

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the opportunities for people to use telecommuting and e-business to work remotely in rural and regional Victoria

Echuca — 15 August 2013

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Witnesses

Mr H. Cock, chief executive, Committee for Echuca-Moama; and
Mr P. Marks, director, capability and export, Foodmach; and
Mr B. Fitzpatrick, assistant to principal, St Joseph's College; and
Ms L. Kapperer, human resources coordinator, Kagome.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the public hearing of the Rural and Regional Committee inquiry into opportunities for people to use telecommuting and e-business to work remotely in rural and regional Victoria. I hereby advise that all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided under relevant Australian law. I also advise that any comments made outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. I ask each of you to give your name and address — your business address will be fine — for the benefit of Hansard.

Mr COCK — My name is Hayden Cock, and my address is 19 Sunset Avenue, Echuca. I am executive officer of the Committee for Echuca-Moama.

Mr FITZPATRICK — My name is Ben Fitzpatrick. I am assistant to the principal, St Joseph's College, 21 Dixon Street, Echuca.

Ms KAPPERER — I am Lisa Kapperer, and I am the human resources coordinator at Kagome, 54 Cornelia Creek Road, Echuca.

Mr MARKS — My name is Peter Marks, and I am a director of Foodmach Pty Ltd, 1 Darling Street, Echuca.

The CHAIR — Would you like to take questions as you make your presentations or at the end?

Mr COCK — I think as we go through.

Mr FITZPATRICK — Yes.

Mr MARKS — I am pretty flexible.

The CHAIR — That will be fine. Whoever would like to lead off can lead off.

Mr COCK — I will just do a very quick introduction. As I mentioned, I am the CEO of the Committee for Echuca-Moama. I have three of our member organisations represented this morning, and we thought it would be good if we could get a different cross-section of perspectives. We have a food processor, a big manufacturer down the end and also St Joseph's College. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak, and by all means ask questions as we go along. I have an easy role here this morning; I am not saying much other than making the introductions. First of all, I welcome members of the committee to Echuca-Moama. I know that Paul is a regular and Damian is here once in a while, but I welcome other members of the committee to our fine town. Peter is going to kick things off.

Mr MARKS — I will kick off. Paul certainly knows Foodmach pretty well, since he inaugurated our 40th anniversary.

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr MARKS — Foodmach employs about 100 people. We manufacture high-tech automation systems for the food and beverage industry — robotics and that type of stuff — and employ a lot of engineering staff, tradespeople and the like. We have an office with about 20 people in Melbourne, and the rest are employed here, but we do have two remote offices, one being in Queensland on the Sunshine Coast and one being in Sydney.

I talked with our guys just to get their thoughts on how their home office has worked and how it integrates with our business. In that context I think there are more positives than negatives in being able to work in a remote environment. The typical things include no commuting to an office. Having an office in Melbourne, when we tee up an early meeting, one of our directors, who commutes from Geelong to Melbourne, on a number of occasions has not made it to meetings because he is stuck on the ring-road or in gridlock on Bolte Bridge or what have you. That is a major benefit. It also enables the staff to have work-life balance. It enables people to be able to live in an area that may be less costly than living in a main city area.

An example is one of our guys, a specialist, who handles the market all over Australia. He lives in Buderim in Queensland. He gets to go to work every day in his shorts and T-shirt and thongs when he is working from the office, with no commuting and the convenience of being able to drive down to the airport at Mooloolaba and get

a cheaper flight to capital cities. It works pretty well. With our guy in Sydney, he is up towards Wyong, so out of the city area. Certainly being able to have affordable housing makes a big difference.

The CHAIR — Just on that, Peter, we have heard that some reservations of some employers are that they cannot see them; they do not know they are working. How do you manage and measure the performance of someone who is living in Queensland in his thongs and shorts and T-shirt?

Mr MARKS — Yes, it would be difficult if you were just employing someone to do a fairly mundane task and it was about how many hours they worked. These guys are working in both business development and sales, and their KPIs are on results. Whilst they might be paid for a 40-hour week, typically they would probably work 50 or more. What it does is give them the flexibility to, if they want, go out and do something personal — go to get the car serviced, a medical appointment. They are working on their own, so they are flexible.

The CHAIR — So it is easy to measure their output?

Mr MARKS — Absolutely, yes. It is results, ultimately. They do have the benefit that, whilst they have their home offices, they probably spend only 50 per cent of their time in the office. They are either working on proposals and that sort of thing in the office coming up with designs for systems, or they are in front of customers. So they are not locked up for seven days a week at home. It is probably a little bit different to some of the scenarios you might be considering. Yes, it is about flexible working hours. Typically you think about maybe a younger family or people who have to get after-school care and stuff like that. It is an opportunity to go and pick up the kids and they can go and do their stuff.

The other thing is increased productivity. For those who do work in an office environment, with the amount of interaction that you have with people day to day, whether it is with interruptions on personal matters or whether you are talking about businesses, there are pros and cons there. But being able to have quiet time with no-one else around — maybe you do not answer phones, or whatever, but you do not have people knocking on your door all the time — productivity is increased dramatically in that regard. And obviously not having to have a dedicated office is a cost saving to a business, particularly servicing remote areas, like Brisbane and Sydney for us. With resources these days, what does everyone do when they want to find something out? You can go and ask a colleague. Probably the first thing I do is google or get on YouTube if I want to find out about something.

On the negative side of things, the flipside of not being interrupted is isolation and less interaction with associates so you do not have the incidental learnings of things. We use a lot of different computer programs like CAD and all sorts of different computer programs. If you spent 5 minutes standing at someone's shoulder and watching how they did something, you would say, 'I did not know you could do that'. People who are working in isolation do not have those incidental learnings from bouncing off their colleagues. It can be a little difficult for them.

Obviously, in our sort of engineering business, we need to transfer large files. When you are remote, if you do not have the high-speed internet, that is a real hurdle.

The CHAIR — Obviously your man in Queensland has got access to that.

Mr MARKS — We have got high-speed internet, but that it is not as good as it could be. We can use Skype and stuff like that, if we want to do that. We have got dedicated videoconferencing between our office here and our office in Melbourne, but that is not broader than that. Certainly transferring big files is a big issue. Some of our files are 20, 30 or 40 megabytes, so you do not want to be waiting around for hours just to have a look at a file. You have got to plan ahead, send the large files on websites like YouSendIt, or something like that, for large files, and what have you.

Mr DRUM — Peter, did Foodmach just grow organically here and just get bigger and bigger? Did you start it here?

Mr MARKS — No, we started it in Melbourne in 1972. We took advantage of some tax breaks for decentralising industry in the early 1980s. We were working in the Goulburn Valley probably half the year. We relocated what was Plumrose and is now Simplot up here. We have relocated Henry Jones to Kyabram. We built the yoghurt plant, which was Yoplait, then Nestlé, now Fonterra. We built that under APV in France. We

work for SPC. So we are working here half the year, and the reason we are here is partly because we had the work here. We also had quite a good workforce after the bearing factory shutdown. That was just where our business resides now. When that shut down there were a lot of competent tradesmen, toolmakers and what have you that we were employing half the year.

Mr HOWARD — How many employees do you have now?

Mr MARKS — About 100, and it was probably 12 when we started back in 1982, I think it was, here. We have grown quite considerably and most of our customers are outside of the region. Obviously we have our bread-and-butter customers, which we call the local food group here, but our biggest customer is Lion, as in Lion Breweries and Lion Dairy and Drinks, the second one being Coca-Cola. All the big players are our customers all over Australia. In fact we have got people working currently in pretty much every state. We are not working in the Northern Territory, but that is about the only place. Yes, we have grown considerably since we have been here. As technology has changed we have been more online, sending big files from here to here. We have got engineering people down in Melbourne. We have got engineering people up here, and it can be quite cumbersome dealing with some of that information that we have got to transfer.

The other comments we make about people working from home offices is that they obviously have to be self-motivated. They have to be self-starters, otherwise you have got no hope. The isolation of being stuck in a home office by yourself, I think there you need to think about ways that you can interact with the other people. Whether it is, I do not know, almost like social networking, through an intranet or something like that.

The CHAIR — What we have heard about in some towns is they will talk about having hubs where people are not necessarily just with Foodmach, but they might be at Foodmach, Simplot, a solicitors or someone. They all come in and there might be 12 different little offices in this hub where they can go, they can have interaction and that type of thing.

Mr MARKS — Yes, we have done that before. We had an office in Sydney, in Parramatta, but the guys still had to commute to it, and when 50 per cent of their time is spent out visiting customers anyway, most of the time it was empty. It was some place to go, but probably not worthwhile.

It is not like these days you need your secretarial services and stuff like that, because everyone does their own — you type your own letters, you make your spreadsheets. You do everything yourself these days anyway.

Mr DRUM — Are Foodmach able to easily differentiate between the various roles you have, as to which are suitable for remote working and which ones are not? I imagine there would be a few knocks on the door of the general manager saying you know, ‘Macca works from home, do you reckon I could also?’.

Mr MARKS — Yes and no. With our Queensland office, the guy we have got up there travels all over Australia. He is a specialist in the beer and beverage industry, so it really did not matter where he lived. He did live in Sydney originally. He worked from a home office in Sydney. It was when he decided to move to Queensland, he thought, ‘I’m going to retire in Queensland anyway, why don’t I move there now? It doesn’t make any difference. I have probably got to go down on a plane and visit all my customers anyway’. I do not know that the business would be open to just saying, ‘Anyone who wants to work from home can’.

Mr DRUM — So it is clearly definable who can and who cannot.

Mr MARKS — Yes, it has got to make sense ultimately, and it would be on a case-by-case basis as to how it works: you know, look at a cost-benefit analysis of how you are going to do it. Do you rent an office and waste people’s time commuting? When it is just to move from home to sit in another office by yourself, it does not make a lot of sense.

Mr DRUM — Has your company quantified the actual savings?

Mr MARKS — Not particularly. I do not know what our office in Sydney would cost us. We do pay people for their home office space. I do not know what it might be — \$1000 a month or something like that for using the office space at home and, you know, pay for their phone and that type of thing. It is really only office rent that you are saving.

The CHAIR — Some of the hubs talk about, you know, that they have just got hot desks there, and that you might only be booked into the hot desk for one or two days a week at that hub.

Mr MARKS — Look, if that sort of thing is available — I would have to think about the scenario. It may well make sense in a lot of instances, I guess.

The CHAIR — It is horses for courses, I suppose.

Mr MARKS — Yes, horses for courses. I just cannot really think about exactly how that would work for us. A home office does work for us for a few of these people. That is pretty much all I have got to say. I think the key to linking to your office for our sort of business — high-speed internet is an absolute must. It is a no-brainer. It does not work without it.

The CHAIR — Lisa, would you like to add something?

Ms KAPPERER — Okay, so I am not sure if you are all familiar with Kagome. We are a Japanese-owned company. We used to operate under the name of Cedenco, which was a New Zealand company, doing the same thing: processing tomatoes. We make diced tomatoes and tomato paste, for which we have most of the market here in Australia and a fair share of the overseas market for those products as well. Cedenco sold onto an American company but operated under the same name and recently the Japanese took over and we have now changed over to Kagome, so our head office is in Tokyo. As far as I am aware, we are the biggest tomato processing factory in the Southern Hemisphere, so we support pretty much all of the local market and have quite a stake in the export market as well.

Mr HOWARD — How many employees are here in Echuca?

Ms KAPPERER — We have around 50 permanent employees, but come tomato season we employ up to another 260-odd seasonal staff. Of course that is just the direct people working for us during that time, then there is the domino effect as the transport companies pick up more work, the laundries, food services and that sort of thing. So for four months of the year it creates a lot of extra work for local people. Then of course we do recruit extra farm staff from now right through until Christmas to help with planting and that sort of thing. To be honest I think you made a lot of very valid points that sort of cut out what I was going to say — —

Mr MARKS — Yeah. Sorry, I did not want to steal your thunder. There will be common themes all through, I would say.

Ms KAPPERER — That is okay. Obviously with our head office over in Japan we do a lot of conference calls, videoconferencing and that sort of thing, so we have all the appropriate things set up in our office. I also just wanted to mention something I thought of when I was reading off the notes. When I am thinking of staff telecommuting and e-business methods, I think of two different things, and we have both of these at Kagome. We have a number of farm and harvest staff who work remotely at various locations, sometimes many locations in the one day. We also have a small number of employees who physically work at our office here in Echuca two or three days a week but for the rest of the time they are at their home base, which in our case is Melbourne. So I think there are two different scenarios on what is remote — —

Mr HOWARD — What sort of tasks are those people who are operating between your site here and Melbourne doing?

Ms KAPPERER — One is our CFO, one is our marketing and sales manager, and the other one is brand new to our company — he is our new accountant, our financial manager. You may or may not have met John Brady, our CEO. Although he is based here, his family is in Melbourne, so he moves to and fro for a lot of the week as well.

The CHAIR — Do you actually have an office in Melbourne —

Ms KAPPERER — No.

The CHAIR — or do people work from home when they are in Melbourne?

Ms KAPPERER — Yeah. We are here in Echuca for the Australian end of the business, so they all just work from home when they are in Melbourne. In terms of our sales guy, that is most appropriate because most of the companies we sell to are based in Melbourne, so he is meeting with customers et cetera in Melbourne. It saves a lot of trouble that way.

The CHAIR — What has Kagome provided for the people who work at home in Melbourne? What do you offer to them in the way of equipment and furniture to have their office in their house?

Mr HOWARD — Or do they just have it themselves?

Ms KAPPERER — A lot of it is done by mobile, like smartphones, as well as iPads. I believe Darryl has an actual computer set up in his office. It is mostly done by phone, I believe.

If I could just talk about the remote work for the farming site — is that relevant?

The CHAIR — Yes, good. Go for it.

Ms KAPPERER — This season we installed RFID, which stands for radiofrequency identification, tags on all of our field bins. Those are roughly 250 bins that we fill. They take about 15 tonnes of tomatoes each. The tags are used to locate where the bins are at any one time, which helps with the logistics of transport during harvest. We can coordinate where a truck is at any one time, how many bins are on the truck and therefore how many are coming into the factory, how fast the factory equipment needs to run to process the amount of tonnage coming in and how many staff are required to make this all happen. We also use GPS systems and mapping. We are currently mapping every single one of our farms so that we can use the technology for better planting, better irrigation systems and that type of thing. Right now we have just completed a trial, and we are now going ahead with Timeclock. This is a remote clock-in and clock-out system for the farm staff. It gives us specific details on not only what time they clock in and out each day but their location as well. They cannot be at home having breakfast and clock in because we will know they are not at the farm, we will know they are at home. That, I suppose, tracks to a point where they are and what they are doing.

Mr KATOS — Peter, you might need to use some of that on your staff up in Queensland!

Mr MARKS — I do not care, as long as they sell.

Ms KAPPERER — We are in the process of installing a GPS tracking system on all of our tractors for many reasons, one of which is also to help with OHS issues. I do think we have a need for more sophisticated technology in this area. At least some of the time we can see via the computer or the phone where various staff are; for example, we can see tractor movements. If the tractor stops for more than 20 minutes at a time, an alert will be sent to another employee's phone, so therefore they can either call and say, 'Are you okay, or are you just having a smoko break?', and of course if there is no answer, they can drive by and physically check that they are all right.

We also use smart phones, but at the moment we are trialling the use of iPads to be able to communicate with the farming staff so that we can have multiperson conference calls and meetings without the need for them to travel in on a regular basis and interrupt their day. A lot of our farms are up to a distance of 100 kilometres away, so this will obviously save on fuel and wasted time just in travel, where they can get it done and then get back to their job. All of our pump stations are operated remotely, either by phone or iPad. Our irrigation team can start and stop various pumps, fertilisers, water flow et cetera, throughout the course of the day or night. They can do it at home, they can be in their ute or wherever to operate these systems, and all of the main operating systems in our factory can be operated remotely as well, obviously by the appropriate people. Recently Kagome has employed the use of drones for spraying crops and taking aerial photos, and in the next five years we should see a higher — —

The CHAIR — So drones are planes without people in them?

Ms KAPPERER — Yes.

Mr DRUM — They do not drop any bombs, do they?

Mr KATOS — Save on staff.

Ms KAPPERER — Exactly right.

The CHAIR — So do the drones get it better than when we have a pilot?

Ms KAPPERER — Sorry, than when?

The CHAIR — A better job than when we have a pilot flying the plane?

Ms KAPPERER — We have only started trialling all this, so I am not sure of the success rate, but yes, our agronomist has been very happy so far. In the next five years we should see greater sophistication of this technology, enabling agronomists to physically inspect the crops less often, freeing up more of their time to do other things. All of these things that I have just mentioned mean there need to be less staff out in the field, or that their time can be utilised more efficiently to do other work, which also equates to less injuries and potential for injuries and that sort of thing.

However, on the downside there are many poor mobile reception areas, some of which are only minutes from Echuca, and this means that our business can be affected, sometimes dramatically, with data not being sent through on time or people not getting the information quickly. There are situations when we need to invest more money to install better aerial systems on tractors or pumps et cetera so that there is some sort of reception to send and receive the data. Our agronomists use a lot of moisture probes in various farms and they automatically — I believe it is once an hour — send data back to their phones with all the moisture readings in the crops, and this can be affected if it is a poor reception area. Currently there is a lot of technology that is available for enabling more remote work for our farming team but there is the issue of cost and mobile broadband reception, so I think a more robust 4G broadband network would definitely be ideal for the remote areas, providing more reliable coverage and fast internet speeds for remote workers.

In terms of the office, one of the benefits of staff working remotely means sourcing the right person for the position. We have a real shortage of skilled and qualified staff in rural areas, particularly in relation to our business. Not in every case, but often city people are happy to fill the position but do not want to relocate to the country, and as I mentioned before, I think you have covered a lot of those points.

Mr HOWARD — Have you found that sometimes can work in reverse? That is often the starting point for some people who might live in Melbourne, but then when they come up here they think, ‘Actually it is very nice here. Maybe I would like to spend some time here.’?

Ms KAPPERER — Our new accountant has not been with us long, but he is already talking about, maybe at Christmas when the kids finish their school year, moving the family up. Yes, it can work the other way; that is for sure.

Electronic data interchange is coming in the new future for our sales department. Orders, dispatching and data entry make for a full-time job for two people in our office, with the addition of support staff, such as forklift drivers et cetera. This will all change to orders being placed, recorded and dispatched electronically without the need for any or very minimal human interaction. We are not there yet, but that is something we are starting to investigate. This will in turn change the way we do business with our current customers and any potential future customers. In fact some of our current customers are already investigating or starting to implement this new technology, so we need to keep up with that. We need to embrace the idea of people working remotely in terms of the farming side but also whether it be sourcing qualified people from different areas, and to be more technology savvy.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Lisa. We will hear from Ben.

Mr FITZPATRICK — Thanks very much. St Joseph’s College just down the road here is a school that has been on the site for over 125 years, so it has a pretty long history with Echuca. Currently we have around 830 students, who come from about 550 families, and about 90 staff. Our families come from as far away as 100 kilometres each day, from Deniliquin in the north and, on the other side of Deniliquin, from Barham in the west.

Mr HOWARD — This is a secondary school?

Mr FITZPATRICK — Yes, secondary. We are an inclusive school; we are very much not a rich private Catholic school.

Mr DRUM — Poor Catholic.

Mr FITZPATRICK — Yes, absolutely.

The CHAIR — My daughters went there.

Mr FITZPATRICK — Low fee paying and has a percentage of families that cannot pay the fees, and that is just acceptable practice. After the invitation from Hayden, before we came we had a chat about what it is that we could talk about. There are probably two perspectives. One is similar to what we have heard already — that is, about our staff and ways of work — but the bigger picture for us is how we are preparing our kids for these jobs we have heard about this morning. Although it has changed a lot in the last five years, I guess the challenges there are that school is essentially still very similar to what it was 100 years ago. The kids rock in at 9.00 a.m. They leave at 3.30 p.m. They do that five days a week, 40 weeks of the year, and that is just how it happens. That is what most workplaces were like too. You would come in the door at 9.00 a.m. and leave at 5.00 p.m. and that was it, but when you hear what is already happening to jobs in our town, that is not the reality for what these kids are going to be walking into. They are the two perspectives of what we spoke about before we came.

Just a bit on our school and how we work, we are proud to say that we have been a technology leader in our part of the world. Basically all of our curriculum and how we deliver it is online. In theory you can be anywhere in the world as a student and access the lessons that we prepare and offer. The assessment and reporting and everything is online. Parents access the reports and they access their kids' attendance data. All that sort of thing is there at the click of a button for them online, and there are even mobile applications for them as well to be able to it.

The CHAIR — Have you offered learning online, and have the results been as good as the ones that come in from 9 to 5?

Mr FITZPATRICK — Okay. We still run the school essentially as we always have, in that the kids come in and they work. We are a one-to-one laptop school. The kids all have a laptop, but it now means that they have greater access to the resources. If they are away for the day sick, or if they representing the school at sport, or we have a lot of students do VET subjects with vocational training where they are offsite, they still have access to what went on in that lesson. They are not having to come back and chase up the teacher and find out what they missed. Those things are what is happening there at the minute.

We have not offered anything to external kids or schools yet, but that is one thing we spoke about. Often in a rural or a smaller school it is harder to get those specialist teachers, the high-end maths and science teachers and especially language teachers. They are the two areas that are really difficult. In the future we see one possibility being that you remotely access your class. The teacher might be in Melbourne or wherever and the class is up here. At 10 o'clock on a Tuesday I open my laptop, click on, log in to whatever system it is, and I am a part of that classroom as well. I am learning with them, and there is a teacher presenting to me as well. That is one of the challenges that we have in employing staff.

Mr HOWARD — You say that if a student misses a class for some reason or other, they can see what they missed; how is that done? As a former teacher I have trouble imagining how that works. I can imagine how I might have some teaching notes, but how that dynamically works in a classroom is quite different. I might teach a number of different classes from the same notes more or less, but the class can be dynamically quite different. What does the child have access to?

Mr FITZPATRICK — In the simplest form, they would log in. Our system is called Simon; that is just the name it has been given. They would go through and find the learning area; they are called learning areas. Each subject has its own learning area, and they would go in there and access resources. There might be a document or a PowerPoint presentation or a link to a website that shows what that lesson was for the day. At the far end of that, what some teachers are now doing is recording their lessons and uploading that as well.

That also works when teachers are away. One of the things we spoke about is that often people at our school are in positions of leadership but are called to Melbourne or Bendigo for a meeting. The kids then have a substitute teacher or someone else takes the class. Now what we can do is sit down, record a podcast or make some sort of recording and leave that for the kids and they access it, so it works both ways.

Mr HOWARD — You would need a fair bit of bandwidth to download that if it is done in video format, I presume.

Mr FITZPATRICK — Yes, you do. On site it is not as big an issue, but remotely it is.

Mr HOWARD — If they are at home, yes.

Mr DRUM — Do any of your courses have to have the course content rewritten to make them more suitable for students to go online rather than expecting the kid to pick up the standard workbook and then be able to work through it himself online?

Mr FITZPATRICK — Yes, definitely, and that is something that we have worked very hard on over the last 12 months. It was our focus for the last six months of last year and the first six months of this year. Our goal is by the end of 2013 to have all of our curriculum documentation online and up to date. It has been a big focus, and that is what our professional development has been working towards. That is not say that we do not want direct teaching, because direct teaching is still essential for students to be able to learn at their best. We are not saying that we can write it up and walk away and go and sit in the staffroom and have coffee.

Mr DRUM — There are a whole range of students who may fall behind through illness and can catch up or those who are flying can actually work ahead.

Mr FITZPATRICK — And it can even be as simple as them sitting at home and maybe having to catch up on some homework. They were in the classroom but they can then look back at the notes again. It is not a case of: it is on the board and it is wiped off and it has disappeared. We might fill a whiteboard with notes and take a photo and upload it, so then it is there for everyone to access. They are the sorts of ways of working that schools have changed. But the jobs we have heard about this morning are pretty high tech, and we need to make sure that is — —

Mr KATOS — An interesting statistic I heard when visiting a few schools recently is that half the jobs that kids are going to have when they leave school have not been invented yet.

Mr FITZPATRICK — That is it. You can hear that example today. I guess the tradition was that you found your trade or your career and you stuck to it, whereas we know that that is not the reality now. Our kids need to be ready to learn whatever it is that is in front of them and flexible enough to jump through it.

We spoke about how kids need to have the skills that were spoken about in terms of self-management and self-direction and they need to have practised them, so a few things we have implemented are e-learning days which we have held on site. The teachers set the four pieces of work that would have been needed that day if they had been sitting in a normal classroom, but on the e-learning days the kids get to choose where they work and what order they do things in. We still set the time line and say it has to be done and uploaded by X time. That is trying to instil those habits of self-management and self-direction which you need to have, no matter what the job is, but if you are working remotely and in isolation slightly then it is more important.

Mr DRUM — Can I ask how that went, Ben?

Mr FITZPATRICK — Yes. On the first day, I will be honest, the kids thought it was the best thing ever.

Mr DRUM — Party time.

Mr FITZPATRICK — Yes, but by 3 o'clock for a few of them the penny dropped and they said, 'I really haven't done much today'. We published the data in terms of percentages of work uploaded. We did not hide that from parents or anyone. We said, 'This is how it went, and we need to do it better'. That is something that will take practice.

In terms of parents and what they can access online and remotely, that is really important because obviously more and more parents work and we cannot just say, 'Come in at 2 o'clock and meet us because that suits me'. That is not the reality of how it is going to work. As I said, parents can access live attendance data. All the reports are online; we do not print student reports and hand them out at the end of the term or semester; they are online. If we get a request from a parent, of course we will, but that does not happen. Feedback from teachers in terms of student work — —

The CHAIR — When you say that that is online, do the parents have to put in a password or something?

Mr FITZPATRICK — Yes. Everyone has an account — the students have their account, and the parents have their version of it as well. Kids do not like it; parents love it.

Mr HOWARD — In other words, all of your parents would have their own computers in their homes and internet capacity.

Mr FITZPATRICK — I do not know if I would fill up two hands worth of families that do not have that. All our kids have a laptop that they take home each day, so that guarantees the computer, but I would struggle to fill 10 fingers with families that do not have internet access at home. Students have a student card, and that can be used. Parents can load money onto that for a canteen account. Rather than carrying cash — obviously we do not do EFTPOS — they swipe that. Parents can put limits on what they can spend it on and how much they can spend on a given day and track what they have bought. Students can also use that card at our uniform shop. Rather than mum having to write out a cheque or give them money, their card is loaded up and they swipe it. It has their photo on it so that people can check that that is that student — all that sort of thing. Whilst it seems like we do not want parents to come in, that is not the reality. This technology is providing them with much more information and access to our school than they have ever had before. Before it was either chasing a phone call or coming in once a term for a parent-teacher interview, whereas now it can be every day if they really want to do that.

Yesterday we were part of the announcement for the trade training centre funding, and fingers crossed that that goes through. Our trade training centre is designed for allied health — the health field — and we know from all the research that that is going to be almost the no 1 field where telecommuting is going to happen, so for us to be able to offer that course and training that is relevant to those kids, they need to have practised it. I guess that is where we are going. That is something else we discussed

Mr DRUM — Will that be located within a new hospital?

Mr FITZPATRICK — It will be on our site; part of a build we are doing there. I guess that has covered most of the things in terms of how we operate now but also with an eye to asking, 'What do we want our kids to be able to do when they leave?'. I think that is about it.

Mr DRUM — Do you know the proportion of your parents who have moved into the region? I know it is a pretty dynamic place, Echuca.

Mr FITZPATRICK — Yes, absolutely. It is safe to say that we have a large number of families who have moved from elsewhere. Whether it is the smaller rural communities — and I guess we are drawing in the population from those communities — or from the larger centres, I do not know, but we do have a number of families who have moved into the area.

The CHAIR — You also have a reasonable Indigenous cohort of students.

Mr FITZPATRICK — Yes, we would have close to 50 Koori students this year. To my knowledge we have the largest education offering that they can choose from in our community. I will say proudly that that community is much more engaged in our school than it was 10 years ago when I first started here in Echuca in terms of parent willingness to come into the school and not see it in terms of, 'That's a place where the kids go, and I don't want to be a part of it'.

The CHAIR — What are some of the things the school has done to help that?

Mr FITZPATRICK — We have dedicated Koori ed support workers who are members of the local community and work for us on site. That I guess creates a bridge between the families and the school because

the families know those people well. They are part of the community and they bridge that gap. But there is also a definite leadership focus on making sure that we welcome those families into our school and provide the opportunity.

We did some IT training for those families. We invited them to come in and said, 'Come and sit down and ask any question you want regarding the students' laptops or parent access'. We showed them how they can be involved in that sort of thing as well. There has been a dedicated focus on making that happen.

Mr DRUM — Hayden, as the CEO of a body — the Committee for Echuca-Moama — that oversees the development of the entire region, where would you put the one or two priorities in relation to telecommunications to enable more e-working and to promote e-working and remote working?

Mr COCK — Thanks for the question, Damian.

Mr DRUM — It is great to see you sitting here and not actually talking.

Mr COCK — Actually I was thinking I was going to say something. I never leave without saying something. What I was going to add — and then I will answer that question — was that one of the big issues that our membership and, I think, the community identified a while back when we looked at our strategic plan was the education capability and e-learning, particularly in post-secondary education, which we have not covered. In a region like this, which is not dissimilar to other small regional towns, you have a lot of students who are going into post-secondary education, and if they are not going to Melbourne then they are looking for a major regional centre like, in our case, Bendigo or Shepparton. What is happening is that a lot of students are doing the travelling. They can perhaps do some of that learning online, but it does create isolation.

We brought probably 25 education training providers together late last year, and the no. 1 issue they identified was the fact that in a town like this you have a lot of students travelling to Bendigo and to Shepparton, but most of them do not know that others are going to those universities. They are doing a lot of travelling. What we are trying to work on at the moment is identifying the facilities that have technology capabilities where some of those courses could be taught locally. At the moment we are exploring utilising the cheaper TAFE facility for some students to come together who have got a common interest in a course, which addresses two things. One is sharing information about education and the course they are doing; the other is overcoming that isolation issue.

The other facility that we are looking at perhaps working with is Echuca Regional Health. They have an education centre there. Michael Delahunty is coming in later today, as perhaps is John, their education manager. There is great potential there, but the ability for us to provide those educational opportunities here at a post-secondary level will always be dependent on our having access to facilities or facilities being available that have that technology capability. To me that is a challenge, and that is something I am sure other regional areas and small towns are looking at as well. Technology in that sense, be it e-learning or telecommuting, can potentially reduce the need for people to head out of town, if they are not otherwise going to Melbourne.

In terms of what you asked is the biggest issue, I think our ability to keep ahead of the times — or at least keep up with the times — is going to very much be a function of bandwidth and all that. I know this is not about NBN, but as you can imagine, there are a lot of people who work or study from fair distances — over 100 kilometres. Where there are black spots and where we cannot have access for that data download, like in the case that Peter was talking about with those big files, it becomes an inhibitor of business productivity. It becomes an inhibitor in terms of advanced schools like St Joseph's being able to offer that distance learning.

In summation, I would say that we need to be mindful, to the extent that we can, that rural and regional Victoria has access to the sort of speed and capability that our major capital cities might have. Costs to companies like Kagome and Foodmach, when you look at electricity, energy and all the other things, are increasingly becoming impediments to profitability. The wages we pay here locally for companies like Heinz, Kagome and the likes are above the odds because they need to be to attract the people and the expertise.

We need the capability to have the quality employees working for these companies, knowing that not all of them are always going to want to come to Echuca-Moama and surrounds. They will want to stay in their thongs and shorts on the Gold Coast or wherever it happens to be. In an overall sense I would say we just need to be

mindful that we would be disadvantaged in a productivity sense, in a wages sense and in a learning sense if we do not maintain the recognition that we need to be on the radar as it relates to bandwidth and the like.

Mr DRUM — Hayden, just one more question: with tourism being a major part of this area and therefore websites being a major part of those tourism businesses, do you feel as though your tourism businesses are keeping their websites up to a world-class standard, with vision of what you can actually do when you turn up here in Echuca or at Kyabram or on the river?

Mr COCK — Good point. Tourism is absolutely critical to this region in terms of the economic impact and contribution it makes. I think the short answer is that we have to look at wi-fi as an opportunity to be able to have those hot spots and all sorts of things. We do not have that at the moment. I do not think Echuca-Moama and District Tourism is speaking, but they have a central website where their members have their information for accommodation booking and that sort of thing. It is probably adequate, but it is certainly not state of the art and it is certainly not world class. If we were to be able to have a vehicle — which we have talked about — where people come into town, an app comes on their phone and they can see where their closest restaurant is and where the hotel or motel is, that would make us a bit more sophisticated than others. But the only way we can do that is through wi-fi, and we have to either come up with the money or find someone who would come in and put central towers and things around town. So I would say that at the moment, even though we are not disadvantaged, it is dependent on that sort of investment, which the private sector by itself is probably not going to do.

The CHAIR — Getting back to post-secondary education, are there any recommendations that this committee could make that would be of assistance here in Echuca and in other communities like Echuca? You have a vision, so is there anything we can do?

Mr COCK — That is a good one. As I said before, it is the ability to do the learning and download the files that anyone out of Melbourne or a capital city would be able to do. It is not about NBN, but the faster we can move into high speed, the better. The capability of the Telstra network to cater for things at high speed would be advantageous, but it is also about providing those central hubs. The other guys will probably have a view on this too, but we need to rely on existing facilities and resources to bring those people together to do that post-education learning by distance. From a rural and regional point of view, I guess we need to ensure that the towns that need that learning so they have the same advantages as capital cities have the capability from a resource and facility point of view to do that. That is just something I would say off the top of my head. Ben or others might have a view on that.

Mr FITZPATRICK — I would agree. I will give a strange example. I went to Timor a couple of months ago with our school group. In Dili they have built a new shopping centre. It stands out quite strangely from the surrounding area. Sitting in that shopping centre would have been 100 uni students because there was free wi-fi. They were just sitting there doing their work on their laptops. That is where they went, and they were all together. If there were a place with reliable wi-fi where people could go and sit and do their work, it would get used.

The CHAIR — Are there any final comments? I will not invite Hayden, because we will probably get another half hour.

Mr COCK — I have only got 5 minutes tomorrow in Bendigo, too.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for taking the time to come along to a very informative session here today. It has been very good to have local businesses and schools and the Committee for Echuca-Moama come along and give their views on what we could do to help. In about 14 days you will get a draft copy of the hearing transcript, and that will be the record of what was said here today. You will be able to make corrections to obvious errors, but other than that it will remain as it is. Once again, thank you very much for coming along here today.

Witnesses withdrew