

INQUIRY INTO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Supplementary questions on notice - Wollongong Hearing – Monday 12 October 2015 Questions for Ms Lorraine Watson, Teacher Consultant, TAFE NSW Illawarra Institute

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to address these supplementary questions. I apologise for the delay in responding. Illawarra Management scheduled a meeting for Monday 9th to present information on the proposed new structure of Equity Services to relevant staff. Therefore, I deliberately postponed responding to the supplementary questions until after this meeting so I could include information about proposed new structure in my response.

Question 1

Please explain the concept of 'education' in contrast to 'training' and indicate:

- a. Why is it, in your experience, important for the student and for society?
- b. Does Smart and Skilled for a particular qualification provide funding for education that is not directly necessary to achieve training outcomes?
 - i. If not, please explain what the implications are for:
 1. TAFE, and
 2. Private for-profit providers.

The contrast between the concepts of education and training has been, and will continue to be, debated by academics and training specialists for a very long time.

However, I believe that it is significant that the acronym VET, Vocational Education and Training, includes both words, “education” and “training”, and the reason for this is that education and training are conceptually and fundamentally widely recognised as meaning two very different things.

Training is essentially utilitarian but narrow while education enables the learner to evaluate phenomena and transfer and apply skills as required by different situations.

Unfortunately, the implementation of Smart and Skilled has resulted in enormous reductions in the funding provided to TAFE to deliver VET courses. The consequence of this is that TAFE teaching sections, across all discipline areas, are being forced to cut the level of face to face teaching and this is impacting on the quality of the education provided to students.

Sections are now adopting alternative methods of delivering courses so that they can work within their budget. What this means is that students are being trained to demonstrate competence in specific tasks and on this basis are awarded formal qualifications. However, the plumbers, electricians, carpenters, nurses, engineers, hairdressers, motor mechanics, etc are not receiving the education needed to enable them to work independently with minimal supervision or to be able to analyse and consider the complexities of diverse situations and problems and to make an informed decision on the skills or tools they should use in various circumstances. Therefore, cuts to VET funding is resulting in students no longer receiving the level of education required by industry, employers or Australian society.

Cutting the quality of VET courses and the credibility of qualifications will also do nothing to address unemployment rates. The decline in manufacturing industry in Australia has resulted in a huge reduction in the number of jobs for low skilled process workers who can be trained to do specific tasks. Therefore, if the Federal and State Governments are genuine in their endeavours to reduce the level and cost of unemployment it is essential that they invest the level of funding needed to deliver quality VET courses that will adequately prepare students for employment and the jobs of the future and provide them with credible qualifications that demonstrate that they have received the education and training needed to be able to work in contemporary positions.

Surely it is in the national, social and economic interests of Australia for our citizens to be engaged in work, to have the income needed to live healthy and comfortable lives, to have the means to save to buy vehicles and homes, the opportunity to raise families and to contribute to society through the payment of taxes. Therefore, the question I would like to ask is what is it going to take for both the federal and state governments to stop lining the pockets of unscrupulous training providers and reinvest the billions wasted in TAFE and other respectable providers so they can deliver the quality of courses needed by students, industry, business and society as a whole.

In respect to people who have disabilities, I understand that the funds provided to deliver support services to students undertaking VET courses come from the tax payer and that there is not an infinite amount of money available to provide students with the level of education and support that they may need. However, as the cost to the Australian tax payer of supporting an individual with a disability over a life time exceeds \$1.5 M in welfare payments, both Federal and State governments need to consider the real cost, (personal, social and economic), of not providing appropriate support to the individuals' concerned and the "burden" of this on the Australian taxpayer.

Unfortunately, since the implementation of Smart and Skilled there has been a decline in the number of students who have disabilities attending TAFE courses. I addressed this issue in the original paper that I submitted to this inquiry and I was recently delighted to hear that the NSW Government has changed its exemption policy meaning that more students with disabilities will be eligible for fee exemptions in 2016. However, unless there is also a change in the way that funding is allocated for the support of students with high level needs, (eg deaf students who require Auslan interpreters), it will remain impossible for some students to access VET courses and therefore a pathway to employment.

Question 2.

Please explain the work of a TAFE consultant and the significance of that work to TAFE students and the community.

In simple terms I would explain the work of a TAFE Teacher Consultant as someone employed to enable students with disabilities to exercise their human right to access education, to realise their potential, to gain the skills and qualifications needed to compete for and secure meaningful employment and the opportunity to live a comfortable and fulfilling life.

The role of a Teacher Consultant is primarily to work directly with individual students who have disabilities to assist them to identify and develop realistic vocational goals and pathways, to identify the type and level of support needed to complete a course of study and to put in place accommodations and reasonable adjustments as required.

In addition to this, Teacher Consultants identify areas of need and develop programs and partnerships. For example, recently I was able to access CSO funds to offer a course in Micro Business to people with disabilities, some of whom have university level qualifications. This course is being offered because many people with disabilities, regardless of their level of education, find it difficult to secure employment. However, this course may be able to assist students to identify and develop opportunities to establish their own small business and generate an income particularly in markets where people are able to work from home at hours that suit.

Unfortunately, in recent times, I have spent more and more of my time as a Teacher Consultant advocating for the rights of people with disabilities to be able to access VET courses and the level of support needed. I am constantly burning the midnight oil writing submissions or responding to supplementary parliamentary questions explaining problems with Smart and Skilled and the impact of this on students and the disadvantaged in general. As I said at the hearing in Wollongong, if the current NSW government had been prepared to spend more time consulting with advocates and representatives of people with disabilities in the development of Smart and Skilled a lot of the current problems could have been prevented.

Question 3

3. How many teachers in your section have lost their positions as a result of restructuring or other changes since 2011? Please specify permanent full time equivalent positions and/or part time casual staff:

- a. How many were there before the restructuring began?
- b. Please explain the impacts on students and TAFE of this change

As stated above, I attended a meeting on Monday 9th November where staff in the Illawarra Institute received a document that outlined the proposed restructure of equity services.

In summary the following has been proposed;

The one (1) Multi – Cultural Co-ordinator position will be deleted and the one permanent full time Teacher Disabilities position will also be deleted.

The ten (10) existing positions for specialist Teacher Consultants will be reduced to seven (7) positions and these positions will be generic rather than specialist.

The proposed reduction in Teacher Consultant numbers in the Illawarra, (10 to 7 positions), is better than in other institutes, (North Sydney 10 specialist to 4 generic and Hunter 10 specialist to 4.5 generic positions). Therefore, the managers in the Illawarra Institute need to be commended for their efforts to retain as many as seven (7) positions. However, one cannot assume that there will not be further cuts to Teacher Consultant positions in the future if funding for the support of students with disabilities does not increase.

Since 2011 it would be hard to say exactly how many part time staff, teachers, interpreters, note takers etc, have lost their positions across the Illawarra Institute but this would be somewhere between 20 and 30 people.

The impact of the proposed restructure of the disabilities unit on TAFE students is that students needs will be met using a "first point of contact" approach. While this sounds all warm, fuzzy and flexible, what this actually means is that students needs will be assessed and met by whoever is available regardless of their knowledge and experience in assisting students with their type or level of disability. What currently happens is that no-one who comes to the disability unit looking for support is ignored. What we do is offer temporary assistance as needed and refer the student on to the specialist in their area of need for assessment and follow up. Under the new model the needs of students will simply be met by whoever is available. It is therefore fortunate that many of the long term existing Teacher Consultants have experience in working with students with different disabilities as many present with co-morbid or multiple disabilities, eg students who spina bifida who also have specific learning disabilities associated with hydrocephalus etc.

However, as Teacher Consultants retire or resign Institutes could be left without a member of staff who have appropriate knowledge and experience of working with students with particular disabilities. For this reason, I am particularly concerned about the support that will be available to deaf students in the future as they require initial contact and communications with someone who can use sign language.

I understand that in the institutes where Teacher Consultant positions have already been cut and generalised one of the generic positions is currently held by someone who can communicate using sign language but this has happened by luck rather than through good planning. If the NSW Government put in place a policy that would ensure that all TAFE NSW institutes engaged a Teacher Consultant who could communicate using sign language this would be of great value to deaf and hearing impaired students as, with the use of VC facilities, the needs of deaf students across all institute campuses could be met.

The other problem with the new model of service is the systems that are now in place to account for expenditure. There is no consistent approach across TAFE Institutes on the process used to engage support for students and to account for expenditure. The system in the Illawarra now requires 4 separate forms and it can take hours to complete the administrative process to provide a student with 1 hour of support. Therefore, all of the talk about Smart and Skilled creating more choice and flexible approaches to the delivery of VET is just empty rhetoric. What has been created instead is a system that is so inflexible it has created a barrier to students receiving the assistance that they need regardless of how minimal this may be.

Over the next few weeks I will be required, as a displaced employee, to apply for one of the seven (7) generic positions that will be on offer in the Illawarra Institute. Therefore, I literally do not know whether I will have a position at TAFE in the future. I have worked for TAFE for over 27 years as a specialist Teacher Consultant and I feel privileged to have held such a rewarding position for so long. I entered TAFE at a time when there was so much enthusiasm, innovation and optimism. However, with the way that things currently are and little hope for much improvement in the future, I am uncertain if it is in my best interests to be offered another position or if I would be better off working in a voluntary or paid position somewhere that makes me feel valued.

