

**Submission  
No 103**

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

**Name:** Ms Margaret Sales

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## SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN NEW SOUTH WALES

My name is **MARGARET SALES**, and I am a retired TAFE Librarian, having worked for 25 years in Wollongong, the last 7 years as Campus Librarian. Before coming to Wollongong I had experience in the education sector, being employed as a librarian at Monash University in Melbourne for 9 years, and as Medical Librarian for 3 years at what was then the Royal Newcastle Hospital. Some people may believe that my long term employment gives me a vested interest in TAFE's continuation – I would agree wholeheartedly, because over the years I have seen the huge beneficial role which TAFE has played in the lives of many students. I maintain contact with former colleagues, both librarians and teachers, and find it distressing to see their growing disillusionment and the collapse of morale as budgets, courses and services are cut, and opportunities for students drastically reduced.

**This submission concentrates on TAFE's delivery of quality vocational education and training services, and the huge impact which funding cuts have already had on the delivery of those services.** This is what I am most familiar with. I have no direct experience of private providers, although I did see the ABC Four Corners program some time back which revealed the rorts, dubious recruitment methods of some operators, and useless qualifications which some students in Victoria were receiving. Heartbreaking for students, and as a taxpayer, such practices make me very angry!

TAFE in NSW has an outstanding tradition of providing a staff of specialist subject teachers with recognised teacher training qualifications, many of whom have years of prior industry experience. Most importantly, they are passionate in their commitment to passing on their skills to the next generation. Sadly, recent government funding decisions, at both state and federal levels, have done much to destroy this once-proud tradition.

As private providers have appeared on the scene offering a no-frills option TAFE has faced enormous budget cuts and been forced to focus on profitability instead of remaining focussed on their quality education product. I've seen the disillusionment of so many teachers as they struggle in vain to maintain standards while, at the same time, seeing so many of their esteemed colleagues vanish as course after course is cut. Who would believe that there is a shortage of skilled workers and yet the number of courses offered by TAFE is falling? This amounts to a base abnegation of societal responsibility. Why do we need to import Chinese electricians on temporary visas for special projects under the proposed terms of the latest trade agreement with China? It is because we have not been prepared to spend enough money to invest in our own people, and to train them to the high standard which we expect of our trades people.

In past years one of TAFE's strengths has been the pathway it offered, or the second chance for many who had opted out at school, to prepare themselves for university and the career of their choice. This is another area under huge threat, with courses cut, teaching numbers reduced, and large costs for would-be students who now simply cannot afford to take this path. Many former students have come up to me in the street in Wollongong and told me with great pride of their success at University, and their new career, which their time at TAFE has made possible. And most gratifying for me, of course, has been their acknowledgement of the role of the library and its staff in helping to prepare them for university.

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TAFE offers a range of specialised services to its students, the benefits of which are sometimes hard to quantify, but which are generally not available from private providers. TAFE has offered in-depth course information and guidance, untainted by the amount of profit to be gained from steering a student to an expensive option. For students in crisis there have been counsellors, and for those with disabilities it has provided consultants to help guide and assist them through their training, thereby providing access to education and training for many more students, and in the process the prospect of a richer, more rewarding and independent life. How do you quantify this? For me, the most important 'add on' which TAFE offers its students is its library service. When I first started to work at TAFE some trade teachers believed their students, unlike university students, didn't need libraries, but gradually they became convinced of the value which libraries could offer their students. In this age of the Internet, educational libraries do more than simply provide information. They teach the skills for life-long learning – the skills to find, evaluate and use information, and in the process give students the tools to think critically and innovatively – in their study, in their work, and in their lives. Private providers do not offer libraries because they cost money to set up, to staff and to maintain. They are an invaluable part of the education process.

Many parts of the Illawarra region have high unemployment levels, especially among young people. According to the 2014/15 State of the Regions report released by the Australian Local Government Association 18.4% of Illawarra young people aged between 15 and 24 were unemployed in 2014, significantly higher than the national average of 12.6%. Local mines have been putting off workers. Bluescope Steel is planning to reduce its workforce, and the very future of steel making here is under a cloud. Similar problems abound in other regions of the state, and indeed the country. At a time when there is a huge need for retraining opportunities in this region TAFE, the publicly funded training facility, has been dying a death of a thousand cuts. Students, staff and courses offered are vanishing, in fact the entire college at Dapto may close at the same time as a nearby housing estate expands quite dramatically. Young people and older workers desperately need the option to be trained or retrained so that they can participate fully in the economy and our society, rather than being marginalised, alienated and written off.

The Smart and Skilled contestable training market has siphoned off millions of dollars of funding from TAFE, thereby threatening its ability to provide quality education, while allowing private providers to make a profit at the expense of their students. People I speak to, including family and friends, are appalled at what they see – they remember the options which were open to them, but which are no longer available to their children. **They expect better from their representatives! Education and training should be operated in the most effective way to guarantee quality and diversity, which is not the case with 'for profit' private providers. This is what our community expects, and our Parliamentary representatives are responsible for its delivery. The contestable funding model desperately needs to be re-examined, but most importantly FULL AND ADEQUATE FUNDING should be restored to TAFE NSW, our quality public sector vocational education and training system.**

P.S. Included as an appendix is an article by Harold Mitchell, AC, businessman, philanthropist and media commentator, which appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald. He sums up the arguments for restoring funding to TAFE with great precision.

Margaret Sales B.A., A.L.A.A., M.A. (Hons.)

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