

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

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I write as a previous full time TAFE teacher who resigned in disgust at the change to adult education. I started teaching Community Services subjects in the 1990's and in 2003 I became a full time teacher. There are some points I wish to make:

1. My first class in the 1990's was a community development class that had 72 hours of face to face teaching time. When I resigned, a similar subject (the training package had changed, but the material that was needed to be understood was similar) lasted 16 hours. However, due to a requirement that students hand in an assessment in the second last class and it be handed back in the last class, the effective teaching time was 12 hours. That is, I was expected to teach a person the same information in 1/6th of the time.

2. Under the competency based training system, subjects are called 'units of competence'. Each unit of competence has around 3-6 'elements of competence' and each element has around 3-5 performance criteria. Depending on which training package it is part of there are a variety of other factors that need to be taken into account, including the range of situations in which the issue or practice arises, how to effectively assess the students and so on. So each unit has between 10 and 30 performance criteria that should be assessed to determine competency in that area.

3. In welfare subjects, and I think in many other courses, these elements and performance criteria are often vague or ambiguous. For example, one element is 'resolve cross cultural misunderstandings', and the performance criteria includes identifying issues that may lead to disagreement, looking at cultural factors, resolving the issue and seeking further help. This is one of 4 elements in this unit (HLTHIR403C), there also a further 18 essential skills and knowledges listed, and a range statement that identifies that the student should be able to consider this under a broad definition of diversity, which would include disability, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity and others. Generally this subject is taught in less than 16 hours face to face, often in large (20+) classes.

4. No one can teach this adequately in 16 hours. TAFE students usually are from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, and so take longer to learn, but even a person with strong academic qualifications would be unlikely to fully satisfy this competency in such a short time.

5. Under the competency based training system, a person does not have to go through a class process if they are assessed as competent. Therefore the competency system emphasises the assessment process but places little or no requirement on teaching hours.

6. At the same time as the rise of the competency based system, there has been a move to increase competition in the VET market by providing government funds to VET providers.

7. There are several things that give an organisation a competitive edge. Many students are attracted to short easy courses that offer free giveaways. Courses that are detailed and require application are attractive to some, but often there is resentment when a person has spent 6 months completing a course and they then learn that they could have gotten the same qualification in 3 or 4 weeks. Students can be attracted to courses that are seen as being easy to pass. Students do not like being told that they have not made the grade. Some students value rigour, but many do not.

8. An added incentive for teaching less is that there are less costs. Indeed, the incentives in the poorly designed VET market pushes the market to produce cheap and faulty, if not fraudulent, qualifications. TAFE and other quality private providers are forced to compete by lowering standards. And this is what has happened. TAFE, while still better than many other training providers, are producing poorer graduates than they did 10 years ago. I would argue that most VET qualifications being currently produced do not reflect the skills they describe.

9. I only have anecdotal evidence. I have met many graduates from private colleges who appear to have learnt no subject matter. When they came for an interview to get into a higher level course only weeks after their initial course, they could not tell me who taught them subjects, nor what the subject was about, nor what their assessment was. When they get into class, they often do not have the background knowledge that should be expected from someone who has completed a lower level course. Many of my colleagues have shared similar concerns with me.

10. There has been an attempt to ensure that minimum standards are kept by emphasising rigorous assessment. Due to this, assessment has become nit-picky, laborious and time consuming activity. Students are often now asked to answer many questions in the one assessment so that the college can prove that they have assessed every particular point if they are audited. Indeed, the task has become onerous for both student and teacher, who are forced to write about and sift through often fairly irrelevant trivial points. Indeed, there is so much time developing and explaining assessment, and, preparing justifications for marking the assessment, that I found I had much less time to prepare a good teaching experience. I think we are teaching more poorly, and, for shorter periods.

11. There is another problem with designing assessments this way. It skews the learning to concepts that are easier to measure, but often of marginal use. If I use learning to ride a bike as an analogy. The current class is so short, and has so many points that need to be assessed, the student spends their time learning about all the components of the bike (the uses of the bell, types of breaks that can be used, how to measure the correct seat height), but lacks the time and the focus to actually learn how to ride well. So the assessment process leads to a person who can tell the assessor the right answers, but is probably going to be useless at the skill that competence describes.

12. What is really needed is an overhaul of the entire system, so that there was a requirement that students be taught for a certain period of time. Colleges then would be much more likely to compete on the quality of the learning experience rather than who can teach a student the least but still pass them. But this is a national government issue, and so hard for a state government to resolve.

13. One possible solution would be to ask industry peaks to set their own standards for minimum instruction, and that industry body accredit colleges that meet those standards. This is an added layer of bureaucracy though.

14. The whole regime is based on a presumption that teachers are likely to assess poorly, or be unethical in their assessment. My experience of teachers is that they are there because they want to help their students develop into industry leaders. That was why I was there, and that was why I resigned. Teachers no longer have the time and resources to do this. The government needs to have more faith in the fact that teachers are usually there because they want to teach. They want people to develop skills and fly. Government should support teachers so that their employers, the colleges and the private providers are not able to reduce standards to increase the bottom line.