

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

Organisation: Blue Mountains TAFE Teachers' Association
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TAFE Teachers' Association Blue Mountains Branch

Submission to NSW Legislative Council Inquiry into vocational education and training in NSW

Our branch wishes to make the following points in relation to the terms of reference:

(a) The factors influencing student choice about entering vocational education and training system including:

(i) motivation to study

'TAFE is in crisis'. This is the word on the street and certainly in the media. The intrinsic motivation to study can be negatively influenced by the uncertainty of a vocational education system undergoing such major change and disturbance. Extrinsic factors such as fee rises of nearly 300% have also had major impacts on the motivation of students to enter the VET sector. Whilst the TAFE brand is under threat some private providers are dragging down the credibility of the VET sector as a whole by using unscrupulous methods of enrolment and questionable educational practices.

2015 enrolments at TAFE are down by 30,000. This disturbing figure is a reflection of the current lack of student motivation to enter vocational education at TAFE. We should be enabling students to enrol instead the NSW Government 'Smart and Skilled' policy is de-motivating students to study. This can have serious implications on skills shortages in the future by jeopardising equitable and accessible vocational education.

The eligibility rule restricting students a subsidised enrolment in a CIII course if they have completed a CIV or above is de-motivating many good students from life-long learning. Learning is often cyclic and not necessarily linear. Changing vocation is a part of our modern work environment. This barrier is impeding many students gaining skills and knowledge to access the workforce.

(ii) choice of course, course location and method of study

Affordability and accessibility are key factors in most students' choice of course and course location. Students on income support (the majority category of students at Blue Mountains College) live below the poverty line. The increase in TAFE fees with Smart & Skilled pricing, has been a major disincentive to enrol in a VET qualification and created a very unfortunate barrier for disadvantaged people.

Another huge issue with Smart & Skilled has proven to be the eligibility criteria, particularly the rule that bars people with existing qualification at a C.IV level or higher, from subsidised VET training. Many, many people have been turned away, or

discouraged by, the relatively large amount of money they would be required to pay to embark on a new or updated qualification under this provision. The rule is based on the flawed assumption that people's lives are linear, that one qualification, no matter when it was gained, must ensure higher earning power throughout the whole of life. In TAFE, we know this is not the case. People lose their jobs and need to retrain in a new industry or career. They can have difficult life situations, or family crises, that make returning to previous work or career impossible. A person may be in a caring role, for children or elderly or unwell family members, for a period of time, and find that their skills and qualifications become outdated or obsolete very quickly. Very often they need to start again, go back to a lower level qualification in a new vocational or skill area. The Smart & Skilled eligibility rules do not allow for these situations.

(iii) barriers to participation, including students in the non-government education and home schooling sectors

TAFE NSW provides an essential pathway for people who have not succeeded in school education. General education courses in TAFE NSW are offered in an adult learning environment with support for students to succeed. The future of these courses is under threat from the additional fees, budgetary issues and increased competition in the Smart & Skilled environment.

(b) The role played by public and private vocational education providers and industry in:

(i) educational linkages with secondary and higher education

(ii) the development of skills in the NSW economy

TAFE NSW is open and accessible to the community and offers courses the community wants within each local area, through consultation with employers, community and external agencies. TAFE staff spends time with these stakeholders determining training needs and providing information and advice to potential students and employers. Developing locally based relationships with communities, employers and external agencies takes time and depends on trust and the continuity of a training organisation in a particular place. As a public Institution TAFE has built trust and a consultative relationship with local communities which has led to the delivery of courses which the community and businesses want. The outsourcing of courses to private providers who may move in and out of communities will remove the local knowledge base which has informed our current successful system.

Centralising all decision-making around which courses are offered based on cumulative state wide data, does not provide the skills that local sub economies require to thrive. It limits innovation and flexibility at a time of rapid change.

Limiting the number of subsidised courses a student may undertake and the availability of loans for students needing to re-train, means less flexibility for people wanting to change careers and a less flexible work force.

(iii) the development of opportunities for unemployed people, particularly migrants and persons in the mature workers' category, to improve themselves and increase their life, education and employment prospects,

Please see comments in (a) ii above, and (c) below, as these are relevant to this term of reference as well.

(iv) the delivery of services and programs particularly to regional, rural and remote communities

TAFE NSW works in close collaboration with community, industry and other stakeholders to customise training to meet local needs. TAFE NSW consults with employers, industry and community groups to meet local and state/national needs.

Blue Mountains College is positioned outside the Sydney metropolitan area and offers accessible local training (in a geographically large area with few public transport options), with some courses unique in Western Sydney / NSW. In this way it is a good example of the role that TAFE colleges can play in the provision of training and education, where there are few other options available.

Beyond the provision of training, TAFE colleges also contribute enormously in other ways to the development and the life of the local community, particularly in rural and regional areas. This role should be recognised in future funding arrangements. TAFE colleges provide opportunities for local industry, business and community organisations to participate in training, by hosting students on work experience placements, or participating in student learning projects involving real work settings, or employing work ready TAFE graduates.

For example:

A learning project undertaken by students in the Blue Mountains College Community Services teaching section, who have partnered with a local cancer support service, Blue Mountains Cancer Help, and initiated fund raising and awareness raising activities in the community, including assisting at the organisation's Open Day. Other similar projects have involved students taking on responsibility for assisting the development of activities and organising an Open Day, with the Katoomba Men's Shed.

(c) Factors affecting the cost of delivery of affordable and accessible vocational education and training, skills and pathways to employment, including opportunities and pathways to

further education and employment for the most vulnerable in our community including those suffering a disability of severe disadvantage

TAFE NSW's access and equity measures, described above, also contribute to national social inclusion goals and should continue to receive appropriate funding. Unfortunately the experience of Smart & Skilled so far has been that across most Institutes, these programs and services have been severely cut.

The government should consider the affordability of courses for isolated and vulnerable members of the community. If the aim is to skill the work force and increase the skills and qualifications of the working population, then the high support needs of many in these groups need to be addressed. Funding should reflect the services provided by TAFE's counseling, equity and support programs, and library services.

Are all RTO's able to provide a full range of student support services including libraries, counsellors and career advice to ensure quality and equity in educational delivery? What is the cost, to students and the community, of forcing TAFE colleges to withdraw or minimise these services, due to emphasising the 'bottom line' at the expense of a quality training environment?

In 2012 the NSW Government announced funding cuts to education which have to date resulted in over 2,000 job losses across TAFE NSW, including teaching, support and administrative positions. TAFE Institutes are continuing to conduct "Products and Services reviews" to meet these targets. In some Institutes this has resulted in the complete or partial elimination of Access and Equity measures described above. Adult Literacy Officer positions, Multicultural, Aboriginal education and Outreach Coordinators and their programs, have been deleted in some areas, and others are currently under review. Funding for arts courses in TAFE, which have contributed to our vibrant cultural economy, have been cut and fees increased to a level which was not accessible to any but the very wealthy.

This represents a squandering of the good name and of the effective and highly valued programs TAFE has offered the community, business, culture and industry.

In addition courses have been deleted from some institute business lines and colleges, resulting in reduced choice for students and local employers, greater travel time and associated costs for students who can no longer study in their local area, job losses and a reduction of community and industry confidence in TAFE as the provider of public vocational education and training in NSW.

(d) The effects of a competitive training market on student access to education, training, skills and pathways to employment, including opportunities and pathways to further education and employment for the most vulnerable in our community including those suffering a disability of severe disadvantage

With Smart & Skilled, TAFE NSW is now in a position where has to increasingly compete for funding . This degrades the level of training and service that can be provided because to compete, TAFE has to cut costs, which inevitably affects best practise. It is the right of every person in New South Wales to have access to education and quite often TAFE is where adult learners start.

TAFE NSW's brand and the training provided are recognised worldwide, and employers and the community respect this training. Australia already has a mix of public and private organisations providing flexible education and training which has served us well. The current VET reform process is based on the belief that private for profit companies do a better job of training than publicly owned organisations, and that competition rather than co-operation is a superior way of achieving quality. We would argue that the reform process is dismantling a world class system, undermining both the quality of training and co-operation with local industry and taking away the current pathways out of disadvantage.

TAFE NSW has a long and proud history of opening pathways for people to engage in education and training, and complete qualifications that may have seemed unattainable. This has been achieved, to a very large extent, by the provision of equity and support programs and measures.

TAFE NSW has an infrastructure of support; services not necessarily provided by private RTOs.

These include:

- Student support services such as counselling and careers advice, disability support, individual tutorial support, help in developing research, assignment writing and study skills.

Examples: (names have been changed)

- *Lisa, a student at Blue Mountains College in Western Sydney, had such severe agoraphobia that she was not able to leave her house for 20 years. She had to leave school before completing her school certificate. Lisa is now studying at BM College and with additional support through TAFE's disabilities support program, is making great progress. She has also been able to extend her social network and has made friends at TAFE and is now feeling confident enough to work in our student clinic. It is most likely that she will graduate and make a significant contribution to the industry.*
- *Blue Mountains College has several students who access disability services for tutorial support and with this additional support are able to achieve academically*

and will be able to graduate. One student, Tanya, has an autistic child and is intending to use her training to work with parents and children with autism and improve their quality of life.

Access, Equity and Outreach programs

- Access and Outreach Courses (previously free courses)- these teach skills in literacy and numeracy, language, access to employment, pathways to education, and training for volunteers and people returning to work or changing career later in life. Until 2015, these courses were exempt from TAFE NSW fee/ concession fee. The fee-free status encouraged people, especially those on low incomes, to enrol in these courses, and to develop their communication, digital literacy and other employability skills. They ensured equal educational opportunities within TAFE to allow full participation in basic communication and workplace skills.
- TAFE NSW's Outreach program is an internationally acclaimed and innovative adult learning and community engagement program, which aims to ensure that TAFE NSW is accessible to people who face barriers to learning, such as:
 - geographical and social isolation
 - language and cultural factors
 - financial hardship
 - lack of educational confidence
 - cultural factors
 - disability
 - family commitments
 - incarceration in, or recent release from, a correctional centre.
- Under Smart & Skilled, a fee is now attached to these courses; while modest in comparison to other course fees at higher levels, is beyond the reach of many on low income. This has proved to be a barrier that has significantly reduced the number of people studying at this level of qualification. This situation contradicts TAFE's charter to provide second chance education and develop effective pre vocational skills. The cost of reduced participation in language, literacy and numeracy, and employability programs to our community and broader society will have significant and wide ranging economic repercussions.
- Because of these changes with Smart & Skilled, delivery of equity programs such as Aboriginal/ Torres Strait Islander and Multicultural Education programs, Access and General Education courses, and Outreach, have been reduced or eliminated in many institutes.

Many Outreach and Access students experience multiple disadvantages. The education programs offered by TAFE are quite often the first step in a journey of rediscovery and lead to further education.



Photo- Students in a sustainable gardening Outreach Course, Blue Mountains

Some examples of students' experiences (names have been changed):

- *Julie entered the Outreach 'Work Opportunities for Women' course as a single mum with very few employment prospects. Nearly 10 years on, Julie has gained skills to be employed by a very large company, she has also returned to complete further qualifications to enable her to expand her role and act in higher positions.*
- *Geoff, aged 53, found that due to his age, re-entering the workforce after retrenchment was very difficult. He had no idea how to approach an interview, very limited computer skills and no knowledge of how to send resumes by email. Geoff completed an Outreach course which helped him to recognise his life skills and he also gained the skills he needed for employment, and as a result is now employed by Bunnings hardware store.*
- *Kerrie had been a bricklayer all his working life when a back injury stopped him in his tracks. Kerrie joined an Outreach 'Introduction to Computers' class and when the term was over, progressed to the next step and enrolled in a small business course.*
- *TAFE Outreach regularly offers 'Pathways' programs such as courses leading to higher level qualifications in Community Services Work, Aged Care or Children's Services. Graduates from these programs obtain volunteer or part time work and/or progress to Certificate courses in the vocational areas.*
- *A number of students have come into BM College massage courses from Outreach or Access courses such as English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. They have completed the Diploma level in massage therapy and now work in the industry, making valuable contributions. Some have gone onto university courses.*
- *Anne had had a high level role in IT before a set of difficult life circumstances and setbacks knocked her confidence and resulted in mental health challenges. She completed a C.II re-entry course at BM College and has found a new direction in life. She now works as a part time TAFE teacher and is a valued member of the teaching team.*
- *Mark, a correctional centre inmate, had an interest in Reptiles and enrolling in a course gave him the focus he needed. He completed a Certificate III in Captive*

Animals and became a much respected Keeper, working at a high profile facility, and is now president of the local association. Mark has also been invaluable in shaping the TAFE training program to meet the needs of other inmates and has regularly been engaged as a guest speaker.

(e) The level of industry participation in the vocational education and training sector, including the provision of sustainable employment opportunities for graduates, including Competency Based Training and the application of training packages to workforce requirements

Industry Standards need to be developed for each qualification around student to teacher ratio and a range of other factors. Without these standards there will be the risk of training being entirely determined by cost to the RTO. The subsequent loss of quality and trust in the training system has implications for industry and our ability to attract overseas students. We recommend that this should be part of an Australia wide project.

(f) The Smart & Skilled Reforms, including

(i) alternatives to Smart & Skilled contestable training market and other funding policies

(ii) the effects of the Smart & Skilled rollout on school based apprenticeships

(g) Any other related matter.

Recommendations

Fees

- 1. Affordability must be front and centre of any pricing strategy.**
- 2. We recommend a reduction in fees for concession students**
- 3. Remove the Smart & Skilled Eligibility rule that bars anyone with a previous qualification at C.IV or higher, from enrolling in another course at subsidised fee.**

4. We recommend that Foundation Skills and Cert 1 courses in Access to Work and Training should be made fee exempt as they were prior to Smart & Skilled.

Pricing of Courses and Industry Standards

5. The level of Community Service obligation funding needs to be addressed as adequate resourcing is vital if Smart and Skilled targets are to be reached.
6. Industry Standards need to be developed for each qualification around student to teacher ratio and a range of other factors.
7. The social impact of pricing on regional and sub-regional colleges need to be factored in.

Authorised by :

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