

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

**Organisation:** Home Education Association, Inc.

**Date received:** 12/08/2015

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**Re: Parliamentary Inquiry into vocational education and training in New South Wales**

Dear Director,

The Home Education Association would like to address the following Term of Reference in the current Inquiry into vocational education and training:

**1. That General Purpose Standing Committee No 6 inquire into and report on vocational education and training in New South Wales, and in particular:**

**(a) the factors influencing student choice about entering the vocational education and training system including:**

**(iii) barriers to participation, including students in the non-government education and home schooling sectors**

**The Home Education Association**

The Home Education Association Inc. (HEA) is a national non-profit association formed in 2001. In NSW, it has 500 member families. It aims to encourage, support and promote the practice of home education in Australia, as well as advocating for freedom of educational choice. The Association is governed by a committee and managed by volunteers on behalf of the membership. All forms of home education are supported by the Association.

The HEA provides a range of services to members, including facilitating access to resources and group discounts with educational service providers and assisting individual families with home education registration processes. HEA insurance policies cover a range of activities for members, including work experience, excursions, group activities, information sessions, seminars and conferences; the Association also sponsors activities and events within the home educating community. Volunteers field email and telephone inquiries from families and members of the general public, including non-member home educators, academic researchers, journalists and politicians.

## **Background of home education in NSW**

There are currently around 3000 children registered for home schooling in NSW. Home education is the facilitation of learning from a home base, by the parents, outside of the school system. In Australia and other Commonwealth countries, home education is the preferred terminology as it recognises that this approach to learning is often not noticeably school-like. Home educators utilise a broad range of pedagogical methods including: structured approach, unit studies, Charlotte Mason, unschooling/natural learning and eclectic. In home education, ability-based progress is esteemed above prescribed stages and milestones. This allows acceleration and/or slowing across individual content areas, based on student capacities. Participation in conversations and activities, rather than continual production of written work, can demonstrate learning. Flexible, life-embedded and project-based learning are key to most families' educating approach.

Parents home educate for reasons that reflect the diversity inherent among home educators overall. Home education may be chosen for ideological reasons (e.g. support for family values) or pedagogical reasons (e.g. preferred methods of education). While religious reasons have been found to commonly underpin home education in North America, in Australia this motivation is unusual and only 5% of home educators in NSW nominated a religious reason for home educating when undergoing registration with the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards. Student welfare is a strong motivator for many home educators. For others, being able to provide an effective learning environment for children, especially for children with a disability, is key. In many of these cases, the children have been to school and are withdrawn in response to detrimental experiences such as bullying.

A substantial proportion of children and young people who are home educated have special needs including physical disabilities (such as hearing impairment and health problems), learning differences (such as dyslexia and giftedness), and emotional, developmental or behavioural conditions (such as anxiety, autism and developmental trauma). The physical, learning, emotional and behavioural conditions which children experience as severe impediments in school settings and which interrupt learning and lead to negative emotional effects are often ameliorated in the home education environment resulting in better learning, emotional and social outcomes.

## **TAFE/VET as a pathway to further study or employment**

Home educated students commonly undertake further education. A 2014 HEA survey of over 200 home educators identified that current or formerly home educated students were undertaking, or had undertaken, a large variety of higher education courses and were employed in a large variety of occupations. The results indicate that 71% of students were studying toward a Bachelor degree or higher (52%- Bachelor degree, 12%- Bachelor Honours, Graduate Certificate or Graduate Diploma, 6%- Master Degree and 1%- Doctorate). This compares favourably with the 2013 Bureau of Statistics data in which 60% of school leavers (aged 15-24 years) who were studying, were undertaking a Bachelor degree or higher (ABS 2013).

The HEA survey also identified that a variety of methods of transition to work and university are employed by home educating families including through school (some home educated students go to high school for years 11 & 12), TAFE/VET, university courses, examination and interview as shown in Table 1. Attending TAFE/VET was a method used by 36% of students and online TAFE/VET was indicated by a further 15% of responses. TAFE/VET is therefore a primary pathway for home educated student with a total of 51% of students using this method of transition.

Pathway to further education and employment	Percentage (%) (n=137)
TAFE/VET	36
Open University/other online university	31
Direct to work	23
Online TAFE/VET	15
Attending high school	12
Interview	11
Examination	9
Private college	4
University courses without credit	3
Bridging courses	3
Distance education	2

Table 1. Pathways to further education and employment for home educated students

### Smart and Skilled funding and home educated students

The new Smart and Skilled funding model for vocational education and training in NSW has caused considerable problems for home educated students and their families. When home educated students sought to enrol in TAFE/VET this year many were told that they did not qualify for a funded place at TAFE/VET because they were “still at school” and Smart and Skilled funding is only available to individuals who are no longer in school. Many home educating families argued that their students were not at school and were provisionally enrolled. The Home Education Association (HEA) sought clarification from Smart and Skilled in early February 2015 and provided them with detailed information on how excluding home educated students from funding would affect them, argued that their students should not be considered to be school students and that they should receive funded placements at TAFE/VET.

The HEA provided Smart and Skilled with the following information

Many home educated students undertake TAFE/VET courses as a component of their home education program.

Home educated students are ineligible for the award of the Higher School Certificate and many use a TAFE/VET courses as a pathway to further study.

People with a disability are overrepresented amongst home educated students. TAFE/VET provides a supportive environment for entry/re-entry into formal education.

Home educated students receive no funding from the NSW government.

Students who are registered for home education in NSW are meeting the compulsory education requirement of the NSW Education Act 1990 but they are not enrolled in a school and are not considered to be "school students" by the Department of Education and Communities (DEC) or TAFE/VET. School students who wish to undertake TAFE/VET studies are directed to school based apprenticeships or traineeships or TVET courses as a pathway to vocational education. Home educated students are excluded from these courses. Access to TVET courses and school-based apprenticeships and traineeships require that students be enrolled in school and therefore TAFE/VET and DEC policy is that home educated students cannot undertake these programs.

Even were school based apprenticeships and traineeships available to home educated students they would not meet the needs students who wish to use TAFE/VET as a pathway to university. This is because school based apprenticeships and traineeships are generally only to Certificate II and III level. While in theory a Certificate III is equivalent to the HSC, in practice a Certificate III is not an effective pathway to university as the ATAR it provides is very low. In contrast, a Certificate IV provides an ATAR that is sufficient to allow home educated students to access a wide variety of university courses. Furthermore, the school environment is unsuitable for many home educated students, for example, many have experienced severe bullying and serious mental health issues as a result of school attendance- these students cannot be returned to school.

On the 20th of March, Smart and Skilled informed the HEA that home educated students were considered to be school students for the purposes of Smart and Skilled funding and were therefore ineligible for funded places at TAFE/VET. It was stated that *"Smart and Skilled covers post-school vocational education and training only. In order to be eligible for Smart and Skilled individuals must be 15 years or over and no longer at school. To be eligible for Smart and Skilled students must have completed school, whether by school education or homeschooling, in adherence with the NSW school leaving age policy and relevant legislation."*

This ruling effectively excludes home educated students from access to vocational education and training as unsubsidised training is prohibitively expensive, as much as \$10 000 for a six month long course. The HEA has since identified that the funding agreement between the NSW government and registered training organisations like TAFE/VET is explicit in excluding students who are secondary students from funding eligibility

([http://www.training.nsw.gov.au/forms\\_documents/smartandskilled/contract/contract.pdf](http://www.training.nsw.gov.au/forms_documents/smartandskilled/contract/contract.pdf))

. Page 50 of the contract states that to be eligible for Smart and Skilled funding individuals must be *"no longer in secondary education."* However, there is, what appears to be an

exceptional circumstances clause in part 1.4 (p51) which allows DEC to make an exception for individuals who do not meet the personal eligibility criteria to receive subsidised training, *“the Department may, in its absolute discretion, allow a Provider to treat a person who does not fit any of the personal or program criteria set out in clauses 1.1, 1.2 or 1.3 of this schedule to receive Subsidised Training.”*

The HEA is of the view that a blanket exception to the “no longer in secondary education” requirement for subsidised education and training under Smart and Skilled should be made for all home educated students.

It has been suggested that the solution to the problem of home educated students being excluded from Smart and Skilled funding would be for students to be deregistered from home education and to undertake TAFE/VET as “school leavers.” However, there are several problems with this proposition:

- It makes part-time study at TAFE/VET for students under 17 years old impossible as students undertaking TAFE/VET part-time cannot meet the compulsory education requirements of the Education Act 1990. Many home educated students can only study at TAFE/VET part-time because of disability or the need to slowly move into institutional learning.
- Where students are 15 or 16 years old on completion of their TAFE/VET certificate they are required to reregister for home education. However, they cannot count the TAFE/VET certificate as a part of their education program (as senior school students do) and so will be required to undertake an additional subject of study.
- Deregistration from home education affects certain Centrelink benefits for some families and may for example, require a parent to undertake paid employment during a time when their child still requires their educational instruction and support (particularly important where students have a disability).

It appears that the exclusion of school students from funding for TAFE/VET may have flowed from the Federal government via a COAG agreement on vocational education and training and that similar issues are arising in other states.

It seems that home educated students are invisible as far as government funding for education is concerned and that situations like the exclusion from TAFE/VET occur because home educated children are not considered in any way in decision making.

It is the view of the HEA that while parents may take the primary responsibility for the education of home educated children this does not mean that no assistance from the government is needed or is appropriate.

There are currently a number of registered home educated students aged under 17, enrolled in TAFE/VET doing a variety of different certificate courses, who are ineligible for ‘Smart and Skilled’ funding. None of these students have been notified as to whether they are going to be considered under the exceptional circumstances clause, to be exempt from the requirement to be no longer at school, or if they are going to be required to pay full fees.

Not only this, but home schooled students are invisible in the TAFE/VET system, due to lack of recognition of the numbers of students currently being educated at home. As many of these students are using TAFE/VET as a pathway to further education, it is of concern that these students, their families, and administrative staff at TAFE/VET have been able to ascertain no clarity regarding government funding.

**Recommendations:**

1. That home educated students be exempt from the requirement to no longer be in secondary education to access subsidies for TAFE/VET courses
2. That all students of "school age", including home educated students, be included in discussions regarding funding and resourcing of education in NSW by government and government agencies.

Sincerely,

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