

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

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LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE NO 6

**Inquiry into vocational education and
training in New South Wales**

Submission by Terri Quinlan

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I write this submission as a current TAFE teacher (of 21 years standing), as a former TAFE student, as a parent and as a recent student of a private for-profit registered training organisation. I would hope that as someone who has worked at the coal face in TAFE for so long and as someone who has benefited from attending TAFE and as someone who has recently experienced the services of a private for-profit registered training organisation that my contribution to this inquiry would be valued, considered credible and carry some weight. I fear that it will be dismissed as self-serving (protecting my job) and biased because it does not suit the current Liberal government economic agenda.

I am a 'part time casual' TAFE teacher (PTC) with TAFE NSW. I have been teaching at TAFE continuously for the past 21 years having started at TAFE in October 1994. During this time I have taught classes at four different TAFE campuses and for a number of different teaching sections but I am primarily employed by two sections at the one campus. I teach for the Information Technology section and the Pathways section. I also taught for many years in the Outreach section.

Terms of Reference

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:

(i) motivation to study

There are many, many reasons and motivations influencing a student's choice of study. University is not for everyone. The academic rigours and costs of a university degree do not appeal to everyone and many people are not suited to it. TAFE has always been there for the community offering technical and trade training and further education options for all. TAFE offers an opportunity for a second chance education, it teaches language, literacy and numeracy skills to people of all ages, it runs English language courses, and courses that for the unemployed, the mature aged, youth at risk, single parents, the disabled and the disadvantaged in our community – all aimed at getting these people back into education, improving and improving their job prospects. This is the "FE" in TAFE – further education – a concept which is often lost in the discussion by the economists and treasurers who make decisions about our education system.

TAFE is well known for its hands on, practical skills education and this is often a motivating factor for students to choose TAFE over uni. I have found students who study the Information Technology (IT) courses primarily do so in order to eventually gain employment in the IT industry or in order to gain IT skills that will assist them or benefit them in their future non-IT study or chosen career. Some students study IT at TAFE because they could not get into university and TAFE prove an alternative pathway for them into uni. Other mature aged students retrain in IT after being made redundant or after being injured at work. Students who study with Pathways and Outreach do so for many reasons – to assist their return to the workforce after a period of absence, to help them enter the workforce having never worked before, to improve their education, as a pathway to further education, to retrain, to gain the confidence and skills needed for further study and/or employment, to get the Year 10 or HSC qualification they missed out because school did not suit them or because they left school too early. Increasingly students are entering the vocational education system because of Government policy – in order to continue to receive their benefit or because the Government is taking them off their benefit. There are also those

students who simply do not “fit” in anywhere else and TAFE is there as a last chance opportunity.

(ii) choice of course, course location and method of study

My experience has been that students chose a location and method of study that suits them. Most students don’t want to travel too far particularly in areas where public transport is costly and/or time consuming as it can be in my area (Central Coast). Trips that take 20 minutes in a car can be 1 hour or more on a bus. Many students have to combine bus and train travel so accessibility is a factor. TAFE colleges are often reasonably located within a community which makes them attractive to students.

Method of study is another interesting one. Most students who enrol in TAFE do so because they want the face-to-face teaching and contact that comes with attending class. There have always been options available for students who cannot get to a campus or who prefer online/distance/self-paced learning, such as OTEN. So when a student enrolls at a TAFE campus it is usually because they want to come to a class. We are increasingly being told by our managers that there is a “demand” for more online learning and less face-to-face delivery but where is the evidence of this? My experience says differently.

Course choice is another interesting point. The economist model of a student is they are a rational being who makes rational decisions that are in their best interest based on having all the required information. But people are predictably irrational, emotional, self-driven, biased, and have different personalities, different preferences for how to communicate, different agendas, different needs, different values, different perspectives, different backgrounds... just about different-everything! So course choice can be based on what they want to do, what they can afford, what they “think” they want to, what is available at the time, what they know at the time. The upshot is for some students they choose a course that suits, gives them what they want and gets them where they want to go and for others it is a less predictable pathway of wrong course choices, several attempts at a course and eventually a course that gives them what they need. And gets them where they want to go.

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

Cost and accessibility are the biggest barriers to participation followed by a limited or narrow choice of courses and a lack of student support resources such as counselling, disability support, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and multicultural support and libraries. TAFE traditionally has been resourced to overcome and/or lower these barriers but the systematic underfunding of TAFE over the last 25 years and the introduction of a VET “market” and Smart and Skilled have all but destroyed TAFE’s ability to do this.

b) the role played by public and private vocational education providers and industry in:

(i) educational linkages with secondary and higher education

TAFE campuses are often located near secondary schools and TAFE has always had good relationships with schools and universities. TAFE is a vital part of the educational pathway – school → TAFE → university. It is an alternative to school and uni for many and/or supplements a school or uni education.

(ii) the development of skills in the New South Wales economy

TAFE has always been there for the community offering technical and trade training and further education options for all. TAFE offers hands on practical training for many occupations including plumbers, electricians, mechanics, carpenters, builders, painters, tilers, bricklayers, office workers, retail workers, AINs, child carers, welfare workers, chefs, hair dressers, tourism and hospitality workers, IT professionals such as web designers, networkers, programmers, aged care workers, musicians, artists, actors.....and the list goes on. Few people nowadays have a job for life and TAFE has always been there for lifelong training and education as people move in and out of industries, jobs and life phases.

(iii) the development of opportunities for unemployed people, particularly migrants and persons in the mature workers' category, to improve themselves and increase their life, education and employment prospects,

There is no doubt that TAFE has played an important role in developing opportunities for unemployed people to improve themselves and increase their life, education and employment prospects. I have seen students who have started in an Outreach class, moved onto Pathways courses and then eventually into a vocational course which has led to them becoming gainfully employed. It is not always smooth transition as it can take up to two or three years. Under Smart and Skilled this will become an expensive option for them.

I, myself, am a product of what TAFE can do for the unemployed. I went straight from Year 12 into uni and graduated with a Bachelor Degree in Computing Science. I then worked for a number of years as an Analyst/Programmer in the IT industry until I stopped work to have children. Unfortunately my marriage broke up and I found myself on a sole parent pension with two young children. Despite being highly educated and having worked in a booming well paid industry I found that the emotional toll of a marriage breakdown, having to sell my house and being the sole carer of two young children prevented me from being able to leap back into the workforce. It was a couple of cash-strapped years before I could contemplate returning to the workforce and then I was at a loss. I had been out of the industry for 5 years. I had two young children I had to factor in when it came to going back to work. I didn't know where to start.

TAFE saved me. I enrolled in an free Outreach course – Work Opportunities for Women – and rebuilt my self-esteem and confidence and was guided back into further study to update my IT skills. Within two years I became a TAFE teacher.

I could not afford to do that now under Smart and Skilled. Placed in the same position now I would have to pay full fees (over \$3500) for my TAFE study as I already possess a qualification higher than a Certificate 3 (my degree).

(iv) the delivery of services and programs particularly to regional, rural and remote communities

c) factors affecting the cost of delivery of affordable and accessible vocational education and training, including the influence of the co-contribution funding model on student behaviour and completion rates

You get what you pay for. If you want industry qualified and experienced teachers who are trained to teach people, not just train, then you must pay them a professional wage. If you want to give students enough time to learn and practise and then competently sit for

assessment's in order to determine their competence you must run courses for a reasonable and realistic length of time with reasonable and realistic delivery hours. If you want students to become competent you must provide support services – tutorial support, disability support, libraries etc. If you want to provide cutting edge education you need infrastructure and equipment. This costs money but the rewards to the individual, businesses, the government and the community are immense.

There is no doubt that in a VET market the cost of delivery for TAFE is significantly higher as private for-profit RTOs can cut their costs by renting classrooms, cherry picking the cheap easy to run courses that do not require costly infrastructure and equipment, cut course delivery length and hours and use poorly qualified and/or less experienced trainers (not teachers).

d) the effects of a competitive training market on student access to education, training, skills and pathways to employment, including opportunities and pathways to further education and employment for the most vulnerable in our community including those suffering a disability or severe disadvantage

A competitive training market has led to TAFE making cuts in order to become cheaper - cuts to courses, closure of courses and TAFE campuses, cuts to delivery hours, cuts to student support. At Wyong Campus we no longer run hospitality classes or IT courses. Students must travel further afield to access these courses. IT course are delivered in 15 weeks instead of the usual 18 weeks. Hours of delivery each week have also been reduced with less face-to-face teaching and student expected to do more self-study. Business units are being offered "flexibly" where students are given a book to learn from and they attend a tutorial with lots of other students studying different units and they must compete with each other to get access to the teacher on duty. Pathways course have been cut from 18 weeks to 6 weeks and class times have been cut from 2 hours to 1.5 hours. Student and tutorial support is now limited.

Essentially we are trying to deliver the same content in much less time with much less support in order to cut costs. This has a detrimental impact on our student's ability to learn and course complete. It has been my experience that most vulnerable in our community including those suffering a disability or severe are the most affected by these cuts as they traditionally need more time and support in order to access opportunities and pathways to further education and employment.

In addition, the competitive training market has led to TAFE significantly increase its course costs. A six month Certificate 3 in IT which cost \$419 last year now costs \$1720 to \$2060 up front if the student is eligible for a government subsidised course otherwise full commercial fees are payable. This year we had students who wished to enrol in the Cert 3 in Business Admin. One young man already had a Cert 4 in another discipline but could not find work in over a year. He decided to retrain. But as he already holds a qualification at a Cert 3 level or higher he would have to pay the full fee of \$5500. He could not afford it. Another young woman had a Cert 4 in Fitness and was looking for work in a gym. She was advised to get her Cert 3 in Business to make her more employable. But she too was required to pay the full fee. She could not afford it. A third lady had a diploma in Business that was over 20 years old. She was unemployed and looking for work. She was advised by employers to update her qualifications but because she already held a Diploma she had to pay the full course fee. These students walked away from TAFE in tears.

In order for private RTOs to make a profit in a competitive training market using government funds they must cut costs and increase income. Inevitably this cost cutting involves severely reduced delivery hours and course length and poorly qualified or unqualified teachers. I recently paid a private RTO to study a LLN unit that was required

for my Cert 4 in Assessment and Training. I researched my options and selected the RTO that came highly recommended and because it offered the unit in a one day workshop and promised that all assessments would be conducted and completed in this work shop. I was sent a booklet of notes and an assessment booklet before the class started. On the day 16 of us sat in a rented room with trainer who raced us through parts of the booklet and who dictated the assessment answers to us. He would say “turn to page 5, question 8 – don’t bother to read the question just write this.....” And “you can change the wording a bit ‘cos we don’t want all your answers to look the same”. He kept saying “this is fast tracked training – we just have to keep moving”. There was no real learning involved. At the end of the day I had my unit. Do you really think a student is going to dob in a RTO for this sort of training when they can walk away with a qualification with so little effort? And clearly a paper trail is very easy to manufacture so that any RTO can pass an audit. When you turn education into a profit making industry this is what you are going to get.

- e) **the level of industry participation in the vocational education and training sector, including the provision of sustainable employment opportunities for graduates, including Competency Based Training and the application of training packages to workforce requirements, and**

- f) **the Smart and Skilled reforms, including:**

- (i) **alternatives to the Smart and Skilled contestable training market and other funding policies**

A fully funded, well-resourced TAFE system that is accessible and affordable for students with qualified and highly trained teachers.

- (ii) **the effects of the Smart and Skilled roll out on school based apprenticeships**

Smart and Skilled is purported to be a “Consumer-driven system” that will provide “More choice” where “consumers can select the approved provider that best meets their needs”. The Smart and Skilled Overview says “individuals will be able to make informed choices about their training” and the Smart and Skilled – Fact Sheet for Individuals says individuals can “find training that best meets your interests and has good job outcomes”.

It is an interesting take on creating a demand driven rather than supply-led system when Institutes are talking about measures to “manage” course demand which include raising or lowering pricing and subsidies to make some courses more attractive to students and others less attractive and the government is talking about ensuring demand driven or entitlement funding is directed at certain courses (identified skills shortage areas) so that some courses are not included in an entitlement funding model and therefore are less attractive (affordable) to students. How does this allow students to find training that meets their interests? Case in point – our arts course which will no longer be government funded and will therefore will require substantially higher fees making it less attractive and/or affordable to students, if indeed courses continue to be offered at all (since Institutes may not find it financially viable to do so)

So who’s demand are they talking about here? The government? (current supplier of the majority of training in NSW) Private RTOs? (increasingly cashing in on the open market training funds bonanza to make a profit) Industry? (who benefit greatly from training but who don’t appear to be a part of the “bearing the costs” picture yet the government talks about ensuring students bear a “cost” that reflects the “private benefit” of training) Or the

student? (who apparently has a funding entitlement they can take with them as long as it is where the government/private RTO/industry wants them to take it!!)

Are we going to have demand driven system that is “driven” by everyone except the student with the “entitlement”?

g) any other related matter

Additional Comments

The OECD in its 2013/01 (January) “*Education indicators in focus*” paper said the following –

“Education brings wide-ranging benefits to the society.....

In the past few decades, research has supported this conventional wisdom, revealing that education not only enables individuals to perform better in the labour market, but also helps to improve their overall health, promote active citizenship and contain violence.....

Education has the potential to bring significant benefits to individuals and society, which go well beyond its contribution to individuals’ employability or income. Skills are important channels through which the power of education is manifested in a variety of social settings. Policy makers should take into account the wider social benefits of education when allocating resources across public policies”.

Smart And Skilled is supposedly about making the student bear more of the cost of their education because of the “private benefit” they get from it. Yet where is industry’s contribution to this cost? If you say they contribute by employing people and paying taxes then isn’t the individual contributing by paying taxes when they get a job or increased taxes when they get a better job? Is the individual not contributing when they have improved health, are less violent and contribute to society?

It is time for spending on education, especially vocational education and training, to be seen as an investment and not as an expense.