

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

Honourable Members,
Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No.6,
Inquiry into vocational education and training in New South Wales,

I present this submission out of my experience at the vocational education and training 'coalface', and with the encouragement of my fellow delivery personnel, currently serving TAFE NSW in a regional setting, unable or unwilling to comment by their terms of service to the State and fearful of the repercussions that may affect their employment situation. Further, I will include, as appropriate, experiences and opinions of our local and regional employers. Robust comment, without fear or favour, has not been encouraged and remains patently missing from this most important government policy area. Of course the initial response by those committed to ensure a particular policy is established can simply dismiss the following as anecdotal. Irrespective, the following is my experience over a substantial portion of my working life.

In addressing the following terms of reference I preface my statements with this caveat. There has been no significant biological change in the condition of the student cohort seeking vocational education in the last four decades. This may at first reading be taken as flippant but I assure the committee that it is most relevant to this inquiry and will be seen as such as you consider the content.

a. The factors influencing student choice about entering the vocational education and training system.

i. Motivation to study.

Several years ago, and I quote:

Block release student: "Do you have somewhere for me to dry this workbook please?"

Teacher: "Yes. Place it on the bench under the heating strip for a while".

Teacher: "How did it get wet?"

Student: "We went fishing last weekend and I backed the car into the water too far when we were launching the boat".

Humorous? Sure! However, this is all too often a typical example of general student commitment to trade training. The above student was on a 3 week block program and had not taken his books out of the car boot since placing them there at the completion of his previous block attendance. However, after experiencing a period of employer sponsored attitude adjustment he went on to grow into a valued tradesperson.

The challenge inherent in the above in terms of student engagement is obvious. In many ways it has been ever thus.

ii. Choice of course, course location and method of study:

Forty years ago, at the beginning of term, a journalist stood outside the north gate of Wollongong TAFE [then Technical College] seeking answers from new students as to their trade and motivation for choosing it. The answers were generally "mum and dad said it was a good job" or "I've got to get a trade before I can return to the farm", or the like. Very few had a clear response as to a personal interest in their career.

In these days of skill shortages and delivery efficiency imperatives the selection of apprentices, by too many employers, is unsatisfactory. Either by way of business pressure or default. Apprentice applicants are often the business operator's children, friend's children or the business customer's children. Further, too many applicants presenting for employment consideration are proving unable to successfully complete basic numeracy challenges presented by the employers choosing to use them. The keen, interested and committed student is an all too rare bird.

TAFE Classes are populated by students displaying the full range of community abilities. From the practically illiterate and/or innumerate through to those having a disgruntled 'missed out university' attitude, to the fully engaged goer.

Team teaching with in class student support by Basic Ed teachers together with the Individual Learning Centre experience of students has been instrumental in servicing the needs of the challenged students noted

above. Under Smart and Skilled this vital, previously included, support is either severely diminished or non-existent other than for an extra fee for limited contact delivery.

Heartening student stories of successful trade course completion and workplace performance, due to their individually supported learning experiences, are testament to these student focussed services TAFE has historically provided.

If it is accepted that the above deficiency is a reality in our community then to provide a positive support structure to facilitate successful course completion is a fundamental if not a moral obligation in building the smart and skilled workforce we say we want.

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:

A little history lesson may be informative. In 1966, during my 'time', apprenticeships were shortened from five to four years. Historically a trade course [subject based] formal ['TAFE'] training time is 864 hours. With the development of modules/units and the current course structure a formula was required to determine a units delivery [hours] value. The total number of points required to achieve successful course completion was 97. So, to the eternal embarrassment of the then curriculum development authorities, it was decided to divide the total course hours by the total course points. Thus $864 / 97 = 8.9072165$. Generously rounded to 9hrs per point. Now let's take the unit MEM07006B 'Perform Lathe operations' It has a point value, or unit weighting, of 4. The nominal delivery hours are thus $4 \times 9 = 36$. However, the pathway to achieving competency in this unit was stated as requiring competency in the modules NM25, NM26 and NM27. Each of these modules had a full module 'Nominal duration' delivery value of, and I quote: *"A full module is designed on the assumption that most of the students will achieve the competencies specified in 35 to 40 hours. The length of time taken to complete a module will vary depending on factors such as teaching method used, knowledge and skills at entry and individual student's ability"*. The three modules above then had a total delivery time of $3 \times 36 = 108$ hours. Subsequently the single MEM07006B unit included a recommended delivery plan addressing all the content of the original three modules. Content, that requires the original design time for students to master. Amazingly a student now not only enjoys an apprenticeship reduced by 20% on the 1966 training program but is able to acquire the lathe operating skills in 30% or less time than his grandfather. Management has sought to further reduce this to a delivery time depending upon student numbers and funding formula.

This trade is still known formally in NSW training orders as 'Fitting and Turning'. It is total fantasy to believe that a student will achieve trade competency in a most vital aspect of this trade in 36 or less hours.

I'm sure management [read NSW Government] would be pleased to have students completing the course in two and a half years tops! For today's apprentice this results in being 'fully qualified' in half the total apprenticeship time of his grandfather. An outcome that, when considered in the cold light of day, is patently absurd. Remember that 'there has been no significant biological change in the condition of the student seeking vocational education in the last four decades'.

Please note MEM07006B has been superseded by MEM07006C and is equivalent. There are no delivery hours specified and this has resulted in VET providers specifying delivery student contact hours on the basis of funding alone.

The nexus, conflict and opportunity for qualification corruption between funding and certification is so serious it cannot be ignored.

iv. The delivery of services and programs particularly to regional, rural and remote communities:

A quote from the 'Statement of Owner Expectations NSW TAFE COMMISSION [TAFE NSW] August 2013 item 2.5 page 3. "It [NSW Government] expects TAFE NSW to lead the field in the provision of high-quality teaching, learning and assessment which exceed or meet national benchmarks and customer expectations."

As I understand it, the TAFE mission statement [and I paraphrase here] is that 'TAFE exists to provide a VET opportunity to study and practice a tailor made course of individually selected units to all comers at a location, time and frequency that best suits the needs of the student and employer'.

I further understand that the delivery focus of providing the above VET opportunity will continue to be TAFE [read NSW Government] policy going forward. If this is substantially correct then it is also true that, compared to a fixed 'lock step' course structure, it will be the most expensive training delivery model.

The Fitting & Machining department at Wagga Wagga, a regional campus, has always endeavoured to serve the current TAFE delivery philosophy. Creatively delivering in ways that enhance a student's course experience and provide workplace ready competency as demanded by industry and the responsible government agencies.

Local employers, small to medium businesses, have an understandable focus on production and cannot provide either the now expected impost of workplace training delivery or the broad trade experience required to train a fully qualified tradesperson. Some businesses have attempted to provide training for their staff but have found that it is not core business and prefer to trust TAFE with the training. In terms of workshop experience TAFE can provide the full range of machining training that a Fitting and Machining apprentice or extension student requires to qualify.

Further, is worth noting that regional employers are generally 'unhappy' with the imposition of a training system imposed upon them by, as they see it, a few big businesses and vested training interests.

- c. Factors affecting the cost of delivery of affordable and accessible vocational education and training, including the influence of the co-contribution funding model on student behaviour and completion rates.

The current focus on the dollar driven emasculation of VET and TAFE delivery is frankly abhorrent.

However, when student participation is facilitated with on demand access and individualised commencement and completion arrangements. Together with tailored unit course construction throughout the year, on a combined block or day release basis, such flexibility comes at a cost. A cost that now appears TAFE [read NSW Government] is unwilling to bear. Or if willing, now seeks to squeeze an already seriously over-stretched delivery system to achieve. Competency based Unit/Module course delivery, in all its various constructs, has always been time and resource hungry and to make it work has been critically supported by over and above goodwill volunteered extras in teacher time and resource contribution.

As outlined previously, the flexibility required can result in concurrent delivery of up to ten units on any one day. These multiple units are conducted for a mix of small groups and individuals within the greater class group.

Students work to a structured program designed to provide sequenced unit progress while attending to pre-requisites and maximising workshop facilities equipment access and loading. Program variations occur to account for new starters, extended sickness/injury [often sport related] absences and required student work attendance by employers at times of high demand or 'away' work commitments.

As the establishment of ASQA has demonstrated, and the statements of various industry groups continually reinforce, real student competency outcomes are demanded from all RTOs.

The implementation of course delivery cuts, in the form of increasing student teacher ratios and truncating annual course delivery times, by managers responding to budgetary pressures in the current environment is educationally unsound and totally disadvantaging to students in terms of unit/course completion opportunity.

WH&S is, as you would appreciate, a critical aspect of engineering activity and trade training in particular. There have been near misses of serious student injury or death in institutes training workshops over the years. Increasing the student teacher ratio will seriously diminish a teacher's ability to safely supervise the students in workshops.

An issue that directly impacts the above is the current drive for 'minimisation' of class support in the form of store person cuts. On class store support is integral to the training experience of students and a second pair of eyes for a safe student learning environment. Additionally, workshop cleaning, delivery resource preparation and departmental consumables purchasing negotiations conducted by the store person directly support delivery and WH&S.

Duty of care [physical & psychological] in respect to all people in a workplace or training institution is a further tenet of WH&S legislation.

- 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 or severe disadvantage.
- 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.

- f. The Smart and Skilled reforms:

- i. Alternatives to the Smart and skilled contestable training market and other funding policies.

Smart and Skilled is an opportunity for private providers to cherry pick low cost, high profit, courses. No private provider is going to make the investment necessary to deliver quality trade training. The big company training establishments are gone and TAFE is the established trainer with the infrastructure to deliver. The imposition of Smart and Skilled is grinding delivery to a low that should be an embarrassment to all involved.

- g. Any other related matter.

The 'new normal' is a current favourite buzz word. Historically a normal trade course was designed for an apprentice to attend TAFE 8hrs per day for 36 weeks per year for three years. A total course time of 864 hours.

The opportunity for early completion has certainly been available since the introduction of module delivery linked to self-paced learning. The actual early completion of trade students is I believe strictly limited to the self-starting, interested and life experienced student. Rather than the rule they are the exception. The 'new normal' in terms of student completion rates is a self-delusion designed by people who have a very limited understanding of the human condition and a vested interest to reduce students to the status of an assembly line product.

The normal student is the one for whom the unit content has been designed to be received and processed to competency in the designed unit time. Compression of a unit's delivery to suit a bean counting formula suggesting that a student's learning is linear when graphed against a learning cohorts' number is patently absurd. An example of this thinking is to suggest that for a unit of 36hrs designed for the 'average' student to achieve competency, in a class of say 30 can be delivered to a group of 15 and achieve competency in 18hrs.

To the best of my knowledge VET and TAFE students have not yet been fitted with a USB port behind their ear. They are not robots queuing to receive the latest version of their selected trade program. Trade training is an eye, mind, body coordination education/training process that takes time. Of course relevant life experiences will assist in expediting the training to varying degrees.

The application or offering of the latest technology for student engagement is not the instantaneous catchall solution to the training for work ready industrial competent graduates required by business. They'll have a computer, tablet or phone on their lap and their attention is divided between chat, games, twitter, Facebook, You-tube and streamed TV. Some will respond as you desire. The others? I suspect not. Be careful how you invest.

Much has been made of the benefits of the manufactured competitive training market. Let the market decide is the catch cry. It will. The market that will decide is the real market inhabited by people that buy goods and services like ourselves. It will not be kind. It will not pay for the services of the expedited sub-standard, 'fully qualified' training product that TAFE [read NSW Government] is hell bent on providing.

Recommendations

Please, Committee members, make the effort to really know this product, its delivery and its customers:

- Co-payments encourage participation of students. Make them affordable.
- Fully fund the delivery of trade training and the funding of second chance students.
- Ensure that fully qualified and experienced teachers deliver the training.

Thank you for this opportunity. I remain very pleased to have expended my working life contributing to the vocational educational and skill development of thousands of young and not so young Australians.

Yours sincerely,

Friday 14 August 2015