

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

To

The General Purpose Standing Committee No 6
Parliament House
Macquarie St
SYDNEY, NSW, 2000

14 August 2015

Parental submission to the General Purpose Standing Committee No 6 for
the inquiry into vocational education and training in NSW, August 2015

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Dear Committee

We write as parents of, and advocates for, a student currently enrolled at TAFE, in a regional campus in NSW. We live in a rural setting a half hour's drive from our regional centre. We believe that our perspective and experiences as parents who support the ongoing education of their children will be beneficial to the considerations of this inquiry.

Our intention for this submission is to address, at least in part, the following sections of the committee's terms of reference:

(a) (i) &(ii); (b) (i), (ii) &(iv); (c); (d); (f); and (g)

We append copies of some correspondence that we have had with NSW TAFE and campus staff this year for your information. We request that these appendices be treated in confidence and not for publication.

Background

Our daughter is a full time student in the Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care course at the local TAFE campus in 2015 and plans to complete her diploma this year. She completed her Certificate III there as a part time student in 2014. She is 19 years old, finished her HSC at a local high school in 2013 and continues to live at home with us. Our daughter drives her mother's car 25km each way to the TAFE campus from our home, often picking up and/or dropping off a fellow student on the way. She is also employed locally, working 5-10 hours/week on a casual basis.

Our daughter has contributed to, and read this submission. She endorses its contents and recommendations and she requests that her name and campus not be identified by publication of the appendices.

1 *Key issues*

- 1.1** The step from school to tertiary education and training is a significant transition for young people. The many who do not apply, or qualify for, university courses but need to further their education and training, may:
- be young people who are not among the higher achieving or more outgoing students at their school.
 - not have completed school to the HSC level or participated in practical, VET courses at school.
 - come from disadvantaged backgrounds or lead lives without significant or capable parental support,
 - be less mature, less confident or more reticent in seeking support than other young people their age
 - require personal, professional support and advocacy to enrol in, participate and thrive in a TAFE setting

Over many decades, NSW TAFE has been recognised world wide as a provider of high quality education and training giving people of this state the skills and qualifications to effectively take their place in the workforce and contribute to our society. This record and reputation is being significantly eroded by ongoing funding cuts to the NSW TAFE sector in recent years; the effect is being most harshly felt by our young and isolated.

TAFE teachers and head teachers seem to be currently overwhelmed by the challenges, workloads and demands of providing a world class, quality education and training service while, around them, staffing levels and support systems are in decline due to significant funding cuts. While technological innovations provide excellent opportunities for communication and productivity improvements, it is well trained and provisioned TAFE student services personnel working with effective outreach programs that will help engage our youth.

- 1.2** Newly introduced VET fees appear to be an important factor in the decisions, choices and behaviours many young people display about their ongoing education and training. While the concept of *'learn now pay later through the taxation system'* may seem reasonable to some, for those young people and/or their parents described in 1.1 above, this can often be completely beyond their understanding, experience or resources.

While generic information about VET fees are provided in TAFE and VET fee information booklets and online, it appears that the VET fee payable by a student for a particular TAFE course is not immediately apparent to them or to their parents prior to enrolment. Impediments to initial enrolment in VET courses at TAFE include:

- no knowledge of the initial and ongoing costs of a particular VET course for an individual student
- the concept of, and implications of payments liable for enrolment decisions not made by, census dates
- little or no understanding of the costs and liabilities following the completion of an individual's course
- no realistic comprehension of an individual's VET fee debt, interest incurred or payment methods

Over many decades, NSW TAFE has provided high quality education, low cost training and world class credentials for trainees, apprentices and adult learners. Importantly it has also made a significant contribution to the post school opportunities for many young people through well resourced literacy and numeracy courses, a variety of life skills programs and essential student support services and networks. Young people need to feel that TAFE provides a safe and caring environment for post school, ongoing learning, education and training. New VET fee structures impose a clear barrier to this perception.

In an environment where VET fees are abolished until the completion of a student's first diploma, young people in NSW could well be invited to continue their education and training at TAFE campuses through well funded, resourced and effective school linkage, orientation and transition programs in partnership with commonwealth agencies responsible for Job/New Start, Youth Allowance and other welfare programs.

2 Case Study

2.1 Our concern is for the quality and delivery of vocational education and training in our daughter's diploma course, and for the lack of effective, outreach support services available to her and other students following:

- generic, mixed and unclear information about the course, methods of study and potential fees
- ongoing delays and confusion regarding 2015 enrolment and commencement dates for the course,
- changes to course timetables, cancellations of days at TAFE and re-negotiations for course delivery,
- reductions in, and limitations to, the provision of contact hours during the first half of this year.

Communications with our daughter's teachers, course coordinator and head teacher at the local TAFE campus have always been open, supportive of her and to the highest professional standards. ***There seems to us to have been significant issues with the:***

- reduction of full time staffing and the consequent changes to teaching roles and learning expectations,
- implementation and management of new computer systems and software to support student enrolment,
- impact of a high rate of student withdrawal from the course or their ongoing non-participation this year.

2.2 As a full time VET FEE paying student (\$2830 for this year), we expect that our daughter will be entitled to the provision of a quality educational service that will hold her in good stead as an early childhood educator and carer when she enters the work force. Now that she will have an outstanding VET fee debt on completion of this course, we are concerned that:

- the quality and effectiveness of the education and training leading to her diploma credential may be significantly different from, and inferior to, that attained by students in previous years at TAFE
- while generic information about new VET fee structures was available, timely and accurate information about *her* VET fees, invoices and course details were not available to her until much later in the year,
- the accounting for the sum of our daughter's VET fees for this year is not available to her, or to us.

Our daughter's family situation is supportive with educated parents who have been able to help her navigate general careers, TAFE course and VET fee information. We have been able to encourage her and help her to follow up with issues at TAFE and with VET fee correspondence. What about those young and disadvantaged people in our community without this support? ***There seems to us to have been significant issues with:***

- a lack of clear, documented and individualised information to CERT III students at the end of last year about course outlines, pathways and VET fees for the diploma course they were to be starting this year
- the high rate of student withdrawal from the diploma course or ongoing non-participation this year of CERT III students due to possible concerns and lack of understanding about *their individual* 2015 VET fees, course content and outlines, work placement opportunities and commitment, and ultimate qualification

- the impediment of a high cost VET fee on the decisions made by many young school leavers who are known to our daughter from low socio-economic or rural and regional areas who may want to continue their education at TAFE and who require significant, personalised ongoing support and advice at TAFE.

2.3 At the local careers expo in both 2013 and 2014, TAFE advisors gave us to clearly understand the Diploma course in which our daughter is currently enrolled took 18 months as a full time student following the completion of the Cert III component at TAFE (which was advised as 6 months full time, 12 months part time). This included benchmarks for attendance, course content, the meeting of AQF competencies and work placement hours. As a 19 year old student, our daughter is considered an adult learner by TAFE with consequent rights and responsibilities. We are concerned that:

- communications with her, whether in a face to face situation or by email, about enrolment procedures and timelines, course dates and structures and individual VET fee calculations are considered only for her information and may only be shared with others at her invitation. While we are mostly kept '*in the loop*', many parents , carers and advocates for young people still living at home are likely to be '*out of the loop*'
- our daughter may have been able to negotiate a completion of this diploma with her course coordinator and other students in *6 months*; she has currently negotiated to complete it by the end of this year (12 months), all being well. Many other students in the term 1 intake have either, stopped attending, failed to negotiate alternative pathways or withdrawn from the course.
- while her VET fees for the diploma course are now fixed, the provision of our daughter's education and training is not only dependent upon, but regularly adjusted in response to, the lack of attendance and non-commitment of other students. It seems that TAFE staff are constantly required to adjust timetables, lesson delivery and days for student face to face learning as a consequence of their limited resources.
- as parents, we expected our daughter to be continue her attendance at the TAFE campus (started as 4 days per week) this year as a full time student while flexibly negotiating her part time work and her TAFE work placement requirements. By the end of May, she was attending one day a week at work placement, no days at all at the local TAFE campus and unsure about her schedules for the new term in July.

There seems to us to have been significant issues with the:

- quality and accountability of private sector VET service provision with which TAFE now has to compete – a sector without requirements to direct resources toward essential, ongoing student services and support
- significant reduction in funding, staffing and subsequent services that TAFE is able to offer young people,
- large numbers of students who may like to attend their local TAFE, but are not there at the moment.

3 Evidence

3.1 In mid Jan this year, our daughter decided to forego two deferred offers at university and continue with her diploma at TAFE. She tells us that she completed a copied enrolment document that she received from a fellow student during that month (source unknown) and submitted it to the local TAFE campus. She and the fellow student understood that TAFE classes would begin on 2 Feb and they turned up on that day to start.

Our daughter told us that:

- classes began that day the for Certificate course cohort students only
- the Diploma course cohort classes were delayed due to insufficient enrolments
- their course start date was deferred to the beginning of March
- she would receive further information at a later date and meet with teachers before the course started

Our daughter received the first email contact for her to enrol in the diploma course for 2015 on 19 Feb. Students met at the campus with staff on 25 Feb in preparation for the course commencing on 2 Mar.

Appendix A 19 Feb 15 Email to daughter from the team at local TAFE re: enrolment for 2015

3.2 Our daughter received email correspondence from the Unique Student Identifier (USI) Registrar as below.

Appendix B (i) 11 Feb 15 Email from USI Registrar for her to set up an account

Appendix B(ii) 09 Mar15 Email from USI Registrar confirming successful set up

Appendix B(iii) 09 Mar 15 Email from USI Registrar confirming contact details

3.3 Following family discussions with our daughter during March about her issues with enrolment, the course starting date, her lack of access to TAFE online services and VET fees, her father:

- phoned the local regional office of VET FEE HELP on her behalf on 24 Mar. He was told that the Smart & Skilled Course fee for her diploma course was \$4930 but a reduction may apply when RPL (recognition of prior learning) was taken into account. The RPL assessment, and hence the overall VET fee, was the domain of the TAFE course head teacher. Information had to be provided to meet census date timelines
- met with her and the Student Teaching & Learning Services Officer (ST&LSO) at the local TAFE campus on 24 Mar. The issues at 3.3 above were discussed. Our daughter later received the following email cc to her.

Appendix C 24 Mar 15 Email cc to daughter from local TAFE ST&LSO after enquiries with her father

3.4 Our daughter received an email from regional TAFE VET FEE HELP on 9 Apr confirming her successful application for fee assistance. This was the first time that she, and we, became aware of *her* VET fee

Appendix D 09 Apr 15 Email to daughter from regional TAFE VET FEE HELP confirming assistance

3.5 From April through June, the days that our daughter had been timetabled to attend TAFE were regularly being cancelled, reduced or rescheduled due to the diminishing numbers of other students attending.

It was during this time that she told us that, as the course work could now no longer be complete in 6 months, staff had negotiated with the remaining students who were attending to offer this course work in the second half of the year when a new cohort may enrol. It also appears that the TAFE term for our daughter's cohort finished 2 weeks earlier in June than was originally planned.

Our daughter attended local work placement in early July, returning to campus on 20 July to commence the next term. That night she told us about an upcoming meeting with her new coordinator to *negotiate* course work and attendance for this coming term. We immediately emailed our daughter's head teacher on her behalf with our concerns for her education. The head teacher responded on the same day.

Appendix E 21 July 15 Email to Head Teacher Child & Family Services, local TAFE campus,
including a summary of information and events that led us to write

Appendix F 21 July 15 Email from Head Teacher Child & Family Services, in response to our email

3.6 Our daughter and her mother met with the new course coordinator on 22 July and were joined in teleconference by the head teacher who was at another campus on that day. Both our daughter's and her mother's recall of the meeting includes:

- confirmation that delays to the start of the course in Feb, changes to course delivery schedules and negotiations with remaining students were an unavoidable consequence of resource limitations
- the VET fee payable by her was a fee for the diploma course, irrespective of how long it took to complete
- course content delivery would be made available to her in semester 2 even if she was the only diploma student attending in order to meet outcomes of prior negotiations and her expectations for qualification
- extended discussion and negotiation between her and the course coordinator to plan schedules, timelines and assessment deadlines and to link in with the timetable for the incoming semester 2 cohort.

3.7 Our daughter received the first invoice by email on her VET fees, VET FEE HELP and responsibilities on 25 July

Appendix G 25 July 15 Invoice - NSW TAFE Commission Commonwealth Assistance Notice – VET fee

4 Recommendations

As parents of a young person living at home in a rural setting 25km from the regional centre where NSW TAFE provides her diploma course, we expect that our experiences in helping her to navigate enrolment, participation and engagement in her VET course may contribute to the deliberations of this inquiry.

The recommendations outlined below are based on two key overarching assumptions that we consider pivotal in enabling our NSW TAFE and VET training sector to meet the education, training and potential employment needs of young and disadvantaged people in our state. Those assumptions, which lead to our recommendations are, **that the NSW government:**

- (i) provides an immediate and significant increase in funding and resources to the NSW TAFE sector with the clear intention of providing for well trained and provisioned student services and teaching personnel who will be able to work in effective, individualised outreach teams and programs to target young and disadvantaged people to help them access, and stay engaged with, vocational education and training
- (ii) abolish the current VET fee (co-contribution) model, at least to the level of a student's first diploma.

4.1 With respect to this inquiry's Terms of Reference regarding:

- (a) motivation, choice and barriers to participation; and
- (b) linkages to secondary education, service delivery and opportunities for regional and remote students and, considering the assumptions in (i) and (ii) above, **we recommend that where any young person in NSW:**

4.1.1 is 21 years or younger, lives in the family home; and/or is not an apprentice or trainee, and/or does not apply for enrolment in TAFE or fails to attend / withdraws from a TAFE course in which they are enrolled, and/or:

- (i) has left school prior to completion of the HSC (yr 12), and does not become fully employed, and/or
- (ii) completes a 'VET in school' or TAFE course to Cert I or Cert II level while still at school, does not become fully employed and/or does not apply, or qualify for, further tertiary education at a university;

then procedures be established to connect *both* that young person and their parents, carers or advocates (stakeholders) to a dedicated transition team at their nearest TAFE campus. This team's role could include:

- a) ongoing case management, career planning and mentoring with the specific goal of helping the young person to find a pathway to further education and training, and assisting them to continue participating and engaging to the completion of their first diploma or equivalent credential.
- b) regular interviews, phone and social media communications involving *all* stakeholders
- c) promotion and coordination of effective TAFE and campus orientation / engagement programs
- d) support for the young person in mandatory Centre-link, Job-find and other welfare communications

4.1.2 as described in 4.1.1 above, has successfully applied for entry into an Australian university and has deferred that course(s) for two years or more, then the recommendation of 4.1.1 above applies.

4.1.3 is currently enrolled, attending and participating up to the level of their first diploma at TAFE, and/ or is subject to a case managed transition to TAFE as described in 4.1.1 and 4.1.2 and lives in a regional, rural or remote location in NSW, then they become eligible for:

- a) free public transport to and from TAFE campuses and work placement venues on regular the school bus routes that they may have previously utilised when students at school and/or.
- b) payment to subsidise private vehicle transport costs to and from their TAFE campus and work placement venues.

4.1.4 as described in 4.1.3 above, and is enrolled and participating in a course or courses delivered by TAFE through distance education modes (DE), then they also become eligible for all recommendations made in 4.1.3 above up to the level of their first diploma at TAFE.

4.2 With respect to this inquiry's Terms of Reference regarding:

- (c) factors affecting the cost of delivery and accessibility including the co-contribution model on student behaviour and completion rates,
- and, considering the assumptions in (i) and (ii) above, **we recommend that:**

4.2.1 the costs / fees for a TAFE Certificate or Diploma course that will ultimately be invoiced to a student be:

- (i) consistent across TAFE campuses and for like components in different courses
- (ii) published for transparency in TAFE booklets, enrolment documents and on TAFE websites
- (iii) indicative for individual students and their stakeholders prior to, and during, the enrolment process
- (iv) itemised for, and invoiced on successful completion of, each component of the TAFE course
- (v) available in an electronic calculator format where students and stakeholders can estimate:
 - a) the overall cost of a TAFE course being considered, including strategies for repayments of loans
 - b) discounts for the successful completion of course components (RPL) and/ or the balances owed

4.2.2 while TAFE students continue to maintain the status of adult learners, for those students in described in 4.1.1 to 4.1.4, the recognised stakeholders be *'kept in the loop'* and availed of relevant information regarding:

- (i) enrolment status, attendance patterns, course participation, progress, and academic transcripts
- (ii) information and invoices relating to costs and/or fees associated with a the student's TAFE enrolment

4.2.3 a mechanism be established whereby students and/or stakeholders may review, contest or appeal invoiced costs and/or fees based on the current published and available information.

4.3 With respect to this inquiry's Terms of Reference regarding:

- (f) Smart &Skilled reforms; alternatives to the contestable training market, and:
- (g) any other

and, considering the assumptions in **(i)** and **(ii)** above, **we recommend that:**

4.3.1 the NSW TAFE sector be appropriately and immediately funded and resourced to enable it to provide, demonstrate and account for, the highest possible national and international standards for vocational education and training with respect to the:

- (i) quality of teaching and programs delivered in all NSW TAFE campuses
- (ii) qualification and vocational backgrounds of TAFE teachers and their ongoing professional development
- (iii) benchmarks for student:
 - a) service, support, transition from school and assistance to course completion
 - b) attendance, participation and engagement in learning during each component of their course
 - c) attainment and recognition of national AQF competencies
 - d) work placement opportunities, support, standards for learning, safety and course requirements
 - e) transition from first diploma to employment for those who are not trainees or apprentices

4.3.2 all other private and commercial providers in the contestable training market in NSW, without exception, be expected to provide, demonstrate and account for, the same highest possible national and international standards for vocational education and training as described for NSW TAFE in 4.3.1 above. This may mean:

- (i) all vocational education and training providers be regularly assessed to the same high standards
- (ii) real costs for quality vocational educational and training may be more evenly spread across the market.

5 Summary

For many young people described in 1.1 above, isolation in its many forms and the limits to their aspirations and opportunities are often greatly mitigated while at school by responsible, professional adults in their life; acting in their interests, communicating with family, guiding their decisions, supporting them in times of need; teachers, aides, counsellors, careers advisors. On leaving school, or on reaching 18 years of age, the only significant adult capable of advising, guiding, mentoring and acting on appropriate vocational choices and decisions may be them alone or, if they're lucky, a capable parent or family member.

A transitional pathway to quality, ongoing vocational education and training is essential for these young people; without well trained and resourced adults who have the young person's interests, ongoing education and successful outcomes at heart, misunderstood or complex information instantly becomes a barrier, which can become a hurdle, which collectively become obstacles, all of which can become insurmountable.

In the internationally acclaimed vocational education and training environment of NSW TAFE campuses, where significant resources are directed to well-trained and provisioned student services teams working with effective outreach programs in the interests of each individual described in 1.1 above, we can envisage:

- case managed support, advocacy and intervention in guiding a young person's pathway beyond school
- collaborative communications with a young person's family, helping to guide decisions and choice
- effective linkages, protocols and partnerships with local schools, services and commonwealth agencies
- transitional and/or complimentary programs and courses at TAFE related to language and financial literacy, numeracy, strategies for successful learning, computers and multimedia, life skills, resilience, etc.

While our communications with staff at the local TAFE campus have always been open, supportive of our daughter and to the highest professional standards; effective, personalised outreach that connects every individual in their transition to adulthood with a significant and independent adult, is crucial for their success.

Where private schools compete in the primary and secondary school education market, high quality standards for legal protocols, curriculum offering and delivery, quality teaching, student well-being and community transparency are essential and accountable. When private providers of vocational education and training wish to compete in this space, they must do so to the same quality standards we expect of a well resourced NSW TAFE sector. They must be accountable for; the provision of quality teaching and learning; effective student transition, outreach and well-being programs as well a capacity to build and sustain their business over the longer term. Otherwise, NSW TAFE can only compete in a *slash and burn* environment.

When young people are mentored, welcomed, supported and encouraged in a fee-free, accessible, tertiary campus environment like their local NSW TAFE, they are more likely to enrol, keep attending and thrive.