

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

**Organisation:** The TAFE Community Alliance

**Date received:** 14/08/2015

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Submission from the TAFE Community Alliance to the:

## Inquiry into vocational education and training in NSW

NSW UPPER HOUSE INQUIRY TO EXAMINE TAFE'S FUTURE UNDER SMART & SKILLED

August 2015

*TAFE NSW is owned and valued by the people of NSW and supports the development of skills to sustainably increase productivity, prosperity and well being (TAFE NSW website)*

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## Introduction

The TAFE Community Alliance welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into vocational education and training in NSW, and to assert the need for a strong well-funded VET system in NSW with TAFE as its major provider.

The TAFE Community Alliance is an advocacy and strategy group that recognises the central role of the strong comprehensive public VET provider in the building of social, cultural and economic capacity of communities across NSW. Our website [www.tafecommunityalliance.org](http://www.tafecommunityalliance.org) tells a TAFE story of itself. The website has quotes from politicians and well-known citizens speaking about the value of TAFE. It has letters from students about how useful a TAFE education has been for them, at times life-changing.

Through Smart and Skilled NSW, the NSW Government has moved the focus of VET from education, quality educational infrastructure and meeting students' needs to a business that primarily is concerned with the needs of employers, industry and private profit to the exclusion of the former.

As part of its advocacy role, the Alliance sought a commitment from political parties in NSW prior to the last state elections, to ensure that TAFE should exist and be supported by government to provide quality training incorporating ongoing development of appropriate educational pedagogy. The statement of commitment published by the TAFE Community Alliance said: "We expect a commitment to a statewide publicly-owned technical and further education system. We expect this system to grow and flourish as it meets the priorities of educational, social and industry policy. We do not expect this system to operate like a business to break even or make a profit, but a public education and training system serving society efficiently and providing value and quality for the public dollar."

These are two opposite ends of the spectrum.

The TAFE Community Alliance wishes to focus on Terms of Reference, a, b, c, d and f, in providing evidence of the negative impact of Smart and Skilled and a competitive training market on students and communities in NSW generally.

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

**(i) motivation to study**

The **loss of free courses in VET** has significantly impacted on the motivation to study particularly for the working poor, people with multiple dimensions of disadvantage and disadvantaged communities.

These courses offered a bridge to participation in education and training, and assistance to overcome the barriers that many people experience around participation (financial strain, previous subjectively 'bad' experience of education, psychosocial problems such as domestic violence, alcohol and/ or drug problems, disabilities, and language barriers).

***Stakeholder comment:*** *With the introduction of fees for Special Access courses, thousands of people, particularly women were prevented from enrolling in a course because any fee was prohibitive. As courses started in February, the same time that schools went back, women were unlikely to have money to spend on themselves when money was needed for school items, new school shoes & uniforms (many women would refer to this circumstance) and they could simply not afford fees for a course for themselves.*

Special Access Programs for disadvantaged groups were fee exempt before the introduction of Smart and Skilled. This fee exemption removed the key social and economic barrier to learning engagement for people who would not otherwise access further education and training. Outreach staff could work with these communities and individuals through a community strengths based developmental process.

The current Smart and Skilled fee structures categorise students into the deserving and non-deserving poor uncoupling access to education from the critical community engagement process required in disadvantaged communities. Effective strategic social and educational planning requires a whole of community approach not a complicated fee allocation calculator that serves to alienate the most deserving students from vocational education and training and social participation. Such barriers undermine effective community pedagogical practice and create intergenerational disadvantage and unemployment in communities who deserve better from our education and labour market policy makers.

The most significant negative impacts of Smart and Skilled on these programs are:

- excluding the 'non deserving',
- the undermining of effective pedagogical process and
- the time and resources taken to just enrol students.

The series of barriers including criteria around eligibility, concessions, exemptions, entitlements and non- entitlements make access complex, significantly undermining motivation to study both individually and collectively.

Motivation to study is compromised for the highly successful **Career Education and Employment for Women** course which targets women seeking to return to education and the workforce and unclear of their career direction. The complexity of Smart and Skilled eligibility, concessions, exemptions, entitlements and non entitlements act as a disincentive to study. The subsidised fee is prohibitive for many women and having to beg various agencies or negotiate payments plans can turn women away. This can be compounded if they are in a relationship with an unsupportive or abusive partner who works but does not support their education. Furthermore this is a category of prospective students who may not be eligible for subsidised training because:

- they have a higher level of training from overseas. They may have studied a degree, migrated to Australia, been in a parenting role for several years and now find their qualification no longer relevant or of use to enter the workforce.
- have a higher level of training from Australia and have a similar experience to the above.

Smart and Skilled has impacted on students enquiring about **language literacy and numeracy** courses. Typically, they have technical qualifications from overseas which are not recognised here or they cannot obtain work in the field. While their overseas qualification may be formally recognised here, industry may not recognise it. They spend time working in unskilled jobs and/or parenting. They want to improve their language literacy or numeracy to get a better job or return to their field of training, but find they are not eligible for subsidised training due to an irrelevant and often obsolete prior qualification from overseas. Paying full fees is not a possibility, so they are excluded from training and forced to remain in unskilled work.

Several metropolitan colleges in Sydney used to have a thriving suite of **communications skills courses** targeted for a wide range of groups - people from CALD backgrounds, people with overseas qualifications who need additional communication, workplace and cultural skills to assist them to obtain work and local students who also need communication skills for the workplace

Spokespersons: Linda Simon and Jozefa Sobski for the TAFE Community Alliance

(job seeking, conflict resolution, team building). These courses have now declined dramatically because the cost impacts on motivation and capacity to study. The emphasis is narrow vocational technical skills training. This means that cost and financial considerations are cutting across sound considerations for educational and career development and meeting the requirements of the full range of key employability skills.

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

Currently it is not uncommon for students to travel long distances (100km plus) to study in TAFE. The metropolitan solution of having super centres means some will be travelling a lot further. This will pose further barriers. Some locations that have been chosen for these centres, such as Wetherill Park, have poor public transport, while others such as Ultimo, have public transport but very limited expensive parking.

Many students are not able to travel beyond a 5 to 10 kilometre distance from their homes due to family, caring and work responsibilities. Some students cannot afford the bus or train fares to travel to TAFE due to financial constraints, welfare needs and income limitations, perhaps as a result of refugee or recent arrival circumstances. Mobility is a great limitation on many students access to TAFE or related VET programs

That the same Diploma course may be available through either VET FEE Help or as a targeted priority program through Smart and Skilled means that students in various locations may be relatively disadvantaged if their closest location does not provide the Smart and Skilled option. Students may be 'lucky' rather than having equitable access to funded training.

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

Smart and Skilled provision proposed to make the up short fall in VET provision in Correctional centres, that will only work for offenders who are Aboriginal or with a Disability – the requirement of eligibility under Smart and Skilled is not appropriate for this group. Eligibility requirements should be lifted for the Correction Centre population.

As Smart and Skilled intersects with the renegotiation of the MOU with Corrective Services the range of courses have been reduced to shorter ticket type course such as forklift. Effective pathway courses such as Certificate III or IV in Small Business or Fitness will need to be individually negotiated between Corrective Services and TAFE parties as full fee for service options. Corrective Services Industry (Business Units) will determine training needs and courses rather than those decisions being based on the needs of the offenders. The

proposed new pricing structures (per student) will increase class sizes making many classes difficult to run under WH&S guidelines

Exclusion has become increasingly common. A teacher reported three women were excluded from enrolling in a Work Opportunities for Women community engagement program because they have achieved a Certificate IV or higher in their country of origin decades earlier. Each of these women were at a point in their life where they were ready to return to work and keen to undertake study to achieve that goal. In terms of gaining employment, previously achieved qualifications were redundant, either obsolete or not recognised by industry in Australia. Such barriers to peoples' capacity to contribute as productive members of our workforce are contradictory to 'increasing productivity, prosperity and well being' in NSW.

**Stakeholder comment:** *'Recently I had a student who had previously completed a teaching degree and Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. He had however spent the last 2 years in hospital. He had become isolated and lost his confidence. When he attempted to enrol in an entry level program to learn skills and progress, he found he was not eligible and would have to pay more than \$2000 which was out of the question. At a grass roots level I see the impact of such exclusion impacting on public expenditure with greater demands for support in areas such as mental health, drug and alcohol misuse and crime. This in turn creates a huge financial burden on the economy'*

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

**(i) educational linkages with secondary and higher education**

**The Smart and Skilled** requirement that you must be “**no longer at school**” in order to be entitled for a subsidised training place, has put an end to effective linkages between schools and TAFE NSW, to run programs with students at risk of disengaging or already disengaged from school. In addition, School Counsellors report that many of the successful alternative education programs previously run by TAFE (equivalent Year 10 or Year 12 programs) are no longer funded due to budget and staff cuts, so they have nowhere to send students who don't “fit” the school environment.

**Stakeholder comment:** *'A group of disengaging students from a low socio economic area in a Western Sydney High School, were halfway through a Certificate II in a vocational qualification. The program had successfully engaged the students and was offering employability options as well as giving them a positive education experience. Due to the Smart and Skilled reforms the students have been abandoned unable to complete the qualification and let down by the system again.'*

TAFE has traditionally provided underpinning education and enabling skills for students who wish to develop pathways from school to work and further education. The stepping stones of Access education some times provide a refuge from hostile secondary school environments and at other times provide a safe haven from Universities where students can get lost on a big campus with less guided instruction and educational support processes. Smart and Skilled has undermined many of these support programs.

TAFE has run numerous productive employment and training pathways courses with local schools over the years. TAFE as a complete package or provider with wrap-around services have been able to provide a supported introduction for often, at-risk students, into the world of vocational training, and the work force. These programs work collaboratively with mainstream TAFE to give the students hands-on experience in trying various trades through 'taster sessions'.

These courses provided valuable support to the local higher and specialist school vocational departments, and often engaged students into planning for life after school in a way that only TAFE can offer due to the specialist equity discipline experts alongside a wide range of industry environments that could be accessed on any TAFE campus.

**Stakeholder comment:** *'In many cases it was reported to our department that students found impetus to re-engage with their higher schooling and displayed this through greater rates of attendance and better participation. In other cases students were assisted into pre-apprenticeship courses where they began their journey into the skilled workforce.'*

These courses were always highly popular with the attendees and it was ensured by all of the educators involved that the students left with the sense that TAFE was a comfortable and supportive learning environment. Often this was the first positive education experience for these students. Many students reported back that they now felt like vocational training and the workforce was something that they now felt confident in entering into.

The introduction of Smart and Skilled has sabotaged these programs as school students are not eligible to enrol under it. The vital link between high school and vocational training has now been diminished, leaving those students who needed a supportive introduction into the vocational environment completely to their own devices, and many high school teachers reporting back that they now longer hold little hope. In areas such as the western suburbs of Sydney this undermines notion of becoming trade industry hubs of the future, as was widely projected by many economists.

At another level networks with schools have been undermined with the loss of free Special Access Courses. TAFE has run successful programs in schools for decades, mostly through TAFE Outreach. The outcomes from these programs including:

- engaging adults with adult education and training
- effective pathways to further study and employment
- strengthening school and TAFE relationships
- providing programs cost effectively with in kind support
- providing positive modelling in schools as kids saw their parents learning
- enriching school communities as parents gained agency and contributed to the school
- improved outcomes for kids at school who engaged more positively seeing family and other adults involved and learning in the school environment

The barriers around cost and complexity mentioned throughout this submission have proved to be the downfall of these programs result in loss of significant public benefit.

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

The current model of privatisation and competition has had a major negative impact on TAFE:

- Hours have been cut to trades courses. Trades teachers, e.g. plumbing teachers, have been required to cut course delivery time by the equivalent of a semester of training and are being required to cut more hours in order to meet Smart and Skilled funding costs. This is a serious threat to work health and safety standards in industries where human life and property are at risk apart from the loss of quality in skills training.
- More courses are offered flexibly / online in order to cut costs rather than for educational reasons, posing a threat to quality and standards. This doesn't

Spokespersons: Linda Simon and Jozefa Sobski for the TAFE Community Alliance

suit many people in the VET sector who may not have the necessary levels of organisation or analytic skills required for online learning. They may also not have access to appropriate resources including timely access to a computer or access to adequate internet speed and data. This is particularly true for mature age learners, people in remote communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, youth, and other disengaged or disadvantaged learners.

- Literacy and numeracy support programs have also been significantly cut in many locations due to budget pressures, in some cases by more than 60%. Token services are maintained in order to satisfy AQTF requirements, but trade students can no longer be provided with quality support to complete their courses. This support becomes even more important as more courses are only offered online and with reduced teaching hours

There has been an assumption in TAFE that people will apply for VET FEE HELP loans for Certificate IVs or Diplomas. There are many people who are permanent residents (eligible for Smart and Skilled) subsidy but not citizens (ineligible for VFH loans). In some Institutes TAFE did not apply for subsidised training in these courses (presumably because there is more funding through VFH). These prospective students have been cut out of training opportunities. In some cases they only discover this once they've completed a linked Certificate III, then discover that they can only continue if they pay full fees.

Teachers have noted people who have lost jobs, may have excellent skills but needed some upgrading or refresher training. However they are not eligible for the Smart and Skilled subsidy and have not been able to enrol. This is a waste of human resource.

There is a loss of flexibility in our training system which should have the important aim of encouraging people to enter into lifelong learning. Unfortunately many are finding they can no longer afford this. A recent example highlights this situation.

**Stakeholder comment:** *'A TAFE Community Alliance supporter spoke with a woman who had been working for 15 years in a particular industry based on a Certificate III level of qualification. She wanted to retrain and upgrade to a higher level. When she discovered the cost of the VFH debt (\$20000) she decided she couldn't do this as well as purchase a house in Sydney for herself and her family. This does not support the accepted economic view that many of our industries will not exist in the future and people will need to retrain, yet they are finding the cost of doing so with increased fees and debt, prohibitive.'*

Financial considerations are superseding educational and vocational planning. The loss of focus on sound educational and vocational planning is also demonstrated by the reports of private providers marketing courses to people by phone - identifying people from online resumes and selling courses inappropriately e.g. offering a Counselling Diploma to a person with social communication problems.

Alongside Smart and Skilled, new processes and systems impact on the student experience as they are invasive and divisive. They undermine the confidence and dignity of students whilst putting pressure on teachers and other staff transferring resources away from optimum teaching practice. System problems have overwhelmed administrative staff, further impacting the development of skills in the New South Wales economy as this directly affects teachers when administrative matters intrude on teaching

Training packages are technically prescriptive competence based programs. There is a need for 21<sup>st</sup> Century affective skills which foster the skills of creativity, constructive abilities and critical thinking along with a wide range of educational adaptive skill and abilities to cope with adjustment in technology and work place teams and changing industry requirements

The Teacher Educational Support Services, (former Curriculum Centres) have been abolished leading to a loss of educational experts who can support a strong system researching student needs and developing teachers as appropriate. This means a loss of dedicated staff who can also liaise with industry, higher education, the community and other government departments at a co-ordinated level, ensuring skills meet community and industry needs as well as being delivered within a sound pedagogy. This is a significant loss to NSW that such services no longer exist.

**(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,**

Programs for the most disadvantaged have been severely compromised with the introduction of fees and the complexity of the new systems colliding with Smart and Skilled. To enrol in a Smart and Skilled subsidised course you must first prove eligibility then negotiate your way through concessions, exemptions, entitlements and non-entitlements. This added complexity is a deterrent that reduces opportunities for people to improve themselves.

People who are unemployed, not registered as unemployed, either have to find funds to pay if they are eligible for an entitlement, or register with Centrelink in order to access concessions and/or fee assistance. There are many reasons why people don't register with Centrelink, including pride, dignity, or a hope that the

situation is short term and they are able to manage independently. These people are now being penalised when they attempt to improve themselves and increase their life, education and employment prospects.

Smart and Skilled changes have created a massive and intimidating barrier of 'red tape' for disadvantaged learners. Potential learners can no longer make a simple enquiry about enrolling in a course without having to first answer a barrage of confusing entitlement – related questions about their citizenship status, educational qualifications, and any disabilities. Often beginner level students and migrants have no idea about these answers and so they must be turned away or sent back to Centrelink.

We have had several literacy students walk out in frustration at this process, despite teachers' best efforts. It has removed educational appropriateness from the enrolment process, and replaced it with interrogation about administrative entitlement. These courses were previously free courses. If this free access could be reinstated disadvantaged students would not have to deal with these barriers.

For example, even before thinking about course enrolment the most vulnerable students have to produce substantial forms of identification for their Unique Student Identifier (USI) such as a drivers licence, Medicare card, Passport, Birth Certificate, and Certificate of Registration by descent and or proof of Citizenship. This is a major barrier for our homeless and post release students. Many of these students do not have any form of identification and they do not have the social or economic resources to navigate this 'proof of identity' imperative.

If students manage to get to the enrolment stage, State Training Services ask for a CRN (income support number) and income statements plus further proof for exemptions involving interviews with Special programs staff to verify their 'disadvantage'. If they manage to survive, they do a TEA online (presuming you have access to and can use computers), then finally an official enrolment and maybe if they are very lucky the EBS system just might accept them- many don't and they remain without proof of enrolment. At the end of week 7 a large majority of students remain not enrolled due to this cumbersome IT system.

Further examples of the impact of barriers to ongoing training imposed by the Smart and Skilled changes include these examples provided by supporters of the TAFE Community Alliance:

**Stakeholder comment:** *'A man in his 50s is a permanent resident and recently migrated to Australia. He had worked for decades as a blood collector in his previous country, having completed a Diploma level qualification in pathology. He had looked for work in the same field in Australia but been unsuccessful. He was advised an Australian qualification would assist him in finding work. The Pathology Certificate III is an Australian 6 month qualification which is sufficient to train him in this role. He was looking forward to completing this relatively short training option, however discovered that because he had completed a higher level qualification, he was not eligible for Smart and Skilled government funded training. He could not afford the \$5250 full price of the course. A relevant Certificate IV level course, would not have been a barrier to his receiving a subsidy under Smart and Skilled - unfortunately there is no blood collecting training at the Certificate IV level. He therefore is unable to retrain and will have increased difficulty getting a job in his field, and contributing his skills to the economy.'*

These are examples of some of the drastic effects Smart and Skilled has had on training options for those career changing, often in difficult circumstances, or those who are new to Australia and seeking to contribute their skills to the NSW economy.

Many migrant women work in child care and aged care - not necessarily because these fields are consistent with their skills, previous education and work, but because these are areas in which they have been able to access training and employment in NSW. The Aged Care Certificate III or equivalent is required for employment in aged care, and the Early Childhood Education and Care Certificate III is required to work in childcare. If people new to Australia have a Certificate IV or higher (which many do), they cannot access government subsidies for these qualifications, and in many cases they cannot afford to pay the full fees for these courses. They can access government subsidised training for Certificate IV and above, but in the case of aged care they cannot complete the Certificate IV in Aged care without first completing the Certificate III. The only related higher qualification in the field of Childcare is a Diploma, which trains you to be a Childcare teacher or centre coordinator. People new to Australia hoping to enter the childcare industry often do not have the time to complete a Diploma, or do not necessarily have the English language skills or aptitude to work in the more senior childcare roles. It should also be noted that progressive completion of courses is frequently educationally sound as it enables students to

build confidence and find their appropriate level. The current system which forces many to enrol directly into a Diploma course, if available, is not based on sound educational pedagogy and is not, therefore, customer focused.

**Stakeholder comment:** *'It was a shock for me to find that in order to increase my basic computer skills it would cost more than \$2000. I managed to complete a Certificate IV and now have a small part time job. I have always been terrible at computers and need better skills to help me in my job and get more work.'*

Another major impact of Smart and Skilled is the significant increase in full fee courses. Some TAFE campuses are running full fee courses at times instead of running Smart and Skilled offerings of the same course - in order to increase their revenue. We understand that the payments the government makes to TAFE to run Smart and Skilled offerings are not sufficient to cover TAFE's costs and remaining educational infrastructure, and therefore where TAFE colleges believe there is sufficient course demand, they will at times only offer the course full-fee to help recoup costs for the organisation.

### **(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**

TAFE NSW has a long and proud history of providing appropriate underpinning skills and knowledge for equity students. It provides them with the tools to overcome barriers, teaching them how to learn, how to access appropriate support services, ensuring they are prepared and on the right pathway to achieve optimum outcomes in order to reach their potential and participate fully and effectively in society. This has been seriously compromised and is at threat of further destruction through the Smart and Skilled reforms. This poses a substantial threat to student completions.

As mentioned previously, there are numerous examples of prospective students who are unable to pay the co-contribution particularly when they have already stretched budgets with rent payments, mortgages or child care and schooling costs. Many migrants also find the costs prohibitive and so are not engaging in training which would assist them to obtain work.

The real cost of delivering professional VET training has not been adequately funded. The loss of professional experts in the equity area, including Disability co-ordinators, Multicultural co-ordinators, Outreach co-ordinators and Counsellors, has occurred as a result of the loss of funding in the areas of equity through Smart and Skilled, not addressed through CSO funding. Many students Spokespersons: Linda Simon and Jozefa Sobski for the TAFE Community Alliance

no longer receive the support services they need in order to successfully complete their VET studies. This will deteriorate over time.

Learner support centres have traditionally been a feature of TAFE Colleges. Colleges also provided a range of Tutorial support programs to provide the necessary enabling, professional educational support to many students to help them to develop the skills and confidence to progress with their course competencies and project requirements. Such educational support services have been largely removed due to cost constraints but unfortunately this impacts on students' loads and prospects of course completion.

**(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**

Access to education, training, skills and pathways to employment for the most vulnerable in our communities is a casualty of Smart and Skilled. Removal of fee exempt courses, previously known as Special Access Courses has most notably effected enrolments of the most disadvantaged. Another impact of Smart and Skilled is that without the opportunity to enrol in a course thousands of people will not only miss the chance to gain skills to find work but will not gain the confidence and knowledge needed to participate in the community. Special Access Courses often included introductions and visits to local services. These included local Councils, family and health related agencies and also local schools which were an important part of community participation for those students. TAFE Outreach worked closely with a diverse range of local agencies and their staff, to ensure students were well informed about the role of each agency and how to access their services.

Place-based Special Access TAFE Outreach courses provided a way to break down barriers by bringing people from a wide range of backgrounds together - in some cases people who would never have mixed together socially because of cultural or political differences. The fact that so many groups came together with the same goal to study in a course encouraged greater awareness, understanding and acceptance of other cultures and customs. These courses played a vital role in preparing people for the workforce, supporting them to actively participate in the community and in contributing to living in harmony - something that has been highly valued in our society and is more important than ever.

Without the free access courses all of the above are greatly diminished, if not lost and we are far worse off as a society because the enormous success and the great

value of these courses has not been recognised by Government and therefore allowed to disappear.

Offering Special Access Programs in the context of the broader TAFE training system exposes students on a daily or weekly basis to their full range of career options and possibilities. This is motivating as well as helpful in developing their real understanding of career pathways and skills development. There are no longer targeted courses for people with a disability. A metropolitan TAFE Institute has lost Certificate I level courses targeted for students with an intellectual disability in Retail, Office Skills and Vehicle body work. These courses offered appropriate skills development for students with team teaching from specialist teachers. This pathway no longer exists and students are required to enrol in higher level courses which they may or may not succeed in.

To be eligible for an exemption from the fee as well as the loading which provides additional support, a student with a disability must identify prior to the commencement of their course. This has resulted in intrusive questions being asked in administrative processes. It also disadvantages those who do not initially identify until they have gained the trust of a teacher or member of support services. Previously, students could identify at any time during their course and then receive their entitlement to the exemption or learner support. This change with Smart and Skilled appears to indirectly discriminate against students with a disability.

Since the implementation of Smart and Skilled in 2015 delivery for Corrective Services has been disrupted. The new pricing arrangements entailing a 'price per student per course methodology' is likely to pose the following problems:

- in some centres it will mean the courses will not run, as they are not guaranteed to all complete – most of the offenders are enrolled in a number of units in a course
- if the student numbers drop off, sentencing is not based around course timelines, either TAFE misses out on the full course funding or the offenders may be unable to complete
- class sizes are also determined by the availability of the room available ie there are no standard classrooms available in every area and the classification of offenders often means that the numbers may also be restricted
- previously effective courses that were costed for a period of time in the semester, such as cultural and creative programs like Aboriginal Art, facilitated a 'floating' group of participants, with some students moving away whilst other students join the group over the period of time. This allowed for the course to be flexible and responsive to the needs of the learners who may be making their first tentative step into engaging in a

VET program – if a course such as this is priced on a ‘per student basis’ this will cause some havoc with the cost of the course

TAFE Outreach has a long history of effectively engaging individuals and communities who would not otherwise access further education and training, into educational programs that strengthen communities and get individuals into study with effective career pathways and employment. The most disadvantaged have been the most compromised with the introduction of fees and the complexity of the system. The implementation of Smart and Skilled has:

- sabotaged engagement processes as the process is now so intrusive and divisive
- excluded young people at risk of disengaging from school
- excluded people who have in far away times and places achieved qualifications that are no longer viable for their employment
- excluded the working poor as even the subsidised costs for eligible people are out of their reach
- assaulted people’s dignity with minimal opportunity for privacy as prospective students are under pressure to declare sensitive personal information about their health or circumstances in order to access programs, and/or have to beg for assistance from support agencies or job providers
- limited options for inmates of correctional centres given release to attend class
- created more barriers for women to access courses under Smart and Skilled as they prioritise family finances

Smart and Skilled has resulted in a complicated and lengthy enrolment process, for example, currently a learner with a mental illness is required to:

- create a USI (unique student identifier - federal requirement),
- complete an enrolment (online or campus based),
- complete an exemption/concession form,
- provide (proof of Centrelink benefit with benefit card or income statement)

If they are not on a Disability Support Pension (DSP) they are required to:

- have a doctor or psychologist’s letter and
- meet with the Disabilities Consultant who signs their exemption/concession form

The process is almost as long for people entitled to concession and the recently implemented Fee Free scholarships for 15 to 30 year olds.

This process can take up to two weeks (more if the USI system does not recognise student's ID or students don't have a Medicare card, often the case for young people), yet, all of this needs to be identified before commencing the course. Head Teachers and teachers spend a large proportion of their non-teaching time processing Smart and Skilled enrolments for weeks after students commence studying. The massive fee hikes have turned students away from studying – evidenced with huge drops in student numbers. TAFE Institute Managers are deleting sections in anticipation of this.

- Many students who do enrol cannot afford to pay fees, this can also be a result of complicated third party payments. This places their enrolment in limbo. TAFE gets no money, the student gets no credit for their study and the student will be blocked from further study in TAFE.
- A further deterrent is the complex fee structure of Smart and Skilled. Students don't know about eligibility to Smart and Skilled subsidised courses, some mistakenly think they need to pay the higher fees.
- Options are reduced for students as resources are used to try to navigate a complex system to find solutions that will not exclude people.
- TAFE staff are still working through the mess left by the premature data migration at the end of 2014.
- Many students are still in limbo as their results have not been processed correctly, due to the EBS difficulties.

Competition has resulted in a refocus from sound educational and career planning on behalf of providers to aggressive marketing of courses and enrolment of students. RTOs are advertising for 'career consultants' with sales experience, experience dealing in high volume consumer sales and a 'can do' attitude. This contrasts with the Federal government's requirement that career development practitioners meet relevant industry standards to be eligible for membership of the Career Industry Council of Australia. For students, the competition has led to a loss of customer focused assistance and a focus on cost and speed of course completion rather than sound educational and career planning.

#### **(g) any other related matter.**

With the wave of redundancies TAFE has lost considerable expertise and it cannot be assumed that these teachers' skills can be replaced by casual employees with equivalent skills and experience in VET.

Morale among teachers still working at TAFE is low. Teachers are at the frontline experiencing frustration and humiliation managing the difficult transition of students to Smart and Skilled. At the same time they are uncertain about their own job security. Relentless product and services reviews as TAFE is forced to

cut more jobs, creates an insecure work environment with compromised capacity to provide the services NSW public deserve.

An ineffective computer system imposed on TAFE while still in trial phase, means that TAFE can no longer comprehensively track students' previous learning. This makes it difficult or impossible to assist with course and career planning and RPL. Like Smart and Skilled the system is overly complex and far more labour intensive than the so called antiquated previous systems. The system is still failing on many levels.

***Student comments on problems with Smart and Skilled:***

- increased fees, lowering of educational standards and course provision;*
- problems with Smart and Skilled courses and the TAFE enrolment processes*
- decrease in support services reference was made to libraries, student associations, counsellors and campus life*
- the decrease in range of teachers and course options,*
- decrease in course options and the numbers of enrolled students;*
- some poor attitudes from some teachers who are working under pressure;*
- lack of TAFE presence on the web sites and a saturation of private providers marketing their courses; worry that there is a plan to destroy TAFE,*
- there were too many different providers of VET seeking to profit and to privately control skills development as opposed to being publicly accountable*
- the worry about the next generations as TAFE is being privatised and the cost of education is becoming too expensive for many creating adverse impacts in society*
- too much focus on Universities and too little on TAFE ;*
- worry about the collapse of second chance and access education*

## Conclusion:

The TAFE Community Alliance reiterates part of the conclusion of its previous submission to the Senate Inquiry into TAFE.

The Alliance is concerned that educators who do understand the business of education are being excluded from significant discussions about VET and its future. As a group that represents community members and educators we are in an important position to provide relevant advice and welcome the opportunity to do so. VET is not just about meeting the needs of industry, but also community and individuals.

A worth while national VET provision:

- focuses on securing students' vocations
- engages with and gives discretion to those participating and enacting it (eg. students and teachers)
- has curriculum models and processes accommodating local needs and requirements within a set of national goals, regulations and content
- elevates the standing of vocational education and the occupations it serves, and
- promotes the excellence individuals want, not just the competence somebody else pre-specifies for them." Harvard quote

It appears that the State Government's reform of the vocational education and training system in NSW, Smart and Skilled, does none of these things. The TAFE Community Alliance asserts that the primary responsibility of government (state or federal) is to public education not public and private education. It is a government's responsibility to ensure that adequate funding is allocated so that there is a quality sustainable public vocational education and training system in this country. Governments have walked away from their prime responsibility to maintain a quality public VET system, and we believe this should be reversed.

The Alliance does not support public funding/government funding being used to either create or prop up a competitive training market. Private providers of VET operate and are motivated for profit, and consequently it is inappropriate for their business to be supported by government funding. If there is a market, then they must operate in such a way to make their business viable in the market, not by depending upon government funding which should be allocated only to the public provider, TAFE.

Many private providers do not have the current TAFE infrastructure to support people with special needs which contribute to education, employment, economic and social outcomes. Many do not have experts in vocational and educational counselling, disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student needs,

Spokespersons: Linda Simon and Jozefa Sobski for the TAFE Community Alliance

multicultural education, Language Literacy & Numeracy , community development, people with multiple complex needs and youth at risk. They do not have experts in developing curriculum for the range of students within our community. We are concerned that TAFE may also lose these professional services to students as a result of Smart and Skilled.

The experience of market-based vocational education and training systems across the country is that they don't work, and lead to results that are costly for governments and for the students who are forced into high-fee cost courses or those that are not the most appropriate for their needs. Smart and Skilled has been a failure. The impact of drops in student enrolments should be a major concern to this review and the State Government. We are now not providing universal vocational education for young people in the skills they will need for productive careers, nor providing further qualifications for those who need to upgrade their skills and knowledge, in a vocational education and training system that is accessible, affordable or quality-assured.

It is absolutely critical that this Upper House review ensure that their recommendations include that the State Government remove Smart and Skilled as a way of funding and operating the vocational education and training system in NSW, and replace it with a system that ensures funding to TAFE as the major provider of vocational education and training, with the ability to provide quality education and student support services through professional educators.

## Reference

Billett, S. 2013, *The future for VET and VET Research in Australia: Informing the business of vocational education*, Keynote address to AVETRA Conference 2013, (cited on website [www.avetra.org.au](http://www.avetra.org.au) 6 march 2014)