

**INQUIRY INTO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND
TRAINING IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Name: Name suppressed

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Submission to the Inquiry into vocational education and training in New South Wales

The Director
General purpose standing Committee No. 6
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

28 July 2015

There are 3 major issues that we are submitting for the consideration of the inquiry:

1. The reduced access to education for students to improve their skills and knowledge for the benefit of industry and the community in NSW.
2. The implementation of EBS into TAFE, which has significantly disadvantaged TAFE to enrol students into their course and has placed substantial additional workload and stress onto TAFE staff.
3. The long-term economic and social impacts of Smart and Skilled reforms on the NSW economy.

This submission is focussing on the Community Services Sector and the qualifications that this section offers.

A typical student in community service work:

Age: between 18 and 60 years mostly female but increasing numbers of men studying for a qualification. Also TVET students study qualifications in Community service work at TAFE.

Reasons to study:

- Find their first job
- Changing career – sometimes from corporate background into something “more meaningful”
- Young people looking for a career direction
- 25 – 35 year olds often have had difficult and challenging backgrounds and have been a client of the sector, now getting their life on track with new direction and meaning
- 40 – 50 year old women returning to the work force
- Personal experience in supporting someone requiring community service support improving their skills

These reasons to study are aligned with stated objectives of both the state and federal governments for employment growth.

Personal skills

- Life experience or “lived” experience
- Administration experience
- Caring and empathy for the clients

Community service provides a wide range of employment opportunities in a range of different sectors. This work is paid generally at or below the average wage. It can be argued that this work is under paid for the benefits provided to society. A recent ruling was to increase the wages of community service work staff to equivalent qualifications and position responsibilities of other sectors.

Government legislation outlines the standard of client care (Age care Act, Disability services Act, Anti-Discrimination Act, Mental health Act and others) required to support clients and carry legal obligations for both organisations and employed staff. All community service qualification cover these requirements as core units

The reduced access to education for students to improve their skills and knowledge for the benefit of industry and community in NSW

Many students who enquire, are shocked at the cost of the entry level qualification and do not pursue further enquiry. Since the introduction of 'Smart and Skilled' student numbers have dropped significantly. We have experienced a drop of one third to one half of new students.

In some sections of TAFE these reduced student numbers have meant that state-of-the-art equipment purchased at enormous expense is sitting idle. It is an unspeakable waste of resources.

The other barrier created by Smart and Skilled is the requirement that even higher fees are charged if a previous qualification has been obtained. This rule has had many different interpretations by different institutes and some students have been disadvantaged by these decisions.

A number of students gain an initial qualification and begin work later returning to study to broaden their skill base, increase their knowledge of the industry and move up the career ladder. This requirement will be a barrier to further skill enhancement.

VET Fee Help is not available for Certificate IV Youth Work, Certificate III and IV Disability or Community Services. These are primary qualifications to enter workforce in these essential areas.

Education is the key to improving employment opportunities and to ensure that qualified staff provides client focussed care whilst complying with their legal obligations.

HECs style debt combined with the low wages paid in the sector even after qualification, impacts enormously on individuals. Many seeking to work in the community service sector do so because of personal experience. The average student is from a disadvantaged socio economic position and does so as a means of overcoming this disadvantage

In addition it will ultimately have devastating impacts on the economy. The example of the US demonstrates that large student loans have reduced the ability of graduates to service additional loans such as home loans leading to a lack of buoyancy in the economy

To remain within budget of 'Smart and Skilled' reforms, teaching hours have had to be shaved significantly and class have been combined increasing class sizes. TAFE's strength is about practical application of theories and the learning of new skills – this is difficult in the reduced teaching time combined with classes of 30 or more. This can only mean a reduction in the educational quality and educational outcomes.

This reduction of face-to-face teaching time has meant that students now attend classes less than 20 hours per week. As full time study is considered to be 20 hours or more per week, our students have been further disadvantaged by no longer qualifying for travel concessions. This adds significantly to the cost of study and compounds the disadvantage of our already disadvantaged students.

Ensuring that graduates are appropriately skilled for the work they will undertake is of great concern for all industries. However, the work that our graduates do is with the most vulnerable and marginalised members of our society. If workers behave in a way that is less than professional, the results for clients (and therefore communities) could be devastating

Some students use TAFE to gain a preliminary qualification to go on to study at university. Many of our students come to the course with 'lived experience' in areas such as mental health, family violence, substance abuse. They are often individuals who while having the capacity to complete university, do not have the self confidence to take that leap. TAFE often provides a bridge to this major turning point in the life of disadvantaged individuals

The implementation of EBS into TAFE which has significantly disadvantaged TAFE to enrol students into their course.

Enrolment process

- Students unable to enrol
- Student registering had no subsequent contact from their online enquiry
- Course offering not consistent, disappearing, reappearing
- EBS enrolling them into the wrong campus
- Varying fee charged for the same course in different institutes - different interpretation of the rules – lack of training given to enrolment staff
- Payment system has “bugs” in it – students who have paid show as unpaid, Results are entered but disappear when transcripts are published
- Refunds (because students are usually over charged when these inconsistencies are discovered) difficult to obtain because of EBS process

TAFE has been disadvantaged by EBS by providing very poor customer service and the fewer potential students are going to private providers because they are more professional in this aspect. This necessitated that many institutes allowed students to sit in classes who were not enrolled. The result of this was that for months there was no insurance cover for students (therefore they could not commence work placement, attend student excursions etc).

All attendance and entry of results had to be done retrospectively (after all enrolments were complete) at a time in the semester when workload demands were high. It also meant that we were teaching a number of students who did not continue their studies and therefore TAFE did not receive any funding to compensate for this

Other than one or two features of EBS most teachers would suggest that the old CLAMS was easier to operate even given its limitations. EBS takes more “key strokes” than CLAMS to do the same tasks. (attendance, results etc) The cost of EBS is significant but the promises about EBS have not been delivered and have significantly contributed to lower enrolment numbers as well as increased staff workload and associated stress. This is still the sentiment of staff nearly a year after implementation.

The long term economic and social impacts on the NSW economy

Education is more than money - it is about opportunity. It is important that TAFE is an efficient education provider that meets the requirements of industry while providing good quality student outcomes. It is short sighted to limit educational opportunity.

By reducing educational opportunities for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, we limit their contributions to the workforce and their ability to participate in the economy - paying taxes and spending their wages. We are essentially encouraging reliance of welfare payments and confining them to a life of disadvantage.

This also means that students on low incomes are essentially excluded from education. We know that education is the key to enhanced employment opportunities higher level of skill delivery and improving on income.

By reducing employment opportunity this will effectively result in an ever increasing gap between the 'haves and have nots'.

When similar changes have been made in other states it has ripped apart the VET sector allowing some "Tick-and-Flick" operators to give qualification without substantial skill input required to make an effective worker. This applies across a number of different industries.

The significant loss of jobs in the TAFE sector is also likely to have devastating impacts on the economy as well as personal impacts. As job security has been under threat for an extended period, many skilled and experienced staff have opted to leave for more secure positions. It is a shameful loss of skills that further weakens the position of TAFE in the VET market

What needs to happen.

1. EBS needs to be fixed so it is usable for the purpose that it was purchased. (Consumer law) Whoever is responsible for the implementation of this system should be accountable for the negative impact this has caused TAFE without any further impact upon the cost structure of TAFE. Consistent and adequate training is required to all users of this system to ensure the benefits of this significant system change are realised.

2. Smart and Skilled needs to be revised to take into account that affordable access to education is fundamental to improve skills of the work force. As our economy changes, workers need to be able to adapt to the new skills required. Cost barriers and arbitrary rules that Smart and Skilled lay down should not block this.