

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

Name: Ms Vivienne Fox

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Partially Confidential

Inquiry into vocational education and training in New South Wales

Dear Director,

I would like to address the following Terms of Reference in the current Inquiry into vocational education and training;

1. That General Purpose Standing Committee No 6 inquire into and report on vocational education and training in New South Wales, and in particular:

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

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

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

(ii) the development of skills in the New South Wales economy

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

My husband and I home educate our children, none of whom have ever attended school. The eldest two have used TAFE as a pathway to further education. I would like to address the terms of reference, particularly in relation to the new 'Smart and Skilled' funding presenting a barrier for our other children accessing a similar pathway to further education.

Once home educated students reach the age of around 15, many of them are gaining an interest in working towards formal qualifications, particularly as the more usual pathway of the Higher School Certificate is not open to them. TAFE presents a good introduction, and a pathway to careers, and to other formal education, including University. We know many home educated students who have followed this course, and hope that it will remain available and affordable for years to come.

Our son entered TAFE at age 15, and completed a Certificate 3 in Information Technology (Software Applications), a Certificate 4 in IT (Web Design) and a Diploma in Web Development. At the age of 16 he was able to enter a Bachelor of Information Technology at

the University of Newcastle, using the TAFE qualifications he had, and subsequently received 90 units of credit towards his degree course. This was an efficient and cost effective way for him to gain qualifications, and then to enter the workforce, which he did, joining the IT support staff at an independent school, at the age of 18.

Our eldest daughter entered TAFE at the age of 16 and completed a Certificate 4 in Laboratory Techniques, gaining an overall Distinction, and was able to gain entry to a Bachelor of Arts with a Bachelor of Science at Macquarie University. The TAFE teachers were extremely dedicated, providing excellent tutoring, and answering questions to students outside business hours, and really ensuring that they gained a proper understanding in the areas of science covered by the course. As the Laboratory Techniques course was such a well taught and thorough course in a number of areas of Science (including Microscopy, Microbiology, and Chemistry), our daughter was able to gain a High Distinction in first year Chemistry. I would hope that this course continued to be offered to students, with the same excellent content. As home educated students are not eligible for the award of the Higher School Certificate, TAFE is an appropriate pathway which is both practical and affordable.

TAFE allows home educated students an introduction into a formal educational setting. It is disappointing that this excellent educational system has been undermined by the cuts to face to face teaching time, and funding that have occurred this year. The Certificate 4 in Laboratory Techniques which my daughter completed was a 12 month course (2 ½ days on campus per week) in 2013, and cost approximately \$1500. Two of her friends have taken the course this year, which has now been reduced to six months (still 2 ½ days per week), and they were charged a significantly higher fee, despite the cuts to teaching time. I personally know at least four home educated students who are currently enrolled in our local TAFE. They have been hampered by uncertainty as to whether they could be enrolled, when the Board of Teaching and Educational standards declared they were considered to be 'at school' (which would mean that they were ineligible for the Smart and Skilled funding subsidy) and other issues. These families had to argue that their students were not 'at school' to be provisionally enrolled, and did not know what the cost to them would be.

In spite of the 5 principal objects of the Education Act including, "(d) to allow children to be educated at home", little regard is given to home schooled students, whose needs are ignored in many areas, including in the TAFE/VET system. It seems this lack of regard may be due to a misunderstanding of the increasing numbers of students currently being educated at home. In NSW, approximately 3000 students are registered as home schooled, up from under 1500 ten years ago. It is also estimated that a significant number of home educated students are unregistered, due to the difficult to decipher, and inappropriate registration system in NSW. In a society which values education, and expects that all students will have fair access to educational qualifications, this small but growing sector ought to be considered.

We have three younger daughters currently registered for home education, who will be looking at pathways to further education in the next few years. We sincerely hope that TAFE courses will be open to them.

We would encourage the committee to consider that home educated students be exempt from the requirement to no longer be in secondary education to access subsidies for TAFE/VET courses, and that home educated students be included in discussions regarding funding and resourcing of education in NSW by government and government agencies.

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

- **(ii) the development of skills in the New South Wales economy**
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There is another reason for continuing support of the TAFE system; the increase in unscrupulous private providers, claiming to compete with TAFE, who provide a poor level of education.

A year ago our eldest daughter began a Certificate 3 in Childcare through [redacted], in order to qualify in Childcare as a means of earning money while studying at University. Childcare is something she has been involved in from a young age, and it seemed like a reasonable choice. [redacted] is a private distance education provider, based in Queensland. She chose this course as it was cheaper than the TAFE equivalent (by \$1000, approximately) and paid for it herself.

While TAFE was supportive and provided plenty of support as well as actual teaching, both during class time, and outside class hours when our daughter was completing her Certificate 4 in Laboratory Techniques, [redacted] has been extremely difficult to communicate with. When our daughter managed to get time to speak with a tutor, the time allocated seemed to be about 15 minutes, and then she felt like she was being 'fobbed off'.

Although our daughter is now gaining a Distinction average at University, the Certificate 3 in Childcare through the private provider has been lacking in support, dull, dry, and difficult to decipher. The requirement was that volumes of paperwork (answering short answer questions) be completed, and that 100% correct answers be provided, or workbooks were returned. No lecture material or any significant student support was provided. Voluminous paper notes were provided, but it was difficult to ascertain how to answer particular questions. The information came in the form of 'Learner Guides', long, dull, dry volumes online with no clear pathway, and she was also expected to refer to a number of other websites. The guides seemed to provide no actual guidance. When directly asked for help, tutors needed to have a time booked, but could give little assistance.

There was no clear information given in the early weeks of how to undertake the course in the timeliest way.

While trying to organise practical work, little contact could be made with [redacted]. [redacted] seemed to have far greater expectations of the Childcare Centre than the centre could provide. Even the Director of the local childcare centre (where prac work was to occur) emailed and called [redacted] for support to be provided, but none was forthcoming. This was a surprise to a well established childcare centre which had catered for numerous students before, generally from TAFE.

Ultimately the course proved to be a failure, and she has abandoned it, with no hope of refund of her \$1300 fees.

We recommend that much greater scrutiny is provided for private education providers, and that instead of giving free reign to private providers, to compete with TAFE and undermine the public system with poorer educational provision, that the TAFE system be supported in the excellent work it has done over many years.

Thank you for your consideration of these important issues,

Regards
Vivienne and Russell Fox