

**Submission  
No 144**

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

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**Date received:** 10/08/2015

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

### Summary

Quality Vocational Education and Training (VET) is required for the significant number of people of all ages, who want to gain skills to enable them to engage in trades or other work. Not all people want a university education.

There is a need for equal and fair government support for all VET providers. In particular there is a need to maintain adequate funding to TAFE to allow it to continue to provide quality education opportunities for the disadvantaged, those who live in remote areas, people who are 'second chance' learners, students in upper secondary education studying VET and people with learning difficulties.

The *Smart and Skilled* reforms and budget cuts to TAFE indicate that there is a planned move in reducing the influence of TAFE. There is an obligation on TAFE to remain competitive in the VET marketplace.

The *Smart and Skilled* reforms are seen as being of importance but are deficient in their application and some private training providers are not following the spirit of the reforms. In some cases providers are using unethical practices to attract potential students. The cost of courses can be prohibitive.

Employers have a responsibility for evaluating and reporting on the achievement of student competence.

Participation by overseas students in VET is important to the Australian economy, but the motivation of students and quality of VET provision needs continuous evaluation and commitment by both regulatory authorities and providers.

Relevant developments in education need to be incorporated into VET to achieve best outcomes for both industry and students. Informed, ethical and involved leadership is required.

### Introduction

This inquiry is both timely and urgent. There is evidence, both at the Federal and State levels that there are policies and procedures that have an adverse effect on the provision of relevant and effective VET in Australia. Alternatively there are VET providers who are choosing to ignore them. To remain competitive in a globalised economy, it is essential that Australia develops and supports quality VET systems that best meet contemporary and future work and social needs.

I make this submission on the basis that I have been a part-time teacher in TAFE. Further, I have lectured in VET teacher education courses at a university. These courses have involved a broad spectrum of participants from both the private enterprise and TAFE sectors. During this time I had

the opportunity to visit both private training organisations and NSW TAFE Colleges to observe trainers during their workplace practicum sessions. I have had the opportunity to discuss VET provision with trainers working for private training providers. In addition I have been a trainer in both government and private organisations.

I am particularly concerned about the provision of appropriate support for students with disabilities and Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD). I am a committee member of Specific Learning Difficulties Association, NSW (SPELD NSW). The Association is involved in the provision of appropriate support and opportunities for people with SLD. This support allows them to engage in school and post-school learning and gain knowledge, skills and attitudes that will assist them to achieve their life goals and make a worthwhile contribution to the Australian workforce and way of life.

This submission does not specifically address all of the terms of reference but comments upon those matters considered to be of importance to the intent of this NSW inquiry.

### **Terms of reference**

#### **(a) the factors influencing student choice about entering the vocational education and training system.**

It has to be emphasised that a significant number of people do not wish, have the opportunity, nor the ability to engage in university studies. Therefore VET provides an essential alternative learning experience for them. A significant number of people of all ages wish to enter or re-enter the trades or gain practical skills to achieve their desired workplace employment.

It is also important to understand that there are university students who enrol in VET courses to gain more hands-on skills that may not be available through their more academic based university courses. VET allows them to make their learning more compatible with future workplace employment.

It has to be appreciated, that particularly for young people; the cost of training courses is an important factor. Whilst there have been some measures taken to assist students in paying these costs, for many they are prohibitive. TAFE courses have been particularly affected and along with mainly computer generated problems in processing enrolments; many students have been deterred from attending training and gaining necessary work and life skills.

#### **(b) the role played by public and private vocational education providers and industry**

Many private and community training providers make a valuable contribution to VET and the continuing learning needs of the general community. They provide a broad range of relevant courses in convenient locations and using learning methods that are productive and meet participant needs. However the media are frequently drawing attention to the practices of unscrupulous providers. This is unfortunate, but does draw attention to some inappropriate activities and

attitudes towards officially sanctioned training requirements and the needs of students. Those private training providers that are based on a specific industry are seen as providing a more ethical service and are more motivated towards the achievement of student learning outcomes.

TAFE plays a significant and major role in providing vocational courses for upper secondary school students. Students completing their schooling can further their studies by enrolling in appropriate VET courses and gain entrance to further education through access to university level courses. Many school students will become skilled workers, business and tradespeople, through on-the-job work experience and related vocational education and training. There is a strong linkage between those students who are in the upper secondary schools, undertaking VET training and TAFE colleges. This linkage is extremely important, as the colleges provide a very valuable teaching service and equipment resource provider to upper secondary schools. Students, upon leaving school will be enabled to gain employment or further their training through participation in traineeships, apprenticeships or a comprehensive range of business courses, up to and including Advanced Diploma level.

There are people who ‘drop out’ of education before completing their studies; but at a later date desire to reengage with learning through ‘second chance’ education. Perhaps one of the best success stories of reengagement opportunity is the Bradfield Senior College at the North Sydney Institute of TAFE. Not only do the students reengage with upper secondary education, but they develop constructive relationships with dedicated, mature, caring and experienced teachers.

#### **(f) the Smart and Skilled reforms**

From a reading of the earlier issued NSW Department of Education and Communities fact sheet on *Smart and Skilled* reforms, it was apparent that the purpose was to enable private training providers to gain a greater role in the VET market and provide a broader range of course opportunities to students. This was to be achieved with government financial support. Although it was stated that “TAFE NSW will continue to be the leading provider of vocational education and training in New South Wales...” it was not made clear how this was to be achieved in the context of reduced funding, staff cuts and property sell-offs and increased allocation of public funds to the private training industry. This statement has been deleted from the 2015 version of information sheets and cutbacks in NSW Budget allocations to TAFE would further support the belief that a planned reduction in the influence of TAFE is being implemented; as is the situation throughout all of Australia.

The reforms specified measures to achieve high quality training such as, “strong regulation, effective contracting, performance monitoring, validation of assessment, consumer protection, teaching and leadership and evaluation”. It is in all these areas that the reforms are considered to be ineffective. VET courses are required to be delivered under the standards set by the State Training Services through the NSW Quality Framework. Unfortunately there are private providers who do not follow these requirements, but continue to operate without any apparent corrective action being taken by

them or the regulatory authorities. More importantly and of particular concern, there is a problem, mainly involving overseas students. When their instructors, rightfully insisting on maintaining standards, draw their attention to unsatisfactory attendance and subject assessments, the students then refer to the high fees they have paid for their tuition and that they therefore have an expectation to pass. They may make approaches to more senior staff for assistance. Instructors can then be directed to allow the students to continue their studies without the requirement for a change in behaviour or satisfactory performance of tasks. This situation can also apply to local students. In the learning environment, competence in both spoken and written English is also required, but unfortunately can be overlooked.

The participation of overseas students in VET has become an important contributor to the Australian economy. It is important that high standards of instruction and student competence be achieved. Overseas students come to Australia on student visas and then may apply for work visas or for permanent residence on satisfactory completion of their studies and gaining of appropriate employment. If the VET and visa systems are to be creditable and not open to abuse, then the VET providers and regulatory authorities have to ensure that students reach the required competency standards and have genuine reasons for gaining vocational qualifications.

With the separation of State Training Services from the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC) and incorporation into the NSW Department of Industry, there should be more interaction with industry bodies and employers on the need for and content of courses, location and training methods. As the receivers of the product of the VET system, employers have a significant responsibility for monitoring, evaluating and reporting on the maintenance and achievement of industry and government approved training standards. There remains the need for a close relationship to be maintained with DEC to ensure that a holistic, systems approach to education is maintained and the developmental needs of VET teachers and quality learning by students are met. Informed, ethical and involved leadership in the political, industry and education domains is required. Leadership in these domains is currently lacking.

#### **(g) other related matters**

New technologies, new developments in teaching and learning methods and changing course content requirements have had an impact on all training providers. With the use of flexible and self-directed learning students are enabled to select their preferred learning method, time and location of classes and the total time required to complete courses. This has benefits for both the student and the employer. The employer can have a trainee or apprentice fully trained in a shorter period of absence from the workplace.

It is important to understand that the Australian economy does not just rely on a trained workforce. A society consists of people, who besides possessing work knowledge and skills, also should possess appropriate attitudes towards social values, including an awareness of difference and the need for

inclusiveness. TAFE provides for difference and inclusiveness, by for example providing resources for the attendance of the disabled, hearing and visually impaired, people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait descent, people in rural areas, non-English speaking students, the unemployed and those with SLD. It would be difficult to see this level of participation and care being delivered by many private training providers with their strong profit motives. The current and proposed reduction in the allocation of funds to TAFE has already seen a marked reduction in the ability of TAFE to support these important members of society.

It is in the provision of opportunities and support for disadvantaged students that separates TAFE from the private training industry. TAFE has stood out as the provider of care and support for these students. When examining the needs of students with SLD, it has to be understood that the school education systems have an obligation to provide learning and behaviour support for students with SLDs. Once the student leaves secondary school they are virtually on their own. TAFE Institutes have provided support for these students through counselling, guidance on ways of best learning, language and numeracy guidance and if necessary providing extra teacher support to assist in classes. This support has been eroded by the *Smart and Skilled* reforms. It is considered that the TAFE support for the disadvantaged has to be re-established as an important and necessary community service.

TAFE Colleges in country areas have become blended into their local communities, providing acknowledged and appreciated services to students, industries and local businesses. The courses provided by the Open Technical and Education Network (OTEN) are of significant benefit to students who are unable to attend regular courses, because of their remoteness or inconvenient course scheduling. In a similar fashion, it is known that at least one TAFE College has developed an e-learning course to assist SLD students with their learning and the development of their literacy and numeracy skills. Such initiatives would enable students to better engage in their chosen studies, thus allowing them to seek employment opportunities, and indeed give them the opportunity to better interact with others in their local communities. An important function of TAFE Institutes is to respond to the demands in small communities for courses where there would only be a small number of students. Such courses would be unprofitable for private training providers and TAFE also has difficulties in providing this service with cutbacks to staffing and budget allocations.

The nature of the competitive training market is the critical issue. If the competition is comparable and equal, then it is believed that TAFE, with adequate funding for disadvantaged students, would continue to be competitive and provide opportunities for all students to achieve their desired learning outcomes and engage in occupations of their choice. To remain competitive there is a clear need for TAFE to regularly assess change in industry and student needs and develop best administrative, instructional and learning programs to meet those needs.

As a final comment, it is emphasised that concern has been expressed about the ethical behaviour of some private training providers. There have been instances where marketing campaigns, such as

door-knocks and particularly those conducted 'on-line' (many by overseas marketing agencies), have attempted to encourage people to participate in courses by offering inducements such as free computers, iPads or tablets. Decisions have been made to prevent this unsatisfactory situation but close monitoring of provider response is required to ensure requirements are met. There are also cases where students, who are unlikely to have the ability to complete their course, are persuaded to enrol. They now have a financial obligation to pay their contracted course fee under VET FEE – HELP. Despite non-completion of their course, they have to pay the fee when their income reaches a prescribed level.

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