

**Submission
No 193**

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

Name: Mr Stephen O'Brien

Date received: 14/08/2015

I support the role that the public sector has in providing vocational education and training (VET), particularly with regards to the arts education, in this state.

One of the first indications that the NSW government was moving away from the traditional view that education should not just strengthen job prospects but it should also enrich society was the announcement by Pam Christie, Deputy Director-General, TAFE and Community Education in 2012 that "From January 2013 ... Fine Arts courses including sculpture, visual arts and ceramics will no longer be subsidised by the Government."

According to popular lore in Newcastle this move was justified by a former state premier with the comment "you cannot dig coal with ceramics". Whatever the truth of that reputed quote it is undeniable that the arts do contribute to the economy. In fact in the case of Newcastle the arts have saved our inner city from urban blight.

I particularly refer to Renew Newcastle (see <http://renewnewcastle.org/about/>) which works to match artists, cultural projects and community groups with buildings that are vacant, disused, or awaiting redevelopment. Many of these revitalised spaces are tenanted by graduates of the arts programmes such as those run by Hunter TAFE.

As the coal industry goes into a terminal decline it has been the arts which have provided a focus for creativity and entrepreneurial enthusiasm in Newcastle. I previously witnessed this phenomenon in the early 2000s after the closure of steelmaking in Newcastle. As a former steelworker it was remarkable to note the number of my former workmates who came to TAFE to study in the creative industries.

The continued existence of the Hunter Street Campus of Hunter TAFE In Newcastle West is testimony to the value of an education in the arts. The amazingly creative students and staff at this campus have survived against many odds. In a city which is making a transition to new economies the creative industries are demonstrably important.

The Smart and Skilled website claims to be "helping people get the skills they need to find a job and advance their careers" and meeting "skills for industry and individuals". However, as Smart and Skilled is ideologically driven by the notion that "skill shortages can be resolved naturally by market forces" it adopts too narrow a focus on vocational education and training.

Market forces have not worked very well in Newcastle over the years as demonstrated by the success of Renew Newcastle. An unjustified faith in the market has also led to the underfunding of TAFE as a public provider and huge increases in fees for students. Some students at Hunter Street TAFE are now paying between \$14,500 and \$17,000 a year.

In many ways the survival of the Hunter Street campus of TAFE in Newcastle West is a miracle. It survives through dedication and enthusiasm of its students, staff and alumni despite the limited funding it receives from the state government, the Smart and Skilled model and the ongoing restructures. It is also a credit to the Hunter TAFE leadership that it has continued to support the creative industries.

There are many regional towns in NSW which have proud main street 'technical college' buildings which attest to a long history of the commitment of people not only their personal job prospects but also enriching society. The Hunter Street TAFE building is one of those. It has the year 1895 set into its facade. It is a beautiful and proud structure which still bears the original interior signage such as those saying Art Room. 130 years later after wars, depression and earthquakes Hunter Street TAFE in Newcastle West still serves its original purpose as art school.

Smart and Skilled – with its orientation to markets and privatisation has lost sight of what Vocational Education and Training is all about. It cannot quantify and therefore cannot understand that people and communities do value an arts education. It has too narrow a conception of skills and careers. It cannot see that in places such as Newcastle an art education has contributed to the revitalisation of Newcastle where big money has failed to deliver

I encourage the committee to visit Newcastle and witness firsthand the amazing impact of our campuses. I urge the committee to visit as many regional areas of NSW to see how TAFE's contribute to society and to really understand the important role they play in our non-metropolitan communities. The committee needs to see what Smart and Skilled cannot see.

I recommend to the committee that you reject contestability and to support a fully fund TAFE.