

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

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SUBMISSION

I have worked in TAFE for over 20 years and have observed the many changes that have taken place with the ongoing government withdrawal of funding over this time. I loved working for TAFE because of the commitment to learning, the passion, collegiality and the sense of community that our staff have. As we were gradually starved of funding, educational staff worked tirelessly to deliver the same quality of service, and became more and more creative in their delivery of programs.

We provided our students not only with a world recognised quality VET education, but captured the more disadvantaged members of our community in second chance education. Living in a socially and economically disadvantaged area, TAFE provided a respectful, nurturing environment, to many who had disengaged from education and for some, from life. Aboriginal people, disengaged youth, people with mental illness and women who'd been isolated and often suffered abuse, came to the campus tentatively to learn. I have seen our students turn their lives around by participating in a TAFE education, and who went on to participate in a productive life. It is more than an education that these people received. Through learning in an adult environment in which each student was valued as a unique individual and accorded the respect of teachers, students thrived. Some for many reasons did not complete their courses, but many returned, knowing that their learning, personal and social needs would be met in a TAFE classroom.

We had excellent support for our students with counsellors, disabilities consultants and outreach staff. The latter provided education, often off campus for disadvantaged groups, tailoring the courses to the particular needs of the group. Once these students completed their outreach course they often transitioned into courses on campus, knowing that the TAFE model of adult learning would meet their needs, both in terms of education, but also for their personal and social needs.

With the threat of Smart and Skilled, cuts to staffing commenced in 2014. Unbelievably the outreach team were the first to go, followed by Aboriginal support workers and then again unbelievably the campus managers.

On my campus we lost 7 full time staff, 6 of whom were women. At the same time, casual staff had their hours cut, and many lost work as a result.

At the same time, the bureaucracy was burgeoning, and a new culture was being introduced into the TAFE structure. Outsiders were employed as long term TAFE staff were sacked. These new people often had no educational experience let alone worked in TAFE before. They brought with them the culture of the market and within a short period of time our values were replaced by the values of the marketplace-students became customers, courses became products, and emphasis was placed on competitiveness, sales, marketing and surviving in an open market. Frontline staff who were after all doing TAFE's core business were affronted at the cost of these business or marketing specialists.

As a result, there is a huge void between the TAFE frontline staff, who value quality learning, commitment to social justice and equity and those whose job is to replace the educational model with a business model. Lip service is paid to collaboration, but frontline staff feel that the agenda has already been set.

With the implementation of Smart and Skilled this year, courses have been cut by up to ½, fees have risen and many people have been excluded from education, because of the hefty fees that have been imposed.

One example is the Fine Arts Diploma which could be completed by those on a Centrelink benefit for \$200, BUT now costs \$10-12,000 dollars. This was a course which allowed particularly women and those in recovery, to gain a sense of worth, and tap into long suppressed creativity. The rationale behind this massive increase in fees was that it didn't lead to employment. A government focused on employment outcomes, doesn't have the capacity to understand the benefit to communities of having people feeling a sense of accomplishment and personal growth. Many of the graduates are now holding exhibitions and selling at markets. Others chose to complement their studies in art, with studies in community services, playing a vital role working with clients and using their artistic skills in art therapy.

The push to the cheap and easy online learning, greatly disadvantages my community in particular. Many people don't even own a computer let alone have the necessary skills to use it for education. When I recently pointed this out to a manager they were quite surprised- an example of how out of touch these people are! TAFE is more than learning. The coming together as a class and educational community greatly outweighs the advantages of online learning.

As well as Smart and Skilled, the imposition of the EBS has had enormous ramifications for the health and safety of our staff. The cost has been in the order of 1/2billion dollars, but on top of that, possibly thousands of extra staff has been employed to try to sort out the mess. Students have been unable to obtain accurate transcripts of their results, or to be enrolled properly. For a government so smug about efficiency and outcomes-to impose an untested system that doesn't work, could almost be considered as sabotage!

Frontline staff who always prided themselves on their professionalism and customer service, are made to feel inadequate when dealing with their students. Many are sacrificing their own time to try and work it out. I am sure the statistics for sick leave would indicate the physical and mental harm that the current working conditions are introducing.

In terms of private providers in my area, students often give feedback when they have enrolled in a private course, how they didn't learn anything and the term "tick and flick" describes how the courses are completed.

There was one private provider with a very fine webpage who set up a pop up in town, offering \$50 and a lap top to students who would enrol with them. Several Aboriginal people that I know of signed up. One Aboriginal student told me that she didn't have a clue what course it was and how much it cost. Further research on my part found that she had signed up for a Diploma in Management and that the course would cost \$14,700. This person was studying literacy and numeracy at TAFE!! And these are the providers TAFE has to compete with and who are being paid by taxpayers' money?

The inevitable loss of the old TAFE system (NOT the new EDU business) will have significant ramifications for people in rural and regional areas. As courses are cut, and as expected, campuses close, students will not have accessible education. More importantly TAFE counsellors and disabilities consultants are an important link to the limited services in town for disadvantaged clients. If these positions go a valuable community resource will be lost, and existing services will be further stretched. TAFE counsellors play a vital role in supporting vulnerable students, and who by attending TAFE is part of their road to recovery.

I can't stress too much the implications for people with mental illness, Aboriginal people women (some living in isolation or escaping domestic violence) and disengaged youth. These people are part of our community and can be supported to educate themselves and live productive lives.

In closing I would say to the government, that I pay taxes and prepared to pay more in order to have a public education system. Taking money out of the TAFE system to put into the pockets of profiteers is not the way to protect the future of our citizens.

I see the government is moving to increase jail capacity. Have they heard that education can prevent crime? I've seen it many a time!

I used to love working for TAFE and told people that they would have to take me out in a box, but because it's so toxic, I'm thinking of leaving and finding a job in the community with an organisation that has strong values and a commitment to the local community!!