

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

**Organisation:** Australian Association of Bush Regenerators Inc.  
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**Australian Association of Bush Regenerators Inc.**

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Dear Sir/Madam

**RE: SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN NSW  
by the General Purpose Standing Committee No 6, Legislative Council NSW, August 2015.**

**GENERAL COMMENTS:**

The Australian Association of Bush Regenerators, AABR, is a peak body representing the bush regeneration and ecological restoration industries in NSW and increasingly, other states of Australia. Both professional and volunteer practitioners make up the membership. The establishment of professional standards and fair employment conditions for all in the industry has been a focus of AABR for 30 years. AABR has always worked closely with the training providers and industry to raise standards of practice and help the ecological restoration industry deliver quality environmental outcomes.

The current vocational education and training situation in NSW is of great concern to AABR. The substantially higher course fees introduced through 'Smart and Skilled', particularly for students who have another qualification, is already having a serious detrimental effect on our industry and if it continues will lead to a further decline in the quality of work undertaken for the environment. We consider that the fees are priced beyond the point of affordability for our industry, which is one with low private but high public benefit. (See testimonials, below.) This effect will worsen over future years if the course fees remain unaffordable.

We submit that it is vital for a healthy industry and a healthy environment that the Certificate II and III courses must now regain a substantially higher level of subsidy and that this should be available irrespective of whether a person has a previous qualification. This will allow learners to at least start their training and enter the industry.

(Signed)

Jane Gye

Secretary

14 August 2015

## DETAILED COMMENTS

AABR'S detailed comments on the Terms of Reference are entered in *italics* below each of the following points

1(a) the factors influencing student choice about entering the VET system including:

(i) Motivation to study

Participants in our bush regeneration/ecological restoration industry are motivated to undertake study in the Conservation and Land Management (CLM) qualifications at Certs II, III, IV, Diploma and Advanced Diploma levels to improve skills and knowledge so as to become more employable. Also, improving the skills of volunteers improves their public service contribution.

The VET system provides PRACTICAL skills with an industry focus.

- *Many university graduates FURTHER their education by adding these practical skills to their knowledge base and therefore become more employable and better employees. The idea that these skills are gained cheaply via TAFE or other subsidised training venues, for short-term employment while graduates look for other work, is false. The practical skills gained in on-ground work and training are essential to a talented land manager at higher levels of employment down the track. Hence because of the high course costs, these potential students may decide to do alternative, more 'glamorous' courses. No other courses provide the essential practical skills for sound environmental management that the CLM courses provide. In reality, this means that highly qualified people in the land management field, often lack the basic skills – for example, many bush regeneration contractors complain that their contracts are managed by people who do not understand the strategies required for efficient use of resources. Hence results are less than optimal.*
- *Volunteers who gain practical training and education go on to provide thousands of hours of free labour on public land and contribute skills to the whole community.*

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

*Cert III is the minimum requirement used by most of the businesses in our industry when hiring employees. It is also used by AABR as a benchmark when we assess members for professional accreditation. This qualification therefore needs to be accessible to anyone interested in working as a bush regenerator. Access to this course as delivered within a bush regeneration industry context - is limited to a handful of TAFE colleges in NSW and where numbers of enrolments are dropping due to the recent fee rises, numbers are falling below the critical minimum to run a course. This means that accessibility is reduced. Workplace training and assessment is only available in limited areas and is also limited by the fact that our industry is erratically funded and as a result many of the small companies will find it difficult to provide any workplace training and assessment.*

(iii) Barriers to participation..

**COST!**

*School leavers make up a small percentage of workers in the bush regeneration industry. It is also the aim of VET training that you work and study at the same time - building the student's skills while learning on the job. So by providing fully subsidised education to unemployed people alone will just reinforce the message that you don't look for work while you are studying. The skills of these students will not improve as rapidly, and they will not be as employable in the end. Not all small businesses can offer traineeships, especially in our industry where casual work is the norm and we often still run on the basis of annual contracts.*

*Many people come to the field with other qualifications from all sorts of backgrounds not just the environmental sciences. This is commonplace within the developed world where people go through*

multiple phases in their working life. Having a prior qualification does not mean that a potential employee has the skills gained in Cert III. It is therefore a puzzle to our industry why it should cost more to attend the later course if you have prior qualifications in an entirely unrelated field? For example many students in bush regeneration are of mature age and are changing their career focus. What use is a nursing degree to a Cert III student in Bush Regeneration? Why should that prior qualification affect their ability to study something else?

Encouraging a workforce with multiple skills must surely benefit Australia to ride the economic highs and lows.

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

(i) educational linkages with secondary and higher education

Few school students or school leavers are interested in an environmental career. Those with interest and aptitude in environmental studies tend to go straight to uni and only realise the importance of a VET course when they realise they need the practical training before entering the workforce. Our industry therefore links with higher education in the reverse order to what is generally assumed.

(ii) development of skills in the NSW economy

To keep the skills base growing and even just at its current level, the bush regeneration/ecological restoration industry needs access to VET training. Access to shorter courses such as Cert III so that entry level skills can be gained quickly, cheaply and efficiently are essential to our industry as profit margins for this public-benefit industry are very low.

(iii) 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

Our industry has played a strong role in providing employment for particularly, people in the mature workers category. However, by this stage, the workers already have Cert III or above qualification so the high fees now imposed create a barrier to anyone with a previous qualification to retrain for employment in our industry.

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

A small number of very important regional centres offer industry-based courses in CLM. However, student numbers have been dropping due to the costs, in many cases below the level where running a course is viable. There is a danger that we will lose the few courses being offered at regional institutions, with no alternative available.

(c) Factors affecting the cost of delivery.....

By charging high fees in an attempt to help in cost recovery, the student numbers have dropped. Therefore the courses are now even harder to run and it is hard to find teachers willing to teach for low numbers of hours. Employers are now struggling to engage skilled workers. Small companies and Government agencies within our industry have always encouraged all the employees to attend TAFE to gain at least Cert II or III. They can't do this now as their workers cannot afford it.

(See testimonials below)

(d) the effects of a competitive training market on student access to education.....

It would appear that at this stage there are not more RTOs coming into the training market. This is a major concern as the fee rises have just driven the costs up for students and made most courses un-affordable for RTOs to run.

(e) industry participation in vocational education

AABR has an Accreditation system for practitioners designed to establish and maintain acceptable standards of practice. One of the components of this accreditation is whether the person holds any formal VET qualifications in CLM. The Accreditation process is run by volunteers. If we lose formal qualifications because employees can't gain them due to cost, our industry will have difficulty training and assessing practitioners. The time to individually assess someone for Accreditation will extend beyond our organisation's capacity, and it is very difficult for many of the smaller companies in our industry to run training programs and to make these skills transferable within the industry. Maintaining standards without formal VET training will become highly problematic – as

*AABR already experiences in regions where formal courses are not offered.*

(f) the Smart and Skilled reforms, including:

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

*It is the view of AABR that the Smart and Skilled contestable training market is already having a serious detrimental effect on our industry and that it is essential that Certificate II and III courses must now regain a higher level of subsidy (irrespective of whether a person has a previous qualification) so that they are low-cost courses, suited to a low private benefit / high public benefit industry. This will allow learners to at least start their training and enter the industry.*

(ii) the effects of the Smart and Skilled roll out on school-based apprenticeships

N/A

## TESTIMONIALS FROM CONTRACTORS AND EMPLOYEES

*Below are several testimonials from employers, educators and workers in our industry:*

### **1. Andrew McGahey (Principal of Total Earth Care P.L.) says:**

I have employed over 1,000 people in the Land management industry, and I and my clients have reaped the benefit of these staff, be they school leavers or post graduates, completing the Land management courses at TAFE. Currently no staff want to enrol in these courses because pro rata they cost more than a full time degree. In the past, staff with post graduates could use the CLM qualification to help them land their first career job. However the dubious cost benefit of paying exorbitant fees to enter an industry that pays an entry level of \$21.00 an hour makes no financial sense, University graduates need these practical skills to be well rounded practitioners. We will lose young employees, school leavers and University-educated staff before they start in our industry and natural attrition will leave fewer trained professionals in the industry. The industry stalwarts will, being in short supply, demand more money for their services. Concurrently our clients will resist an increase in Rates and will squeeze the already wafer thin margins that contractors subsist on and will jeopardise their viability.

Regards

Andrew McGahey | Managing Director

Total Earth Care Pty. Ltd. | [www.totalearthcare.com.au](http://www.totalearthcare.com.au)  
Unit 5, 1 Vuko Place Warriewood NSW 2102

**2. Hugh Paterson (Principal of The Good Bush People) says:** "The new VET fees are anything but smart and will lead to a less skilled workforce. People in work are now required to pay prohibitive fees which discourage students from gaining employment until they finish their course. That means that the ideal training model of people doing formal courses at TAFE while learning and gaining practical experience on the job has been destroyed.

The most likely outcome is that some students will remain on the dole until they finish Cert III. They will be required to miss classes and field trips at times to jump through Centrelink hoops. They will finish their courses far less skilled and useful than in the past.

These days few people remain in the same career for their whole working life. Retraining for new careers is important. Many bush regenerators come into the industry already with qualifications in other fields. I did, and most of my staff did. Such people cannot access training subsidies even though they are unemployed. They must pay \$10 000 to retrain.

The only alternative now is to train the trainees ourselves and send them to specialist training providers for courses such as first aid, Chemcert, chainsaw operation, rope access and white card. Which is fine for contractors such as The Good Bush People who have the skills and experience to provide suitable training. But how transferable is the experience between contractors? I do not know all the contractors who could provide suitable training. Good regenerators without formal qualifications will find it hard to be recognised.

Enrolments in CLM are falling off in the Western Sydney Institute. I suspect it would be the same in other areas.

How will AABR address the problem of accrediting experienced regenerators without formal qualifications?"

**3. John Drury (Regenerator with Lane Cove Bush Regeneration Co-op) says:** "It would be apparent to most that excessive VET fees preclude many from entering the Bush regen industry. What future ahead? Surely the environmental concern is worthy of anyone thinking beyond the next election. "

**4. Lachlan Garland (sole trader, Wentworth Falls) says:** "I have worked for bush regen contractors for approx. 11 years. I have now retired, but I am involved with about 8 voluntary bushcare groups in the Blue Mountains. I am also on the NPWS BM Regional Advisory Committee, this is partly because of my involvement in bush regen.

Under the current cost structure that I have seen, I most probably would not have done the Cert 2 course and certainly would not have done Cert 4. I suspect many people I did my course with would feel the same way.

Many people who may want to follow the same path I have, now won't.

It can be a lot of money to pay, only to receive relatively poor wages at the end of it all"

**5. Susan Brunskill (Regenerator, Albury NSW) says:** "The new fee structures certainly don't encourage people to undertake additional training to broaden their skills base or to undertake lower paid work. Education is certainly increasingly skewed towards getting a higher paid job as those who have a qualification can't get one lower or the same without it costing a lot of money. It seems that govt sees one course being enough, but often people need to have a career change, or do another course to broaden their skills but this turns out to be very expensive."

#### **6. Teacher, Conservation and Land Management Courses**

\*Cert 2 Conservation and Land Management full fees have increased from \$253 in Sem 1 2014 to \$4850 in Sem 1 2015. This is prohibitive for many people, particularly the unemployed.

Consequently, for the first time in 20 years, Cert 2 Conservation and Land Management has not run this semester at this campus due to low enrolments.

\*Several previous students have not continued their studies, although they have expressed a desire to do so, specifically due to the increase of fees for Cert 3 & 4 being in excess of \$9000.

\*Each semester prior to the fee increase we would have full fee paying enrolments from rural land holders and Landcare members wishing to gain knowledge regarding restoration work, particularly in weed control. These students would then implement their acquired skills on their properties or public land, producing great environment outcomes and reducing the strain on the public purse, particularly for weed control. We have no enrolments from this cohort this semester,



\*Under the smart and skilled system potential students cannot receive a subsidised rate if they enrol in a course at a lower level than any other qualifications they already have. This is regardless of the field the qualification is in, how long ago the course was completed or even what country it was completed in. As a result I have had students required to pay full fees that have had a Diploma in Mental Health, another with an Arts degree gained in 1974 and a woman with a degree from Columbia not recognised in Australia. Students are being financially forced into higher levels without gaining the basics of the field.

\*No value seems to be considered for the "life skills" students receive in attending TAFE. Many have had negative educational experiences and/or have not participated in training for many years. For some of these people the regular attendance, supportive environment, mixing with people from various backgrounds, ages and life experiences, give these students a different outlook on what they may be capable of. Many of these students go onto attaining employment and further training,

\*Students continuing their studies with TAFE after gaining qualifications with a private provider have had varied skills and knowledge. Some have been terrible! As an example one student could only identify 5 common weeds in comparison to 50 by TAFE students completing the same course. This student had also very limited experience working in a bushland setting. Many international educators recognise the TAFE system as an exemplary example of adult education.

END OF AABR SUBMISSION