

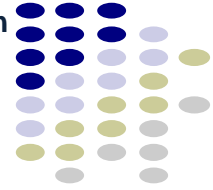
INQUIRY INTO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Fairfield Multicultural Interagency and Fairfield Emerging
Communities Action Partnership

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Fairfield Emerging Communities Action
Partnership-FECAP
“New Communities, New Initiatives,
Embracing Diversity



General Purpose Standing Committee No. 6

Vocational education and training in New South Wales

**Joint Submission from:
Fairfield Multicultural Interagency and
Fairfield Emerging Communities Action Partnership
Corner of Railway Pde. and McBurney Road Cabramatta
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14 August 2015

Strengthening VET in NSW

Joint Submission: Fairfield Multicultural Interagency and Fairfield Emerging Communities Action Partnership

The Fairfield Multicultural Interagency (FMI) and Fairfield Emerging Communities Action Partnership make this submission in response to the Upper House Committees inquiry into vocational education and training (VET) in New South Wales.

The Fairfield Migrant Interagency (FMI) was established in the late 1980's and has continued to be a major forum for the Fairfield Local Government Area (LGA), with a directive to address migrant, refugee and cultural matters. Membership and participation is extended to government and non-government agencies within Fairfield City and surrounding suburbs. Currently there are nearly 200 members and regular representation of nearly 40 different agencies at monthly meetings.

Similarly, the Fairfield Emerging Communities Action Partnership (FECAP) facilitates action, information exchange and networking amongst stakeholders working with newly arrived communities. Its membership includes 130 government and non-government agencies across various sectors and an actively convening group of 35 agencies.

These networks have emerged as a result of Fairfield's rich history of migrant and refugee settlement which continues today. The presence of many existing culturally and linguistically diverse communities, coupled with the efficacy of existing local services, continues to draw both refugee and migrant communities to the area. More than 52% of Fairfield City's residents were born overseas and more than 144 different languages are spoken locally (Census, 2011), making Fairfield one of the most, if not *the most* multicultural City in Australia. For the purpose of this submission it can be assumed that even when not expressly stated, points raised will be reflective of the cultural diversity of the area and relate to refugee and migrant communities.

We know firsthand the benefits of a multicultural society which are realised when equitable access to resources occurs - including access to vocational education and training. Research consistently reveals direct correlation between low education and training attainment and earning potential and levels disadvantage. It is important that the VET sector recognise this and prioritise access and equity when contemplating program reforms to provide the best opportunity for improved access for disadvantaged groups. Our submission provides further comment to demonstrate this which is informed by the lived experiences of our residents and the ongoing work of local service providers.

Factors influencing student choice about entering the vocational education and training system including: (i) motivation to study (ii) choice of course, course location and method of study (iii) barriers to participation, including students in the non-government education and home schooling sectors.

Migrant and refugee communities bring with them strong education and career aspirations, having experienced multiple barriers in realising these ambitions prior to arriving in Australia. Motivation amongst certain cultural groups that comprise Fairfield City can be incredibly high, so too can the barriers that must be overcome to access VET and other further education.

In Fairfield City, 70% of residents speak a language other than English. The majority of the population growth between 2006-2011 (60%) is attributed to overseas arrivals - the overwhelming majority of these people coming from non - English speaking nations (census ID 2015). Whilst this results in a rich cultural experience for all residents it also means that English language courses are a

priority for our residents and some language proficiency must be acquired before more advanced levels of VET study can take place.

Many individuals from refugee backgrounds are preliterate in their native language rendering English language acquisition, particularly reading and writing that much more challenging. A large portion of refugee communities have experienced torture or trauma and continue to manage post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms- a side effect being difficulty learning and retaining information.

In the last five years, approximately 6000 people from refugee backgrounds have made Fairfield City their home, the highest number of refugee settlement in one area across Australia (DIABP, 2015). By definition these people have fled situations of war, conflict and violence that have made remaining in countries of birth untenable. Young people from refugee backgrounds have had interrupted schooling, missing out on years of formal education putting them at a distinct disadvantage to their Australian born peers. Additional time and support to increase periods of sustained concentration and become familiar with expected standards of classroom behaviour and etiquette is required.

In some instances young people do not wish to pursue tertiary education and the continuation of schooling to receive a higher school certificate (HSC) can seem unproductive. Having providers such as TAFE form partnerships to offer Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) accredited units and the beginning stages of traineeship and apprenticeships is a practical step towards making education more relevant for young people with diverse skills, knowledge and interest.

Local school Principals are complimentary of the in-school VET courses and acknowledge them as an appropriate option for the high number of migrant and refugee young people in secondary institutions across Fairfield. They do have concerns around the impact of TVET (TAFE VET) courses that effect the classification of a student from full time to part time status. This classification results in less funding for these schools and less resources for teaching staff at institutions with some of the highest student populations of refugee background young people in the state. As mentioned, these young people require additional supports and resourcing to be able to realise their full potential.

Recommendation 1

That funding allocation for English language classes is reflective of the demographics of an increasingly multicultural Fairfield City, South West Sydney and NSW.

Recommendation 2

Remove the disincentive for secondary schools to offer TVET by reviewing the decision to classify students as only part time when they engage in TVET courses which results in less resources for schools with high refugee and migrant student populations.

All reports from consultation with both Fairfield Multicultural Interagency (FMI) and Fairfield Emerging Community Action Partnership (FECAP) members indicate that despite these challenges, the motivation for Fairfield residents to access VET remains high. However actual manifestation of this motivation in terms of enrolment and course retention is being increasingly compromised under Smart and Skilled.

Cost of VET and TAFE course fees a barrier for low income earners

While regulation of course costing is welcomed, the considerable increase in TAFE fees is a major deterrent for many low income earners and concession holders.

Fairfield City is the most disadvantaged (non- rural) area in NSW according to the socio economic indices for advantage (SEIFA) index. Over the last four census periods (1996-2011) individual, family and household incomes have all risen at a slower rate than Greater Western Sydney, Sydney Metro Area, NSW and Australia. This is reflective of the comparatively lower levels of education, skills, training and qualifications held by Fairfield residents. **This gap has been steadily increasing with incomes and the income growth of Fairfield City residents falling further and further behind other Australians** (Census: 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011). **TAFE Course fee increases are exacerbating entrenched disadvantage in the Fairfield Area and will serve to increase this gap at a faster rate.**

Fairfield service providers are already reporting that community members are not attending TAFE in instances where traditionally they would have done so. Low income earners and the underemployed who are not eligible for concession course subsidies under Smart and Skilled are electing not to enrol or complete courses:

A recent Advanced Diploma of Community Services Management course attracted only three interested individuals to an information/enrolment session. Despite wide promotion and high initial interest, this did not ultimately translate to enrolment numbers. Feedback revealed that despite the Recognition for Prior Learning, VET Fee Help loan and payment by instalment available- many were reluctant to pay the \$3650 course fee. Another deterrent was the online component of the course, face to face delivery would have been preferred.

While subsidies for concession holders do exist under Smart and Skilled, they are only available for certificate level courses. This is creating tangible systemic disadvantage for concession holders and low income earners who wish to increase their earning potential by gaining a higher level qualification.

Under Smart and Skilled a Diploma of Nursing or Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care for example will cost \$4380, even if the student receives a government benefit. This represents an increase of 411% in course cost since 2011.

Community Services, Health and Childcare are national industry growth areas and sectors of career interest for high numbers of Fairfield residents. They are poorly positioned to pay the current associated course fees.

Recommendation 3

That previous TAFE course fee levels be reinstated with the intent of applying reasonable indexing in the coming years.

We acknowledge the scholarship options available for VET study under Smart and Skilled however we would like to point out the accessibility limitations given the very descriptive requirements for eligibility. People over 30 years can not apply, nor can anyone who does not wish to enrol in one of the courses on the predetermined NSW skill list. Again this support is capped at certificate IV level meaning those who wish to pursue diploma level study or higher miss out.

Recommendation 4

Devise a more inclusive and accessible scholarship program that recognises that financial and social disadvantage are beyond age limitations. One that recognises that higher level qualifications can lead to improved employment prospects and earning capacity.

TAFE has for many years been a significant contributor to education, training and capacity building initiatives within the Fairfield community. This is because the programs that were offered were relevant, accessible and had flexible delivery options – all necessary attributes to ensure access for highly disadvantaged communities. The courses contributed to increased social cohesion, English language skill acquisition, breaking down social isolation and increasing employment opportunities.

In 2014 TAFE Outreach delivered a free food handling certificate to a local group of 45 Chaldean community members. This was onsite at centre where the group regularly gathered ensuring good physical access. Of the total participants 30 were able to complete the course in English. TAFE Outreach organised for an Arabic language tutor to deliver training to the remaining 15. These students were highly motivated to undertake further English learning as a result of this course as they were keen to explore other VET course options. The other 30 with existing English language skills went on to study nutrition units and a small number went on to find work.

The cuts to English, Access and Outreach Programs place Fairfield residents at significant disadvantage. The loss of these programs will perpetuate the entrenched disadvantage that so often accompanies communities with limited education and training prospects. At this stage it appears that there are no replacements for these initiatives, leaving massive gaps in accessible VET options for many Fairfield residents and undoubtedly across NSW.

Recommendation 5

That funding for TAFE Outreach and Equity Programs be reinstated in recognition of the high engagement with these programs historically and the multidimensional benefits for migrant, refugee and other disadvantaged communities.

Recommendation 6

That in recognition of the increasingly multicultural population of Fairfield (and to a lesser extent NSW) VET continue to offer reasonable adjustment in terms of English language proficiency when delivering courses, wherever possible and appropriate.

Need for better recognition of overseas qualifications and skills

Migrants and refugees bring with them a wealth of skills and knowledge that can include overseas qualifications from highly regarded institutions. Many individuals in Fairfield hold higher degrees in such fields as engineering, medicine and IT, which are not recognised in Australia. At an individual level, this can leave a person feeling despondent about the considerable change in their social status. It directly impacts their financial prospects, leaving these individuals and their families reliant on Centrelink payments until they can perhaps find entry level positions in unrelated fields. Traditionally many end up securing employment in manufacturing, cleaning, labouring and hospitality. Some of these opportunities are on the decline however particularly those connected to the manufacturing industry.

Migrant and refugee community members are eager to work and make use of their already developed skills and knowledge but are often unable to do so due to systemic barriers including:

- lack of overseas qualification recognition,
- the cost of obtaining recognition in the instances when this is a possibility,
- difficulty navigating systems to gain recognition of prior learning and
- gaining local work experience even with overseas recognised qualifications

Exploring initiatives that recognise existing skills and qualifications amongst migrant and refugee communities could make a valuable contribution towards strengthening the NSW economy and filling skill shortage areas.

Recommendation 6

That there be free overseas qualification recognition wherever possible for people who have arrived in Australia as refugees. Negotiations between the VET sector, other tertiary institutions, the Department of Human Services and current Job Active providers could make considerable inroads in this area.

Recommendation 7

That there be a review of the entire system of overseas qualification recognition in acknowledgement of NSW's increasingly diverse population and the existing skills and knowledge that could be utilised.

Unscrupulous registered training organisations (RTO's) targeting vulnerable communities

There have been consistent reports by frontline workers of migrant and refugee clients being aggressively and inappropriately targeted by unscrupulous registered training organisations (RTO's). These individuals are more vulnerable not only due to reduced English language proficiency but also as they are not familiar with the systems and structures to seek recourse if they have been taken advantage of.

Recently, current (Level 1) AMEP students with limited English language capacity were approached by an agent from XXX College. They were promised that they would 'learn better English' with XXX college (a private VET provider). The students were totally unaware that they were in fact signing up for a course in Business Management at Diploma level! In fact, they were convinced by the agent that this was an English course and much better than that which they were getting in the AMEP. The students were also not given any information that indicated that the course cost over \$6000 and that they would be incurring this amount as a debt if they signed up for VET fee help.

They duly completed application forms and were asked to bring their tax file numbers and bank details later. Later on, the students realised that the demands of the diploma level course was beyond their current capacity and wished to withdraw. They were advised that they would have to write a letter explaining why they wanted to withdraw their applications. As the students were CSWE level 1, they were not even capable of writing this letter and had to go to the local migrant resource centre to seek assistance.

In another instance:

A resident with limited English proficiency was approached by a private RTO recruiting students for a Diploma of Beauty course that would only take her one year to complete. The prospective student was told eventually that the course cost \$20,000 but that she would never need to pay anything unless she earned more than \$60 000 a year. She was given an agreement to sign but became worried about going ahead soon after. She had no idea how to go about cancelling the agreement but suspected that she was obligated to continue because she had signed paperwork. She approached her local ethno specific service who made the relevant inquiries and was eventually able to cancel the enrolment.

Both of these scenarios are real and occurred within the last four weeks in the Fairfield LGA.

We would like to again emphasise the direct correlation between low education and training attainment and earning potential and levels disadvantage. Closing the gap in income levels between Fairfield residents and the rest of NSW requires a fair and equitable VET sector to build residents capacity to improve skills and knowledge and thus employment prospects. It is our hope that this is acknowledged and that access and equity are the guiding principles of any program reforms.

We are happy to provide further information or answer any queries at your convenience.

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