

INQUIRY INTO SKILLS SHORTAGES IN RURAL AND REGIONAL NSW

Organisation: Technical and Further Education Teachers Association of NSW
(TAFE TA)
Name: Ms Linda Simon
Position: TAFE TA Secretary
Telephone: 02 9217 2100
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Summary

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The Hon Tony Catanzariti, MP
Chair
Inquiry into Skills Shortages in Rural and Regional NSW
State Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Fax to: 9230 2981

Attention: Julie Langworth

Dear Mr Catanzariti

Attached is the submission from the TAFE Teacher's Association of the NSW Teacher's Federation. We apologise for its lateness and look forward to addressing the inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Linda Simon
TAFE TA Secretary

Contact: 0411 550 439

Attach.

TAFE Teachers Association of the NSW Teachers Federation Submission to Inquiry into Skills Shortages in Rural and Regional NSW

September 2005

This submission is in three parts. Part 1 looks at the role of TAFE in rural and regional communities. Part 2 describes skills shortages in rural and regional areas, as identified by TAFE teachers. Part 3 identifies some programs that are currently being conducted by TAFE NSW with comments.

Part 1 – The Role of TAFE in rural and regional communities

The importance of the role of TAFE in rural and regional NSW has been recognised in a range of reviews and inquiries. The TAFE Commission Act 1990 has objectives that confirm this role. Specifically Objectives 1a. and 1b. state:

In exercising its functions, the TAFE Commission must:

- a. ensure that it provides technical and further education services to meet the needs of individuals and the skill needs of the workforce and, in particular, ensure that it provides basic and pre-vocational education as well as vocational education and training, and
- b. provide adults and young persons with a range of technical and further education services that recognise the changing nature of the working environment and the need for new skills and re-training, ...

In regional NSW TAFE exercises these two important roles, of providing vocational education and training required within country areas, and in providing second chance and further education for the people who live there.

The relationship between the education and training undertaken in TAFE colleges and the industry and business conducted in country centres, is very close. The NSW Government has recognised the “thin market” phenomena in regional NSW. In other words, in most cases, unless TAFE provides the education and training required at a post-school level in regional areas, then it is unlikely to occur in these areas.

Consequently TAFE plays an important role in providing the education and training required as part of apprenticeships and traineeships, and is an important factor in ensuring that young people are able to remain in country centres and gain the skills required for the available employment.

TAFE colleges and teachers, by and large, work very closely with local industry and businesses and these partnerships must be supported and expanded.

TAFE teachers have found it increasingly difficult to meet all of these demands in a system which is being drained of funds by both state and federal governments. If TAFE is to continue to provide this extremely important role in regional NSW, it must be properly resourced and supported to do so.

1. Regional NSW requires fulltime permanent teachers with appropriate support

Regional NSW, perhaps even more than the metropolitan area, requires fulltime permanent staff. In metropolitan colleges there is significant access to a wide variety of Part-time Casual Teachers

who provide and support day-to-day TAFE delivery. This support from a “variety” of Part-time Casual Teachers is often absent in country areas. All students, no matter what their geographic location have a basic right to study a range of Post-school Courses in line with the Access and Equity policy espoused by the State Government.

The needs of students from remote areas can also mean that the staffing requirements should be supplemented in order to meet the specialist needs. Support staff is important in providing teachers with administrative and technical help, with the needs of Occupational Health and Safety oversight, particularly in practical classes with hand tools etc, where one set of eyes is often not enough and also in meeting counselling and other student needs. Literacy and numeracy needs of young people in country areas need to be particularly considered and catered for.

At the same time, these teachers must be supported by educational managers in country colleges. The needs of teachers for educational support and professional development must be accepted and governments must ensure that these teachers can work in a place where they are able to make contact with and be supported by other teachers and appropriate discipline experts. To not give our teachers this sort of support, is to deny country students vocational education and training that is most relevant and up-to-date.

The reality of an aging teaching population at the beginning of the 21st century, highlights the need for increased provisions for the training of young people to be teachers in TAFE. Attracting suitable people to the teaching profession needs to be supported by sustainable rates of pay and conditions, so young people will look upon the career of teaching favourably and stay with the profession.

2. A range of delivery modes

The popular answer to educational provision in country and remote locations is distance and online delivery. Educational research indicates that such provision of education is suitable only for a small number of motivated self-disciplined learners. By and large, most students who attend TAFE, and this is particularly true of apprentices and trainees, respond better to education which is face-to-face, and where they can interact with their peers. Many TAFE students are at TAFE because they often do NOT fit in to the more self-disciplined modes of learning demanded by the universities.

Educational provision by TAFE in country areas must continue to provide a range of delivery modes, but always allow students the opportunity to study in a classroom environment. TAFE must remain accessible to students.

At the same time, governments must accept that to provide a quality educational service to remote communities can be costly, and that this must be provided for in state and federal budgets.

3. Partnerships with schools and other educational providers

Given the important role that educational providers have in country centres, it is vital that there are strong partnerships between the schools and the TAFE colleges. The best and most appropriate education for students and the community, takes place when schools and TAFE work together. This is particularly true of VET in schools courses.

Those students who leave school early for a variety of reasons often seek further education at TAFE in order to further their employment or study options. TAFE also offers students the support and delivery that may be an alternative to school, especially for those seeking Board of Studies equivalencies. The Australian Council of Social Services, in their Federal Budget Priorities Statement 2001-2002 states:

“All young people should have access to relevant and appropriate education, training and employment opportunities delivering year 12 completion or its equivalent, as a minimum expectation for making a successful transition to adulthood..... The federal Government should now make a commitment to guarantee this support, and increase resources for all relevant education, employment, training and support services in a planned and phased manner so that the guarantee can be made in a reasonable timeframe.”

TAFE in regional NSW is usually the principle provider of such education and training. Adequate resourcing should be provided to meet the needs of young people and service the needs of second chance education with a focus on vocational outcomes.

4. Indigenous education

The role of TAFE in providing education and support to indigenous communities is well recognised. Once again this role must be strengthened. In many indigenous communities, TAFE is the only provider option for VET and Access support. The provision of courses which promote Access and Equity is essential to these communities, if they are to in turn support and develop themselves.

Educational problems experienced by many indigenous communities are linked directly to other aspects of social disadvantage, such as low income, high unemployment, health issues and high levels of police and judicial involvement.

The implications for secondary and post-secondary education services as delivered by TAFE are therefore obvious. Further research into education outcomes relating to other social factors and the development of good practice in Indigenous education in VET and Access support teaching by TAFE in Indigenous rural and regional education should become a high priority. Innovative programs developed by indigenous communities should be supported.

In the New England region, some 3000 Aboriginal people were recently identified as part of a report, as being of an employable age but not currently employed. Many Aboriginal people are reluctant to leave their community for work or training; therefore it is important that VET programs are established by Aboriginal communities to work for them. At the same time, there is a critical need for tradespeople in Aboriginal communities and programs must assist Aboriginal people to take on such jobs.

5. Transport Issues in rural and regional areas impact on educational opportunities:

- The necessity for students to travel large distances to get to college is a problem.
- Rural areas have extremely limited access or no access to timely and frequent public transport.
- If transport is available, many country students attend TAFE for several days in a row (Block Release) and the available overnight affordable accommodation is not always accessible or appropriate. Putting up 15 y.o. students in a Pub is not an option.
- Transport subsidies are not available to young people if the vehicle they have access to is not in their name and even if they are entitled to it, the amount is pitifully inadequate.
- Dangers of country driving for young inexperienced drivers with early starts, late finishes and long distances present very real Occupational Health and Safety risks. The car may also be shared with other young passengers attending the same college with attendant problems of peer group pressure encouraging inappropriate driver behaviour.
- Car break-down assistance is not helped by poor mobile phone coverage in most country areas when such assistance is required.

6. Quality of Life and Economic opportunities in rural and regional areas

To encourage growth and sustainability in rural and regional locations within New South Wales communities need to be positively resourced to help stabilize and even increase the population. Communities such as these, need to attract and retain the interest of young men and women, through the attraction of diverse and economically viable employment opportunities. This should be augmented through the maintenance of a range of accessible and dependable services to promote a satisfactory quality of life within the community.

“TAFE plays an important role in the education, training and general life of regional communities. In these areas, a TAFE institute is more than just an educational institution. It provides a focal point for current technologies, philosophies and skills and contributes significantly to a region’s social and economic growth”. (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 1998 p. 23).

Provisions such as these can only sustain and develop the very character of Australian rural life. When country people possess a positive self image, they can readily identify with what is special about their community. This can be measured through high levels of civic participation and overt community pride projected by residents.

What we are currently witnessing in many rural and regional communities is a systematic attack upon services, provisions and a stranglehold on developing opportunities. What we are currently witnessing is the steady erosion of the foundations of a healthy and regenerative society. The essence of the national self image is continually challenged by the reality of health and education under-servicing, insecure or non-existent employment and the all consuming spectre of globalisation and its inherent polemics. What is occurring in rural and regional communities is the wholesale destabilisation of communities, and with it personal and social pride. What needs to be established are structures which prevent local culture and identity from disappearing. The role of TAFE in encouraging and strengthening community identity should be actively promoted.

What is required is a change in the nature of present bureaucratic thinking, to stem the flow of dynamic and capable young people away from rural and regional communities. They will not stay if there is nothing for them to stay for. They will leave because there are better opportunities elsewhere.

When they leave, they take with them the hope and future of the towns and communities they leave behind. They take with them the much needed support and inspiration that so much of rural and regional Australia is losing. With increasing skills shortages in rural and regional areas, the problem is increasing.

Incentives to stay would include innovative and well-resourced Public Education and Post-school training facilities, in tune to the changing needs of the community. With the closure and diminishment of many educational services, especially in TAFE, the lack of investment and confidence demonstrated by successive Governments, sends a very obvious signal to the people they service. That is, educational access and equity is no longer a priority and the educational welfare of all people in rural and regional areas of NSW is not considered to be of genuine importance.

Education is not acquired through osmosis. Training is not obtained through fleeting and superficial exposure to an idea. They are both more than just processes. Education and training develop through experience, trust and commitment. What the present levels of declining education provisions, especially in TAFE, demonstrate is the complete misunderstanding or refusal to recognise the role of such provisions within society by governments.

People living in rural and regional communities should expect to be treated with respect with regard to educational issues. The provision of adequate educational services, will directly assist the future viability of most if not all of these communities through the retention and development of its social and intellectual capital, which is the essence of the people in those communities.

Part 2 - Skills shortages in rural and regional areas

TAFE teachers both work and live in rural and regional areas, and often express their frustration with the need for TAFE to provide increased programs in these areas and yet there is insufficient funding and resources.

Our members point out that there are large shortages in areas where pay and conditions are poorest, eg, a lot of qualified mechanics aren't working in their trade areas, because they can earn more money driving a truck. It is therefore not just a matter of addressing skills shortages but also pay, conditions and how vocations are perceived by the public. The issue of public perception of skilled trades people has not been addressed successfully by governments. The separation off of young people to Australian Technical Colleges and comments by the Prime Minister that we should have retained the old Technical High Schools are unsupportable. Moves to address skills shortages by 'siphoning' off young people to particular careers before they finish school and can explore a full range of career options, should not be supported in NSW, as a means of addressing skills shortages or other similar problems.

The shortage in rural and regional areas is also exacerbated at this time due to the ongoing drought situation. The end result is that the flow of young people into most vocations has slowed dramatically. In the Riverina, local engineering firms used to employ apprentices, but as farmers aren't buying purpose built farming machinery, most of these firms are just ticking over, with little capacity to employ apprentices. Many such businesses have disappeared out of rural communities in the last two years.

With recent recovery from the drought commenced the access to skilled people is a real problem for such communities. Targeted relief to rural businesses for employment and training in diversified areas, is required. There needs to be recognition of this 'drought recovery' capacity building when resources are allocated to TAFE.

It appears some major developments in rural and regional areas have been delayed as trades people are unavailable. Many households are unable to acquire tradespeople. There remains a massive drain of tradespeople to metropolitan areas. The issue of retaining such skilled people in rural and regional areas is critical to this whole issue.

Welfare education has been a huge growth area with unemployed, underdeveloped and an aging population moving to rural areas. There are substantial shortages being experienced in aged care and nursing in most rural and regional areas. National accreditation guidelines have imposed substantial demands on TAFE to meet this demand. The issue of the transient population in rural and regional areas, which requires repeated training demands for the same positions, must be recognised and allowed for in funding and TAFE course profiles. The lack of trained staff in aged care and nursing has led, in some cases, to poor quality service, inappropriate use of untrained or inadequately trained staff, excessive overtime and/or exploitative rostering practices.

Lack of funding to TAFE has led to the closing down of many pre-apprenticeship courses, prior to the recent State Government 'one-off' initiative, the Tradestart program. This has been particularly felt in Fitting and Machining, Welding and Commercial Cooking on the South Coast. The TAFE Teachers Association successfully fought a few years ago to have the Shellharbour TAFE Metal

Fabrication Flexible Learning Centre retained, and there is now a growing number of students using these facilities. Management decisions in TAFE, generally forced by lack of resources, are not always good for local communities. Pre-apprenticeship courses in Fitting and Machining and Welding allow students to complete the first part of both skill areas in one semester, leading to excellent employment prospects.

There is a growing need for child care workers in regional areas, such as Goulburn. To meet the needs of current workers, TAFE offers such courses flexibly through individual programs and occasional Saturdays.

There is also a growing need for ESOL teachers to deliver English programs to the growing numbers of migrants being encouraged to settle in regional Australia. If this is a government decision, we must ensure resources are provided to support these migrant groups.

In areas such as Broken Hill, there is a need for qualified tradespeople in the Metals and Engineering areas, as well as other trades. This is due to industrial development in the mining industry and growth of smaller contractors.

Funds need to be provided on a continuing basis to areas such as Broken Hill, to ensure young people are not forced to leave town to gain qualifications.

Distance education, such as that provided by OTEN, is critical in addressing areas of skills shortages in places where TAFE facilities are not easily accessible. Such programs are currently being developed in Aged Care and Public Health.

In an area such as Orange, there are currently vacancies for 25 qualified Automotive Technicians (Light Vehicles) and for Heavy Vehicles. A number of tradespeople are leaving the trade for the Mining industry, where 'big dollars' are paid.

The area of management skills is also of concern in rural and regional areas, especially given the migration to metropolitan areas and the aging workforce. TAFE and Government needs to consider a variety of ways to develop competency in generalist management areas.

There are also many emerging industry areas that require skilled workers, such as Viticulture, Agriculture, Engineering and Maintenance trades and the Equine industry in the New England region.

The areas of literacy and numeracy and all employability skills areas, remain critical in rural and regional areas to ensure workers can gain qualifications and jobs in all areas of Australia. We must be careful not to see the answer to skills shortages as being 'quick-fix' training that does not lead to long-term and sustainable careers.

The north coast is also experiencing shortages in Metal Fabrication and Welding, with 50 students on a TAFE waiting list in Kempsey. Funding is needed as well to run night classes in all skills shortage areas to allow existing workers to update and expand their skills.

Part 3 – Programs and Suggestions

TAFE currently provides many programs that are targeted to meet the skills shortages in rural and regional areas. Outreach programs meet the needs of specific groups in the community. Such programs can always be expanded with increased funding. Teaching staff in country colleges are constantly attempting to bring about changes, so that TAFE is more flexible and able to meet

industry and community needs. Enhanced co-operation and collaboration between teaching sections and TAFE Institutes would help to address some of the current administrative problems.

TAFE works closely with community and government groups to address skills shortages. As well as formal and informal networking, TAFE has over the last few years used surveys and focus groups to identify such needs. Industry forums of local business people are frequently held.

Most Institutes are working to upskill and formalise the qualifications of existing workers, through RPL and individual programs. This can mean that TAFE can offer programs to one or two people, rather than a whole class, which can be difficult to find in rural areas.

TAFE teachers in many colleges have acknowledged the value of the State Government's 'Trade Start' program for pre-apprenticeships, but it is important that such programs are specifically funded on an ongoing basis.

In looking at skilling in the traditional trades areas, TAFE will need to continue to work closely with industry as visiting teachers and assessors.

One way of addressing skills shortages in rural and regional areas is to fund TAFE properly to deliver a variety of courses and skills training to address these shortages. One off programs or funding is not the answer. Programs have to be sustained over a period of time, with proper literacy, numeracy and English skills provided where necessary.

Programs must be developed in consultation with local industry and community groups.

Outreach in TAFE works very successfully with community groups and presently offers many short courses in skills shortage areas. These courses can assist many who are unemployed or underemployed to move into the workforce in necessary industries. These programs also support mature aged workers to gain extra skills.

There are many aged care and welfare courses being run through Outreach, but TAFE teachers say it is becoming more difficult to access funding and to work with local groups, as more and more funding is only being channelled through the Job Network.