery, providing a closer alignment of training to likely student outcomes, however a substantial issue with compiling such data is that once people leave the TAFE training organization there is not a responsible agency or a reason to maintain contact between people and training organisations.

From within the TAFE system, student and industry feedback is being used to shape training. Student course experiences have been used to improve training modes, including the provision of online delivery (Section 5.1.2). Industry has become involved in the training system, particularly as a result of the competition for employing completing students. While this engagement includes student selection, training delivery and work placements, there was a widespread view that industry could do more to provide work placements and experiences.

5.3 Opportunities and Barriers

As employment, and subsequently training, within the Health and Community Services sector has increased, there are both opportunities for further development as well as barriers. This section addresses these two aspects of the training provision in the regions.

5.3.1 Opportunities

Following on from the analysis to date, it is possible to identify three main opportunities for further development. First, it is possible that students could be

provided with practical experiences of working in the sector. Second, training providers could work with people from within the community who have had positive experiences in Health and Community Services to promote opportunities. Third, steps could be taken to promote employment in the sector and to provide further training opportunities within the sector.

Work Experience Programs

Work experience has been shown to be beneficial to students and by extension the industry (Barton *et al.* 2018; Geelong Region LLEN 2019; Vincent *et al.* 2018). These programs can foster positive aspirations in youth, provide perceived opportunities in low socio-economic areas and also address attrition rates in teaching programs. To illustrate, Interviewee 5 noted the advantage of work experience programs, in terms of training attrition rates and remaining in the sector:

> *They've been exposed to it; they know they love it; that's where they're going to be. In our health space we also do the Certificate III in Community Services, and if they're hooked on that then they can go into youth work or mental health or child youth, family … Since they've been hooked, by the community services or health and they know that that's what they want to do or they've been exposed to that industry, yes, the retention is usually a lot more because they know that that's particularly what they want to do (Interviewee 5).*

Another interviewee provided a similar response:

> *They give students a greater insight and that insight could be either positive or negative. Yes, I want to continue on with this path or go no, this is not really where I want to be. I thought it was something different. I think that's very, very advantageous. That's why I agree - I believe there should be more opportunity for - if it's even possible for industry to open their doors and say look, here we've got an opportunity for students to come and have a look and see what we do (Interviewee 6).*

Each interviewee is making the point that work experience is an important part of a training program as well as an often positive precursor to working in the sector. The challenge is to secure placements (Section 5.3.2).

In another region, it was the engagement with the industry that provided pathways through training to employment:

> *… one of the things that we've been really working very collaboratively [with industry] about has been the [sector work experience program].*

Now that is to really give our secondary school students a bit of an idea about what the sector is so that they might consider health and community services as an option for them as they continue their studies, or they look to enter the workforce. Now that has been really successful with the numbers of students going through that program on an annual basis being the highest, I think, of any other discipline that we've got going on. I think we have almost 200 students go through that secondary school program on an annual basis. So that's fantastic (Interviewee 2).

The task by providers is to identify and secure industry cooperation. One notable success in this respect took place in Geelong.

Example: 'Growing the Health & Community Services Workforce' in the Geelong region

There is expected to be increased demand for Health and Community Service workers in Geelong due to the ageing population and the three service agencies located in the city: the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the Traffic Accident Commission and Worksafe (Geelong Region LLEN 2019).

In response to this increase in demand for trained workers, the 'Growing the Health & Community Services' program has been a particularly successful initiative in Geelong. There has been a strong focus on monitoring the outcomes of the program: there have been more than 1,000 school-based TAFE enrolments in the regions since the program commenced in 2011, and 80% of the program participants have indicated they intend to work in the sector. This success reflects the goal of the program:

Awareness raising to inspire the next generation of school leavers to pursue a career in the Health and Community Services sector (Geelong Region LLEN 2019, p. 1).

Anne-Marie Ryan has been the Executive Officer of the Geelong Region LLEN over the entire time the program has run. In an interview undertaken regarding the program, Anne-Marie Ryan stated:

… we have a program now or a model that we have developed and tested and validated since 2011 that shows how young people from Year 10 in schools can engage in understanding the complexity, the diversity of the health and community

services sector and can be making each year a subject set of choices and pathway choices as they're moving along to make a decision about whether their end goal is to work in that sector.

The discontinuation of State Government funding for the program is unfortunate given the success of the program in connecting students to opportunity, particularly as "64 per cent of participants come from under-resourced backgrounds"(Geelong Region LLEN 2019, p. 1). The outcomes of the program, supported by the extensive monitoring of students' progress, indicates that this is an important example of a regional initiative, due to its role in solving the 'learning puzzle' for many students within the Geelong community.

The notable point that comes from this case is the ways in which there must be comprehensive buy-in from industry and the provider must have the resources to undertake such engagement.

Success Stories

Positive experiences were seen as an important way to make people understand what opportunities were open to them. It increased the understanding by students of what is possible. In this way content is given to the engagements just discussed.

It can be argued that for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the positive experience narrative is critical. As remarked:

> *… aspiration comes from young people having exposure to things and seeing role models and people doing these things. Then they think, oh, that could be me too … Particularly for health and community services, we have a series of videos that we've made about local people who've gone on these pathways. Started somewhere and went on these pathways and have ended up in the health and community services sector for that reason (Interviewee 1).*

Interviewee No.2 also saw the benefits of communicating the successes of their students:

> *I think that the more advertising we do and testimonials and different things like that, is sort of getting out there that people who have done training with us have gone on to really successful careers and been able to get a job. So, I think that really comes from the marketing side of things (Interviewee 2).*

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Creating a pathway narrative allows the individual students to ground and relate their own understandings of the sector. Indeed, identifying role models in the sector and being aware of others from the 'place' working in the sector reinforces positive understandings of work in the sector.

> *I think the message is better given and understood and heard when the [person from similar background] has been through and [they] are going oh wow, I remember this [person]. I remember him when he was here and so they're more engaged than [when it's] me just [rambling] and rattling on. It's got to be relevant otherwise it won't do it (Interviewee 6).*

Hence, this suggests that there is a distinct difference in the response to information presented by people familiar to students, rather than learning only from training organisation staff.

In contrast, family histories, particularly parents, were also seen as important influences on training decisions:

> *They've been exposed with - some of them are the daughters or the sons of the nurses, who are the sons and daughters of the nurses, who are the sons and daughter of the nurses, and just through the lineage are going to be a nurse regardless of what's happened (Interviewee 5).*

Such histories may seem distinct from the conscious creation of positive narratives about work in the sector. Nonetheless, it should be noted that even these histories can be captured so that in the region they also become part of the cluster of narratives that positively reinforce the industry as a place of employment (see also Barton *et al.* 2018).

These narrative approaches have been promoted digitally, as illustrated below.

Example: Rural Inspire

The Rural Inspire program is an initiative that provides support for rural Victorians as they transition out of secondary education, to employment, training and further education. This includes a web portal, and "connecting today's rural youth with rural successful people, through shared stories, case studies, guest presentations, mentoring, workshops, work experience and possible employment".
As well as providing examples of what is possible in post-school years, the program provides networks for rural students who need to leave their places of residence to take up post-secondary education opportunities (Rural Inspire n.d.).

These reflections from training providers align with the view that social norms are important influences on peoples' decisions regarding training and employment. Visible and relatable examples of people who have succeeded through training and subsequently finding work make opportunities seem accessible. It provides further support for the conclusions of the 2018 Lock-in and Learning report, focussed on northwest Tasmania, that instilling aspiration in youth as well as their parents is an important element of the 'learning puzzle' (REF). These opportunities are made seem accessible through relatable stories of others' successes, rather than directly from training providers and others involved in the sector.

Careers and Pathways

The perception of an opportunity can be reinforced by the idea of a career and/or a pathway to a career. This notion provides a time perspective to employment; it suggests a long-term future for those employed in a sector. Indeed, some respondents claimed that more could be done to attract students to the sector by promoting a longer-term view of the career and education opportunities that arise, as well as the range of careers on offer. That is, completion of some TAFE courses provides credit in others or on entrance into tertiary education. They saw this as an opportunity for those entering the sector.

Nursing in particular offers this opportunity, through the Enrolled to Registered Nurse training structure of Diplomas and Bachelor's Degrees, for example:

> *… most people who graduate as an enrolled nurse will either seek employment or continue on their pathway to do their bachelor's. So, we have intakes of 25 at a time, we probably have completions of 15 to 18 students that will finish out of each of those 25. Out of that group, five approximately, maybe five to eight, would go straight into their bachelor, because they get 12 months off, if you do a Diploma of Nursing you get 12 months off the study of bachelor, so it only then takes you another two years. The rest would find other work, continue to work in aged care but as an EN rather than an RN, or seek employment in a hospital setting (Interviewee 7).*

This case illustrates the ways in which occupations can be structured and promoted in terms of incremental pathways that can become part of a person's life course as an employee.

In another region, connections between TAFE and the local university have been developed, to provide pathways for students:

> *[Local university and TAFE provider] have had some really productive negotiations in terms of creating some credit transfers between some of their courses and university pathways. And, with allied health, while there*

is no credit transfer, they have made it a direct pathway so the two
courses talk to each other, so that's positive from a student's point of
view (Interviewee 8).

In this case the pathway is being constructed. It is necessary to note that this step requires resource, planning and capacity to create and value such pathways.

There is a diversity of careers in the sector. Of note, it is the case that there is a populism about some careers, such as medical doctors, while the pathways to other occupations where there may be shortages can be opaque, such as Medical Radiation Therapists, Sonographers, Pharmacists and Occupational Therapists as discussed in Section 4.1. For example:

To me, I look at what young people are being told about pathways, and
primarily they are being offered 'you complete a VCE, you go to
university, you go to TAFE at that point', it's a direct route through without
the recognition of the role work along the way plays … We fall down
broadly, how do we raise the level of understanding of the range of
opportunities that sit out there and the ways to get there, they're being
fed 'be a doctor', they are not seeing the full range of all those different
things (Interviewee 10).

Such complexity requires careful curation so that the full range of opportunities are taken into account. This requires further consideration, not least to understand how all the different pathways and careers sit alongside each other, as well as how they are represented and valued in in popular discourse.

This section has provided further insights into the discussion of connection people to training, in that it indicates that there is a need to foster greater understanding of the pathways on offer in the Health and Community Services sector. While there were some concerns regarding the limited opportunities for young people and school leavers, there are also increasing demands for trained labour in the regions. This discussion provides further support for the contention that there could be greater awareness of the opportunities within the sector that are facilitated by TAFE training, particularly in the case of careers advisors within schools as well as career prospects within the industry.

5.3.2 Barriers

Before such opportunities can be realised, some barriers need to be overcome. The three main barriers were: community expectations, as discussed in the 2018 report section *Lock-in and Learning*; the restrictions on enrolments due to the number of placements available within regions; and, the limited number of qualified teaching staff available.

Community Expectations

There seems to be a lag in the community recognising the opportunities, particularly parents in understanding the possibilities of a career in this field. In general, careers advice in schools is still directing students towards University education rather than TAFE. As Interviewee 3 noted:

> *I mean, schools are a funny - they seem to focus on those kids around getting an ATAR score as an entry level into university. But that's only a small group of kids that actually want to go on and do university. Most of them just want to stay in the region, play with their footy club and their cricket club and get a job and be happy here. So, I think we need - well, schools need to change their focus about putting all the emphasis on the ATAR score and the kids who are wanting to go on to university. But, I mean, that's like turning around the Titanic.*

And:

> *We still see the focus, on career advice and information provided to people, it is still very pointed towards 'you should go to university' as opposed to a vocational start of a pathway (Interviewee 9).*

This recalls the West and Northwest Tasmania discussion from last years' report, particularly the role of aspiration and understanding contemporary employment markets in fostering connections to employment (Boyle *et al.* 2018).

This reflection on career advice was expanded upon in a nuanced way by another:

> *Within the health and community services sector in particular, there is probably a really productive pathway to go from school through vocational education and training, develop some Cert level quals so you can get a job and be working in the industry while you then move on to university and keep getting a higher qualification. It would be an excellent pathway for a young person who perhaps, looks at the notion of that HECS debt that you can accumulate and at any point along the way you can say 'this is not where I wanted to go' and refocus your energy. But to go straight fully into building a HECS debt and studying something you probably only have the scantiest information about … (Interviewee 8).*

In addition to the HECS debt, the costs of regional residents attending university in metropolitan areas was also raised as an issue in this regard.

Placements

Work placements are an essential part of qualifications in this field. While respondents indicated that they work closely with industry, securing placements for the current student load is difficult due to competition with higher education providers, legislative requirements (OH&S etc.) and the costs associated with having to dedicate staff time to support work placements.

Such factors appear to be a major restriction on student enrolments, for example:

> *Health is an area of jobs growth, but the way that the VET course in allied health works is that they have to have a mandatory placement, if they don't do 80 hours over two years, they then don't pass that subject, or that certificate. But it's really challenging to get the kids into the health facilities to do those 80 hours, we have one school who is saying it's just too hard and are not going to offer it any more … you are wanting all these people into the sector but at the other end, they're not offering opportunities for young people to get qualifications … (Interviewee 11).*

As indicated, the tension between course and qualification requirements and securing a placement can be overwhelming. These factors raise questions about industry engagement, school and TAFE resources, as well as well as the practicality of mandatory requirement.

Insights into why more placements are not provided by industry was provided by one interviewee:

> *Now that's really going to become more and more necessary and the reason I say that is because our workplaces are very stressed around work placement. One of the things we're really cognisant of is that we feel there needs to be greater support for the employers to be able to be literally mentors for people in the workplace. Because if you're in the workplace and your boss comes to you and says great, we're going to have an intern or a student on work placement, as the employee, you just go well, what's in it for me? I then have to change my working day to oversee somebody, that just makes my working day more complex. It's not as if I don't have enough things to do already and I don't get anything personally out of that. The sector does and this is where we've got a really big disparity between the sector is consistently saying to us, we need more skills and we need more people and we say can you help us with work placement and they say no. So that's really one of the biggest challenges (Interviewee 4).*

The practicality of such placements within a work place can be overlooked. This suggests that more comprehensive and holistic approaches to the role and place of work placements should be developed, as indicated in some of the exemplary cases cited above.

The other side of the process is that organisations within the industry have their own preferences for the type of incumbent they want in a work placement. As one interviewee noted:

> *… we run the diploma of nursing for enrolled nurses. So all of them combined basically take up the resources of the various facilities so it's difficult when you break down the hierarchy of registered nurses, enrolled nurses down to personal care. The registered nurses take precedence and then most of the time they get some sort of incentive to take them, which is great, don't get me wrong, but third in line sometimes we're overlooked. We might have booked months in advance. Sometimes 12 months in advance. Then we're rung up and told sorry we can't take your students, we're taking registered nurses instead, which then puts a hold on everything for us.*

Similarly:

> *What you find is, particularly in the hospitals or the nurses, very limited options for the division 2 nurses compared to the university nurses, people like to associate with the university not the TAFE (Interviewee 9).*

In effect the hospitals in this case, have student placement preferences, based on qualification. The cost is that others undergoing training miss out because they are not preferred, are deemed unqualified. Of note, this exercise of preference also occurred with work experience students as well, where placements would be cancelled to allow for those regarded as more qualified and therefor of more value to the organisation.

Within the regions, training providers had worked on developing stronger connections with industry in order to facilitate increased numbers of student placements on offer. Another suggested that industry may also benefit from casting placements as a social investment "because they are investing in the community and helping young people to develop skills" (Interviewee 8).

Teaching Staff

Shortages among teaching staff is also a problem. The low comparative pay rates and the need for a Cert IV Training and Assessment (TAE) were major barriers in recruiting teaching staff for Health and Community Services: interviewees

particularly noted the impact of greater requirements for attaining the Cert IV in recent years.

TAFE teaching was thought to have some appeal due to the 'friendlier' hours in comparison to nursing for example, and also when the physical requirements become overly burdensome. For example:

> *I did put a bit of a shout out last year when we were in desperate need of teachers in that area and all of the people that I reached out to who were referred to me, so they weren't cold call, they were referred to me, all of them said the time taken to get their TAE because it's 12 months, was an investment they weren't prepared to make. So, that's really interesting. If you were looking at a family life and work life balance, whatever that means to anyone, you would suggest that teaching would be able to provide some of those flexibilities people are looking for, but it doesn't quite resonate yet (Interviewee 4).*

While this is a barrier for TAFE teachers, pay increases in the for TAFE teachers in one State have made attracting staff easier, therefore "I think we will start to see more people going in and coming across to teach into health and community services" (Interviewee 4).

The more general point to make is that the TAFE sector and teaching more generally has undergone much change, as indicated in Section 3.2. There is extensive evidence of structural reorganisation and employment disruption. Alongside the relative pay rates in the sector and the hours of work, such disruptions do not make for working lives where the types of initiatives discussed above for the provision of training and employment placement can be readily realised.

5.3.3   Summary

This section of the report has provided insights into the opportunities for improving the connections between regional residents and employment in the growing Health and Community Services sector. The most telling insights were regarding the importance of work experience in increasing the uptake of training and careers in Health and Community Services. The Careers in Health and Community Services program detailed in Section 5.3.2 provides an example of how work placements provide the first step towards careers in the Health and Community Services sector, particularly for those from less-fortunate circumstances. However, the student work experiences in the Health and Community Services sector also were seen as problematic. The requirements for students to complete placements as part of their training was seen as difficult to source and a barrier to increasing enrolments in the sector.

The use of success stories from within communities was also seen as an effective way to attract people to the Health and Community Services sector. Such narratives also can serve as a way to communicate the range of careers and training pathways

on offer. Both of these ways to increase engagement with training engender aspiration, by making clear what opportunities are on offer and that they are obtainable. In this way, these opportunities also address the problems of community expectations by highlighting the positive outcomes that can arise from training and entry into the Health and Community Services sector.

The main barriers for increasing training delivery were in sourcing placements. Of particular note there is an apparent placement hierarchy. To specify, university (and equivalent qualification) placements take precedence over other training needs, to the point where training placements had been cancelled to make way for university student nurses. Regional training providers were building their industry networks in order to secure placements for their student cohorts; however, this is a major issue if training in the sector is to expand and consolidate.

While not as regularly referred to as an issue as placements, access to teaching staff was also an issue in some regions, particularly in areas where there has been significant disruption, reflected in pay gaps between TAFE and industry wages. Moreover, there is evidence that the requirement for TAFE teachers to have completed the year-long Certificate IV in Training and Assessment has become an issue; some were unwilling to undertake the training. If this is so in these regions, it is likely that access to placements and qualified trainers is an issue for training in the Health and Community Services sector across the country.

6 Conclusion

Training plays a critical role in connecting people to emerging employment in regional areas. The research provides insights into how the complex system of people, employment and training is reshaped as a result of industry transitions. In this way, this report introduces the mechanisms by which the changes in employment changes included in *Diversity in Regional Growth and Development*, and also extends the understandings of regional training provision discussed in Section 2.2.3.

Regional TAFE providers have changed their teaching profiles and scopes in order to respond to the increased opportunities in Health and Community Services, with industry networks providing input into both to whom and how training is delivered in regional areas. While not a result of selection policies within regional training, the changing demography of regional workforces reported on within *Diversity in Regional Growth and Development* is also evident in the interviews with training providers. In particular, interviewees indicated that there was a predominance of female trainees in Health and Community Services training, and there was also a high proportion of mature-age people in the courses. There was also a view that the industry prefers mature workers, due to the nature of the work in sectors such as aged care.

Regional TAFE providers would benefit from a greater understanding of the pathways and post-training employment and mobility of regional people. While there is regular surveying of current training students within the TAFE sector, and some broad-brush surveys of youth and training in Australia, there is not an understanding of outcomes within regions. These are recurrent questions for education and training providers in regional Australia, whether training allows people to remain in place or relocate and find work (Corbett 2007; Cuervo & Wyn 2012; Dalley-Trim & Alloway 2010; Dufty-Jones et al. 2014; Hillman & Rothman 2007). This also runs in the other direction, as it is unclear as to what extent the inter-regional 'poaching' of qualified staff, as referred to in Section 4.2.3 is occurring.

The theoretical underpinning of this research is the 'learning puzzle'; the political economy of education and training that describes the interaction between labour supply, labour demand and training within regions. Drawing on this construct, the opportunities for improving the regional outcomes from training are supply-side, that is increasing the willingness for regional people to participate in the Health and Community Services sector through work experience programs, the use of success stories and promoting the varied careers and education pathways on offer in the sector. In this light, the end of funding for the *Careers in Health and Community Services* program in Geelong is unfortunate given its successes in creating aspiration and facilitating training uptake, particularly in disadvantaged sections of the community. Also, pre-training work experiences appear to provide students with a better understanding of their personal 'fit' with Health and Community Services employment, and therefore improves retention and completion rates for training programs. Given these outcomes, increased work experience opportunities, presentations by successful recent alumni from within regions, and work expos should be seen as priorities for regional training policy-makers and institutions.

A major barrier to increasing regional training was the provision of placements, as students within Health and Community Services training programs are required to complete set hours within the workplace to complete. There was a sense that regional industry was willing to engage with training organisations for their own benefit – employment for preferred students, matching training to their requirements – but not for placements and work experience programs, which were likely to be at a cost to industry. A further source of frustration for regional training providers was the hierarchy of placements, for example, TAFE provider placements would be cancelled if there was a requirement for universities to place students. While the interviewees indicated that they were building closer relationships with industry to mitigate this issue, it was cited as an issue across all regions included in this research.

The second issue for further consideration is the difficulty of attracting teaching staff. The requirement for TAFE teachers to have a Cert IV Training and Assessment was seen as a major impediment, as it is a year-long qualification and required regardless of other employment experiences or qualifications a prospective TAFE trainer may have. It should be noted that this is not an argument that TAFE trainers should not have to be qualified, but rather the impact on people's decisions as to whether they take up work as a trainer, particularly if it is secondary to a career within the Health and Community Services sector. There was also some concern that TAFE training does not pay as well as some types of work within the Health and Community Services sector, which also reduced the appeal of TAFE training as a career. In this regard, the Victorian Government's recent increases in pay rates for trainees may be an important intervention (Tierney 2018). While this research has focussed on the Health and Community Services sector, due to its emergence as a major source of employment in regional Australia, these insights likely apply to other industry sectors. Issues with attracting training staff are likely to prevail in other sectors, particularly as the Cert IV Training and Assessment is a standard requirement.

The overarching conclusion is that there is a need to increase the awareness that the employment opportunities in regional Australia are no longer in the traditional sectors of agriculture, mining and manufacturing - regardless of their economic importance. There needs to greater emphasis on awareness of the growth in Health and Community Services employment, and engendering aspirations to work in this sector amongst regional residents, and a concurrent increase in the understanding of how TAFE training provides a conduit to regional careers and life-long learning in this sector.

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