

TRANSCRIPT

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into local economic development initiatives in Victoria

Ballarat — 24 January 2013

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Associate Professor B. Wright, Executive Director, Industry Skills Centre, University of Ballarat (sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome to the public hearings of the joint party Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into local economic development initiatives in Victoria. Any evidence you give today will be protected by parliamentary privilege but any statements you make outside this meeting will not have that same protection. Barry, could you state your name, your position and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of, if there is such an organisation?

Assoc. Prof. WRIGHT — Barry Wright. I am the Executive Director of the Industry Skills Centre with the University of Ballarat.

The CHAIR — Any evidence you give today will become public evidence. Can I now invite you to make a verbal submission, please.

Assoc. Prof. WRIGHT — I thought it would be better to give a verbal submission than give a full presentation, probably building on the tour we did today but putting it into context and giving you a bit of an overview of the University, which is made up of some dual-sector schools. We have the Education and Arts School; the Science, IT and Engineering School; the Business School; the School of Health Sciences; and then there is UB College. They are all dual-sector schools and then there is the Industry Skills Centre, which is purely vocational training. We have a number of campuses. The two main campuses are at Mount Helen here in Ballarat and Lydiard Street, in central Ballarat. Then we have campuses at Mount Rowan, Gillies Street, Ararat, Stawell and Horsham.

The construct of the University is pretty split into thirds. When I say that, I mean a third higher education, a third international students and a third vocational. There are about 8000 in each, so all up it is just under 24 000 students in enrolments and they are broken down into those three categories.

In that context, I think we are a big organisation and a big employer within the city and the region, but in the context of a university we are quite small. Given that, we have to be innovative and flexible and I think we show that in a lot of ways. I can give you some examples of that. The dual-sector partnership is one where the University is working with six other TAFE colleges in regional Victoria trying to set up really strong articulation pathways from VET into higher education or going back the other way. Really we are helping one another to open up different markets and create some demand for it — not so much demand as economies of scale. Where we have small groups of students, and ordinarily those classes would not run, we are looking at how we link those up so that we get economies of scale and make sure that across those partners we have enough in those specific qualifications to actually run the program. We are trying to think innovatively there. We also have a number of formal partnerships between the schools, the other organisations and the University per se. We deal with a lot of partners in the international market. We do not bring a lot of international students to Australia; we prefer to partner up with third-party providers in their country, and work with them under a moderation program so that at the end of the day those students receive our awards and qualifications, but we do it through a third party. We do a lot of that locally, because that is how we see we get a better breadth of coverage.

When we bring it back into context and look at Ballarat City Council, we work closely together at a number of levels. I think we interface, and there are a lot of touch points from CEO to the vice chancellor level to the committee level to membership on the Committee for Ballarat. There is direct contact when necessary. There is another touch point around local and external research. ICT is another touch point. You will have a presentation from Mal Valance later about that, so I will leave that alone. I think training qualification skills acquisition aligned to the economic development and growth of our community is another touch point and we are in communication with the council at a number of points over a number of issues. The Ballarat West employment zone is a prime example where the city is looking to develop that area. We have been in discussions around training skills research — where we fit, how we can help, where the opportunities are and how do we help one another to make that work. I think that the relationship with Ballarat City Council is vitally important. It is there and it is a strong one.

The other thing that we take into account — and I know the city does and the University touches on it — is we can work in isolation. If we do not do it in a coordinated and managed approach, it will not work. Whenever we are looking at growth strategies, we are dealing with Ballarat City Council. When they are looking at growth strategies they look at a host of things in the University and what the University offers as part of it. So I think that is where we fit.

Where are we going? We are trying to be innovative. I am probably going to be a little bit skewed in my views here now, because I am going to talk about VET, because that is what I know the most about. The Industry Skills Centre is a new entity for the University under a restructure that took place mid last year. It started on 1 January. It has been launched. We had a successful launch, and it is now, 'How do we position ourselves? How do we be smart and innovative to deliver vocational training not only to this community but to the communities either to the west of us, to the east of us or to the north of us?'. We will be a part of the dual-sector partnership. We are looking at how some of our programs that are on offer here are not on offer in those other TAFEs, and we will see how we make that work.

With the introduction of applied degrees, we have an applied degree that is going through an academic board and our internal processes now. It is a bachelor of manufacturing operations. We expect that will be in the marketplace in semester two this year. We are looking to roll that out to country Victoria and interstate, because some of our interstate TAFE colleagues and partners are interested in it. So we will look at it there. There is also an opportunity to introduce it into the international market.

We are looking at how we can be innovative. You toured the manufacturing centre this morning. We are trying to make that a centre of excellence. We are trying to make that innovation and design. I think that is where manufacturing is heading. We have to be at the forefront of that. We have to be a leader of that within the region.

Something that I did not talk about or show you this morning was our rapid prototype printer, which is really good for prototyping. We are working with it with industry; a couple of our industries have used it already for R&D. I have brought a sample with me. A printer actually made this spanner. You design it up in a file. It is not a JPEG file; it is an STL file. The printer will print that out, and it is fully workable. You can do that for most things. It is a 3D printer.

Mrs PEULICH — I might try this out.

Assoc. Prof. WRIGHT — It is a 3D printer, but it makes things that actually work. That is really good for our industry. Industry can come to us if they are doing a lot of R&D and they want a sample or they want to test it, whether it is an alpha or a beta sample. They come to us, print it out, we work with them and then they can go back. If they need to make design modifications, they can. We are trying to position ourselves as a centre of excellence in that area, and along the way we will try to do that in other disciplines within the VET sector. That is pretty much all I would like to say, but I am happy to take any questions that you would like to ask.

Mrs PEULICH — Thank you very much, and thank you for allowing us to visit this morning and see the progress of the works and what will hopefully be not just a dream but a reality very soon. I am interested in your Industry Skills Centre, and in particular the committee. Could you tell me how that is working?

Assoc. Prof. WRIGHT — At the moment we actually have two industry reference advisory groups, and they work very well. For instance, in the building and construction area we have an advisory group. We have been working with that group for three years. The members include, and I am happy to read out their names: Michael Coutts, who owns a large electrical contracting business; Peter Dunn, who is an architect; Craig Fletcher, who is a building surveyor; John King, from JG King Homes, who has a domestic home point of view; Dean Stevens, who is a director at AW Nicholson and a commercial builder; and also Mez Woodward, who is a consultant in the sustainability area of building.

We meet on a quarterly basis. We have items on an agenda. Members can bring things to the table. We bring things to the table. We explain to them any new training packages — anything that is relevant to the building and construction area. It is formalised. We take minutes. We have discussions like, 'Is training relevant? What would you like to see?' Most of them have trainees or apprentices with us, so we are trying to get their feedback. There is no use for us to be in the training business if our training is not relevant and not hitting the mark. That is one of the ways that we test ourselves to see if we are relevant and how our training is going.

With manufacturing, we use the Australian Industry Group as that reference group. Now that the Industry Skills Centre has other things coming into it — like the automotive area and conservation and land management — I think we probably need to set up another couple of committees that are really relevant and specific to those areas. We meet with those people on a regular basis so they can feed us information and say, 'This is where the market is heading, this is where businesses are heading and this is what we need', and then we can align our

training to try to meet that need. We are not going to meet everyone's needs, but if we can get the basis of the generic training right, then I think what happens back in the workplace can then be tailored more specifically for them. We want to get the basic principles right. That is why we use those industry reference groups. I think it is vital that we do that.

Mrs PEULICH — That sounds fantastic, and I commend you for it. Earlier today you also mentioned that there were a number of sectors that you focused on. Could you explain how you came to those conclusions and what the benefit is of creating that sort of critical mass of skill, ability and resources?

Assoc. Prof. WRIGHT — We obviously do some market research, so we look at where the demand lies. The previous incarnation of the Industry Skills Centre — which was the School of Manufacturing and Construction — ran an annual dinner every year, and it invited industry partners and guests to that dinner. At that dinner — no-one gets a free meal — there were surveys and questionnaires. From doing market research and running that dinner, you gain some really good information and market intelligence, and from that market intelligence we set our program.

Mrs PEULICH — Thank you.

Mr FOLEY — Thank you for your submission and your time this morning, Barry. We heard evidence earlier today about the significant and diverse manufacturing base of the city, the importance of the University and your role in the clusters and the precincts to support that through the critical area of skills in moving to high-skill best practice. In that context, what has been the impact of recent TAFE changes to that area of work in the University?

Assoc. Prof. WRIGHT — To be honest, it is too early to say. Obviously when the changes to funding occurred last year I think the University acted fairly quickly but I think responsibly; it restructured. I think the restructure is probably a really good way to go; I support the restructure. That is not to say that there was not a bit of hurt there — there certainly was some pain — but you cannot change that, so we have got on with business.

To answer your question specifically, it is too early to say. We have started the enrolment process, which started very late last year and into this year, but classes do not officially start until after the long weekend, so we are just starting to get some data on it now. We certainly did cut some courses out — we had to cut some courses out. Those courses might have been cut anyway, I do not know. I have seen some data, but not all the data, so I think some were at risk anyway. Some of them may not have been at risk, but we had to make some alterations, so we did.

Mrs PEULICH — Will that necessarily weaken your performance as an institution, or is there a capacity to strengthen what you do?

Assoc. Prof. WRIGHT — I think it gives us the opportunity to focus on our strengths. Sometimes you can have too much on offer, and that is a weakness. I think we have aligned the business and we have reviewed what is on offer. We have reduced what we offer, but I think what we are offering we have strength in; we have a lot of capability and capacity, and to me that is a good thing.

Mrs PEULICH — And the increased funding of skill shortage area courses will surely be of financial benefit to the institution.

Assoc. Prof. WRIGHT — Yes, it will. The certificate III programs have had some increase, so to me that is really pleasing. I am just a little bit concerned though that there has been a decrease at the certificate II level. That can be a concern, because that can be an entry point for a lot of young people. The pre-apprenticeship programs in most of the trade disciplines that we run are very strong, and we get very good conversion from completion into rolling into an apprenticeship. We put a lot of effort into that, but you have to be careful that that is the starting point for a lot of young people to gain the skills. It is also a starting point for where an industry comes to us and says, 'Who are your best students in pre app? I want to put someone on now.' You will offer that employer a number of names; you do not just give them one. They can make a choice. We are not an employment agency, but we are happy to put names forward.

You have to be very careful; you have to be able to run those programs. If you decrease the funding at that level, and it is an entry level, that creates stress. Whilst the certificate III funding is welcome, you also have to match that and complement that at the certificate II level. I think that is just something to be aware of.

Mrs PEULICH — Once enrolments are done we will know more, will we?

Mr CARROLL — Just a quick one, Barry. Thanks for today. What I liked about today at your manufacturing centre of excellence was the way you spoke about the glass. When people walk past and they go in and see the apprentices and the people working there, they will see that mechanical work is not once what it was. It is pretty much a clean floor, clean industry, ergonomic and all that sort of stuff, so you are really on the right path.

For the local students going through secondary schooling here in Ballarat, is the University of Ballarat the university of choice for most of them, or are they choosing to go out of the city down to Melbourne to another university to see how they go?

Assoc. Prof. WRIGHT — That is an interesting one. We have migration both ways. We have students travelling to Ballarat for certain reasons and courses. I would think that probably the migration away from Ballarat is fairly huge, because a lot of students do migrate from Ballarat to Melbourne universities, predominantly because of the courses on offer. I think the University of Ballarat has a good range of offerings, but it does not offer everything; we cannot cater for everyone. I think that we still capture a fairly good cohort of our secondary school leavers who go into either vocational or higher education training, but there is certainly a fair migration out. We do not offer architecture, law and medicine, so there has to be a natural migration because we cannot meet the needs of those students.

We do have students coming the other way; I am not sure what the numbers are, but I expect that the migration out would be larger than the migration coming back. But then we also pick up the migration of students from the west into here, because the expense of living in Melbourne prevents them from going to Melbourne; Ballarat is a good option. Yes, it is a hard one, but we do know that it is both ways.

Mr CARROLL — Thanks, Barry.

The CHAIR — Barry, on behalf of the Committee I thank you both for the tour that you provided for us this morning, which I found particularly entertaining and educational, and also for your presence here this afternoon and for the evidence that you have provided for us.

Mrs PEULICH — And the leadership that you are showing.

Assoc. Prof. WRIGHT — My pleasure. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. I also take this opportunity to recognise Catherine King, the federal Member for Ballarat, who has entered the room.

Witness withdrew.