

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

Organisation: Southern Youth and Family Services

Date received: 13/08/2015

SubmissionInquiryVETLegislativeCouncilAug2015

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 6
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Inquiry Team,

Re: Access, Affordability, Outcomes: Strengthening VET in NSW

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the future of the VET system in NSW and the impacts of recent reforms, including Smart and Skilled.

Introduction to Southern Youth and Family Services

Southern Youth and Family Services (SYFS) is a not-for-profit provider of services for young people and families experiencing, or at risk of homelessness and other disadvantages. SYFS is a medium sized agency with 140 staff and over 40 services funded through Federal and State Governments, philanthropy and self-generated funding. We operate in the areas of Illawarra, Shoalhaven, Southern Tablelands, Queanbeyan and South-West Sydney with the head office based in Wollongong.

SYFS provides a range of services including supported accommodation; Social Housing; Out of Home Care; the Southern Youth Foyer (combining education/training and housing); family support and counselling; education, training and pre-employment programs; outreach; youth health; Work Development Orders; Financial Counselling and Emergency Relief; Child and Family Mental Health and other specialised services. SYFS provided services to over 2,500 young people and more than 1,400 families in the past financial year. Our work includes early intervention and prevention services and strategies including re-engagement of young people with education and training. SYFS works closely with Illawarra TAFE and RTO providers to increase the opportunities of vulnerable young people within the VET system.

The valued provisions of TAFE, prior to Smart and Skilled

Many of the young people we work with have disengaged from mainstream education and training. They require a variety of supports to address their barriers to participation. We have had a very good working relationship with TAFE over decades. TAFE had been able to respond to the needs of these students for flexible course delivery, where appropriate, and offering additional supports. Through partnership arrangements we were able to negotiate flexible and practice-based delivery of a number of modules and core competencies that are accredited and can be packaged into Statements of Attainment. TAFE has also conducted 'taster' courses where the young people get a taste of several different courses that then assists them to identify their interests, strengths and future learning goals.

TAFE has implemented many strategies to assist people who have been marginalised from training and education to be able to access and participate in TAFE courses and facilities. It is important for TAFE to maintain multiple campuses across the broader region and to maintain the facilities offered at the various campuses. This infrastructure means that courses can be locationally accessible and also that there are high quality, practical training facilities, such as: hospitality training rooms, automotive workshops, arts workshops, carpentry workshops, to name a few. Should these facilities be diminished as the reforms roll

out, there is unlikely to be a replacement by private providers to such a high quality and with such a broad distribution around the region.

TAFE has had the ability to offer a wide range of supports to individuals with particular or special needs. The provision of counselling services, student support, multicultural access workers, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Support Unit, disability support services and English language and literacy supports are all important in both attracting and retaining students from diverse backgrounds and with diverse needs. The increased availability of childcare on site has opened up the campuses to many students who have struggled to find, or afford childcare. This infrastructure of support is as important as the physical infrastructure.

Southern Youth and Family Services regularly takes students from Community Services and Youth Work courses for their practical placements. The students have been well supported by their TAFE fieldwork teachers. They contribute to our agency and many go on to seek employment with this agency.

The quality of teaching and the calibre of the teachers in the Community Services and Youth Work fields is very high. The students are well prepared, both in basic skills and in theoretical understandings and appropriate perspectives when they come to our Agency for placement work experience. We have valued the involvement of the teachers in the industry more broadly and their contributions to many community events, industry initiatives and issues. Southern Youth and Family Services, like many community based organisations has TAFE teachers on our Board and this is a valuable voluntary contribution to the industry.

Impacts of the Smart and Skilled Reforms

Accessing information and locating courses

The young people with whom we work, and indeed even the staff, have had difficulty in gaining accurate information about courses that are offered, appropriate VET providers and course fees. The staff and young people report that the MySkills website is hard to navigate and when doing searches, often brings up inaccurate information. For example a search for courses around the Wollongong area can produce a list of providers in Central Sydney, even though on further research, courses can be found in neighbouring LGA's such as Campbelltown. Young people have identified courses and providers, but then have not been able to gain accurate information on the course fees, frequently receiving the message to contact the provider. Once engaged in contacting the provider, some young people feel pressured to sign up for the course at a time when they are still researching their options. Young people have reported similar issues when accessing the TAFE website.

Emmaline has been coming regularly to the SYFS youth health facility. Staff have seen her struggle with her current course, a Cert III in Business Administration with (a Community College) as she is homeless, and suffers from mental health issues. When she first enrolled in this course she was living in the Illawarra, but after a few months found herself living in a backpackers hostel in Bexley Sydney, from where she travelled to the Illawarra to attend her course.

She can become easily anxious; there have been a few times when the College has called an ambulance as they were concerned for her welfare. Emmaline has said that the teachers, counsellor and staff at the College were great and gave her extra support. Due to her Centrelink requirements Emmaline had to be engaged in education or job seeking. Nearing the end of the course Emmaline was concerned that at this time she was not ready for employment, she did want to continue to study but felt she was under a lot of pressure, putting strain on her mental health.

While in the last few weeks of her Cert III Emmaline knew she would have to enroll in another course for next year. Emmaline came into the SYFS centre, logged onto the computers to search for Business Administration Cert IV courses in Wollongong TAFE. Staff noticed Emmaline had become

very frustrated and anxious while doing this. When staff approached her, Emmaline said that she cannot find the course online. The staff assisted and also found it difficult to navigate the TAFE NSW website. After a while they were able to find the course information and Emmaline became more anxious about the course's case load and the cost. Staff at this time had to suggest that this was not the right time to think about this and tried to help Emmaline with her anxiety.

When one of our staff attempted to obtain a printed course handbook to assist young people to access information on TAFE courses, she was informed that they are no longer being printed and all course information will have to be obtained online. She was also informed that, unfortunately, if clients do not have access to the correct search engine (apparently Internet Explorer 2007, 2008 or 2009) they will not be able to complete the online enrolment process and will have to attend their local TAFE campus to complete enrolment on the TAFE computers, even though they cannot access course information prior to attempting to enrol.

The Community Services Obligation Program under Smart and Skilled enables selected Adult and Community Education (ACE) providers and TAFE to offer units and short courses for people who experience barriers to participating in Smart and Skilled. Accessing information on provisions through this program is also complex. For our agency, staff and young people are often only made aware of a course offering when contacted by the provider seeking referrals and enrolments to particular courses. Our experience is that we are given short notice to promote the offering and identify appropriate young people. There is flexibility in the delivery of the courses, which is welcome and often the programs being offered are those that young people have expressed an interest in earlier in their searches. When searching for courses and unable to find information on these programs the young people can lose interest and begin to disengage from the process. Then, when a course is advertised, it no longer matches the young person's availability.

The entitlement system

SYFS has some serious concerns over the entitlement system and how it affects young people. The young people with whom we work are often unsure of the direction they wish to pursue at an early age. They may change their mind or look at different options if they have difficulty finding employment, or their future directions and career choices expand or change from the initial course chosen. Many young people are 'forced', due to the Earn or Learn Requirements of Centrelink, to make quick decisions to be able to keep their payments. Often these lead to a higher percentage of young people not completing the chosen course. The entitlement system removes options for young people to change course and career directions. The system only allows for a subsidised rate for their first qualification at Certificate III or lower level. After that the young people pay a higher rate for subsequent courses.

One young woman (22 years) had previously completed a Certificate IV in Business Studies and wanted to retrain to be a Disability Support Worker. She was very keen to do a Certificate III in Disability Studies and felt that she had come to a point where she knew more about her life goals and this was the field she wanted to develop a career in. The young woman identified the course that was appropriate and that it was available. When she tried to find the cost of the course on the TAFE website she was unable to locate it. Eventually she received the message to contact administration at the TAFE. When she rang to inquire she was informed that she was not eligible for an entitlement or concession and that her course fee would be \$6,100. The young woman was deterred by the high cost and chose not to enrol. This is disappointing as it was her career aspiration and as there is a shortage of disability support workers in her area. Her future employment opportunities would have been greatly expanded had she been able to undertake her chosen training.

Inappropriate enrolments

Young people have reported being approached by private providers and being pressured to enrol in courses.

Dean (21 years) came into the SYFS youth health drop-in facility. As staff were talking to him and updating his information, he disclosed that he is now enrolled in a course. Staff questioned him further about the course: what particular course was it? Who was the course through? Does he need anything to help him complete the course?

Dean then stated he wasn't sure about the course name or Certificate level, he later decided it was a Cert III and thought it was to do with Business Management. Staff questioned how Dean was so unsure of his courses details and he said it is through (a private provider), who had knocked on his door one day. Dean said he just thought at the time it was a good idea. He did not have any knowledge of how much it was going to cost in the long term, he only said he did not have to pay until he earned over a certain amount and that that would not be for a long time.

Staff discussed with Dean about the importance of reading his contract with (the private provider), finding out about his course and that if he chooses not to undertake this course anymore he was welcome to come back and see the Legal Aid worker.

Difficulties with enrolling

Since the introduction of Smart and Skilled, young people are increasingly reporting difficulty in actually enrolling in courses. The new TAFE enrolment software has made it more complicated and the 'ironing out' period continues to extend.

Sally, a young client in SYFS homelessness services, received an email from TAFE stating that she had a place in an Aged Care course at a specific campus. Sally went to the nominated TAFE campus to enrol on the allocated date but was informed that the course was full and that she could not enrol. Sally showed her email which assured her of a place in the course, but was informed by admissions that the email did 'not count' and that the offer of a place was no longer relevant. Sally went to another campus the following day and successfully enrolled in the Aged Care course.

The cost of existing workers upgrading qualifications

As well as our agency's commitment to supporting young people to gain qualifications and careers, we are committed to the ongoing training and career development of staff. SYFS is a registered Charity, not-for-profit agency and employs workers on the SCHADS Award. As an agency, we are concerned about the increasing cost of training and up-skilling of workers. For example, in investigating the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAE 40110), a number of providers in our area offer the course and the fees vary from \$944 to \$6,000. Where workers choose to undertake further training as part of their personal commitment to career advancement, the fees are a deterrent, particularly as the community services industry is not a high paying industry. For our agency, the increasing costs limit the numbers of staff that can be supported to update and enhance qualifications due to our budget constraints.

Comments for the future of VET in NSW

SYFS values public education and the TAFE system. Public education and training has been able to ensure accessibility and affordability for regional and rural students and for disadvantaged students under previous funding arrangements. The additional supports offered by TAFE have enabled the young people in our target group to access and succeed in training. TAFE has also had an ethos of serving the community as well as the needs of business and industry for skilled workers. These aspects of public provision are changing rapidly under Smart and Skilled.

The case examples provided in this submission show that the new VET system is negatively impacting on disadvantaged young people. For some, like Emmaline, the experience has actually exacerbated her mental health issues and heightened her anxiety. For others, such as Dean, the pressure to enrol with a private provider has resulted in entering a contract that he does not understand and is unlikely to be able to fulfil. Others are having their options limited and are no longer able to access 'second-chance' learning, such as the young woman wanting to retrain in the disability field.

VET fee-help is another debt burden on the young people with whom we work. These young people struggle with affording housing/accommodation and daily needs and often have fines and debt issues already, with for example, mobile phone providers and pay day lenders. They are commencing their adult lives with a number of existing barriers and imposing additional debt is demoralising and impractical.

The experiences of the young people in these case studies also highlights the pressures that are being put on other parts of the service system, such as the need for Legal advice, for additional supports from service agencies, for advocates and mentors when navigating the system and enrolling. This is not cost-effective overall for the NSW Government.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Inquiry team and further explore the issues for young people who experience disadvantage and barriers to pursuing education and training in the VET system.

Yours Faithfully,

Narelle Clay, AM
CEO Southern Youth and Family Services Assoc Inc