

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

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Partially Confidential

THE UNIQUE VALUES AND BENEFITS OF TAFE

There is a sign in our staff room which says “if you can read this, thank a teacher”. If you live in a house, might I suggest, that the chances are that house was built by a variety of trades people who were trained at TAFE. It may be very new or it may be quite old, but it is not “jerry” built– to use a very old fashioned term– and it won’t fall down, except in catastrophic circumstances.

This state is filled with examples of the role that TAFE has played and still plays in the development of skills in the Australian economy. These skills range from an adequate level of Literacy and Numeracy and English Language skills to the IT, Engineering and associated skills that are so essential to a modern economy.

In small rural communities, TAFE has been the only provider of the essential skills required by today’s farmers from the basic Certificate 1 in Engineering, Operating a Chain Saw, OH&S, tractor driving and basic mechanics, agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry and so on. The cotton industry, in the area where I work, is eternally grateful for the trained pool of workers that have come through the programs offered at the local TAFE.

Until the mid 1990s, such skills as existed in the workplace had been acquired through successfully completing a TAFE course. That was the only source of post secondary training available in Australia, apart from University. There was, of course, plenty of informal/workplace training but credentialed training came from attendance at a TAFE course in many areas ranging from business through fashion, accounting, construction, cooking, aged care, Children’s services and the list goes on. The opening up of the VET sector by the Federal Government in the 1990s has led not to more training, but to a lower quality training and with Smart and Skilled, TAFE sadly appears to have been forced into the “race to the bottom”

The number of 457/417 visas that have been issued would appear to be testimony to the fact that insufficient funding and incentives have been provided to allow TAFE to build on that foundation. This was discussed recently by Harold Mitchell in the business section of the SMH 1/8/15 wrote in an article “Improving tradie training will stop us going down the toilet” suggest that training our tradies will produce a great deal of employment. The cartoon illustration by Cathy Wilcox expresses the whole idea rather pithily. It is not the content that is particularly new, except that I was not aware of the admiration of countries like Indonesia or India of our TAFE system, it is the location of the article in the business section. It is also the fact that it is written by someone whom I, clearly wrongly, thought would be unaware of TAFE. The other interesting

point is the fact that the NSW Government has chosen to take TAFE out of Education and put it into Industry at the same time as the Federal is taking TAFE/VET out of Industry and putting it into education. Oh, dear, oh dear, we really are a collection of colonies rather than a country.

(<http://www.smh.com.au/action/printArticle?id=998789445>)

CONSEQUENCES OF *SMART AND SKILLED* AND COMPETITIVE MARKETS.

I find the whole concept of an educational “market” problematic. Market theory assumes sellers and buyers all possessing equal knowledge. By definition, I would argue, that in an educational “market”, the sellers have the knowledge and the buyers are frequently stumbling around in the dark. I would also argue that the sellers are offering a limited range of products which may prove of no use to the buyer in the workplace market.

The concept of competition within the market also seems to be problematic. One could argue that Woolworths and Coles are competing on a level playing field, but TAFE and *AAA Training inc.* are not. TAFE provides a full range of services over and above teaching and training. These include library, counselling and disability services. *AAA Training inc* does not provide these additional services and has been known to shamelessly send its clients to TAFE to access some of these services such as counselling and library, when a government contract requires it to provide such services. I would not describe that as genuine competition.

I would argue that, for self evident reasons, *AAA Training Inc.*, will happily offer low cost courses such as Business Administration at Certificate 11 level. *AAA Inc* may also be a Job provider and has a captive audience of students clients they can keep happily “busy” thus ensuring they become long term unemployed which earns them the double whammy of the training voucher and the payoff from the Government IF the client gets a job. Their staff, with or without a year 10 education, all have a TAE qualification. *AAA Training Inc* is not going to either want or be able to offer construction related courses, hospitality courses, Engineering courses, Agriculture courses as the infrastructure costs are very high and there are sufficiently easy pickings lower down on the tree.

While NSW hears the Government’s assurances that the mistakes of Victoria will not be repeated, for all the above reasons that is not totally convincing. Students/clients will of course be fully informed as to where is the best quality training when they get their voucher for the course of their choice, for which they have had no pre- assessment as to their capacity to complete this training. That is such an invalid assumption that it totally beggars belief.

Finally, “competition” exists in the school sector. There are no “for profit” competitors in the school sector at this time, although the move by vertically

integrated education publishing and related industries to enter the market appears to be imminent. The Board of Studies has a much firmer control over the learning outcomes to be achieved in any school than ASQA which we are fearful will be dismantled to allow for self regulation. Given the experiences of “clients” of some of the private RTO’s, that is rather akin to allowing Dracula to run the blood bank.

Today I was told of a bunch of agents for some RTO who are doorknocking the town of Moree. People are lured into signing by the offer of a “learning device” aka a notepad. If they get a signee, that signee is then promised \$50.00 cash for every friend or family member they get to sign on the dotted line. All the warnings in the world from Fair Trading are not getting through, except to people who probably have an involvement in TAFE. For the most part, I fear, that these victims of an unscrupulous private RTO have very low level literacy skills and would be unable to complete any qualification they signed up to. There will be no classes. Any one who actually tries to complete any course they are signed up to, will probably end up attempting to access their internet delivered course by piggy backing wi-fi at the town Library or the TAFE library. They will not be in a position to have the internet on at their home and I would add, this being a relatively small rural town, internet speeds here are closer to glacial than NBN speeds.

ENROLMENT AND COURSE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The Institute in which I work has done rather better in looking after its staff with respect to what the Head teacher of Plumbing refers to as the Electronic B...S... system in comparison to some of the other Institutes. This is not meant to imply that it has been trouble free. To quote a very experienced Administrative Assistant “We don’t know what we are doing”. We are back to the future with paper enrolment forms. However worse than that is the number of steps required to do what we could do with the previous system “CLAMS” Class Management System in one or two. While the level of angst is lower, there is still a degree of angst about the system. There is also a considerable degree of loathing of the new system and fear that when it is upgraded in October, chaos will reign supreme again and Institutes will once again have to invest considerable sums of money on getting everyone trained to use the “new and improved” EBS.

The introduction of EBS was based on a lie which claimed that there had been no upgrades to any TAFE systems for 30 years. CLAMS, Electronic pay claims, electronic ordering and payments systems, finance management systems, on-line enrolments and on and on. All of these have been introduced over the years that I have worked in TAFE from 1995. Granted CLAMS was based on DOS and could have been improved-it could be a bit clunky- but EBS doesn’t just clunk, it clatters as well as clunks.

The major failure of this system from the point of view of the student, is its apparent inability to generate accurate results in timely manner. This is also of great concern to teachers who have apprentices and trainees for which they are responsible. These results impact on the earning capacity of the students as well as their ability to move on to the next level of training. It is my personal view that the

not inconsiderable expense that has been “wasted” on this system and the extensive training that has been required for it to be implemented, may well be a suitable case for ICAC. Gossip has it, that it was forced on the Institutes by senior TAFE management. Whose idea was it and whose idea was it to introduce it just a short time before the introduction of the thoroughly convoluted *Smart and Skilled*.