

Submission
No 164

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

I teach the HSC in OTEN, TAFE's distance education provider.

The HSC course at OTEN has been a great way to get ahead for many students. In the past, it attracted students from many rural and remote locations in NSW and across Australia. We have also had small but significant numbers of students based overseas- the children of Australian expats in places like Russia, Hong Kong, the Gulf states, etc. Doing their HSC has helped these students to stay integrated with Australia and keep their education and employment prospects alive upon return. Another source of students has been those keen to do subjects not offered by their current school- most of these come to us from private schools.

We have also had many students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who have benefitted enormously from being able to study by distance and online with us – single mum school-dropouts in depressed suburbs of Newcastle or Wollongong or in country towns, station-hands from far west NSW, prisoners, new migrants and middle-aged Australians who missed out on completing school because of life disruption or the assumption of family responsibilities, young people who are withdrawn and fear the social hubbub of school, and many others who were bullied at school but are keen to continue their studies.

The HSC at OTEN was built on high quality, engaging materials, written by expert teachers, that were mailed to students or available for download, along with other quality resources, from our website. Students also received great service from the team of HSC teachers, who were always ready to take phone calls, respond to emails, and tell them where to find other helpful learning resources.

Most of my quality teaching, however, has probably taken place through the detailed feedback I give students in response to their assignments (this has to be more thorough than students would get in a 'normal ' school), in group emails I send in response to particular learning needs, and in the resources I find for students or create for our website.

In this country we are not yet in a situation where distance education can compete with the ability of the classroom teacher to provide instant feedback for individual students, despite occasional use of facilities such as Adobe Connect. However, HSC teachers at OTEN have nevertheless consistently provided valuable feedback on student assignments. These are the equivalent of the work a student might do in a classroom situation. Over the course of Year 11 and Year 12, a student would submit 7 or 8 assignments in each subject. Teachers could construct programs that enabled them to address all the content and skills required by the syllabus. Each assignment was designed to build upon the previous one, and marking each assignment provided an opportunity for the teacher to address weaknesses and point the student in the right direction for the next task. If a student failed a task, we gave them very precise feedback, and asked them to try again. The vast majority quickly learnt what our expectations were and developed the skills to progress. When I compare the targeted, and detailed individual feedback our students receive with that received in a classroom, I am convinced that our students were coming out ahead.

Lastly, a final benefit of OTEN was the ability to study the HSC over 5-6 years. Yes, in the past, some people have clearly taken advantage of this to stretch out their Centrelink payments. However, now the time to complete has been limited to a maximum of 3 years, we have punished many good students and taken away the flexibility that we should be offering. The bottom line is: do we want to retrain people or not? Many students have to study part-time because of work, family commitments, disability or mental illness. We have had a whole range of professional sportspeople in the past, who have studied with us precisely because of the flexibility offered – you don't have to be in a particular location at a particular time.

This has brought me to the critical part, how things have gone terribly downhill for our HSC program in the last few years, due to government determination to make us 'competitive' and cut our budget.

Following the debacle with changes to TAFE's enrolment system, and the fee increases imposed on us this year by the state government, we have seen a massive decline in enrolments. I have around 1/3 the Year 11 enrolments of last year, for example.

Because we couldn't enrol students for several months due to the system issues, we have Year 12 students who have lost a great deal of study time and have had to rush through the course, having to make difficult choices about where to cut corners in what they study and what tasks to concentrate their energies on.

The massive fee increases for Australian citizens and residents studying from overseas have killed off our overseas-based enrolments totally. I haven't the figure in front of me unfortunately, but the course fee is now well over \$10,000 for an overseas-based student, which is ridiculous when you consider that no one in Abu Dhabi, for example, studies the HSC unless they hope to engage with our universities and employment system, and that these are children of Australian citizens, who should have the ability to study local courses online.

In order to save marking time and therefore costs (OTEN also relied on some 'offsite markers' who were paid per assignment) we have hurriedly reduced the number of assignments, typically from 8 per year to 5. In the process we have had to quickly re-write assignments to make sure we still cover the BOSTES curriculum. Offsite markers are being used a lot less, and most of the part-time colleagues in our office have lost their jobs. We have also hurriedly made sure that all our learning materials are only available online, as we are not mailing them out any longer, to save costs.

The result is fewer opportunities for providing feedback to students, which means fewer chances to correct errors or develop vital skills, and a more superficial coverage of the curriculum. Just because a student signs up for distance education, does not mean they have great access to the internet at fast speeds- quite the contrary for many of our students- many have had all sorts of problems downloading our materials, and that's just the ones we have heard from, the ones who haven't given up.

Yes, as we have fewer students, the phone rings a lot less, but due to the loss of support staff and less reliance on offsite markers, we have much less time to target student needs through developing resources and addressing particular weaknesses with targeted messages. We keep being told we are funded according to course completions. This environment often leads us to progress poor students on to the next assignment, rather than trying to help them successfully re-attempt the current one. Worryingly, many of our materials, high quality when created are now very dated and need updating, yet the powers that be do not see that it is important to give us time or funding to do this.

Additionally, there was a bizarre decision (last year, I think?), to contract a private service called 'My Tutor', providing a study helpline for students to ring. This was touted as a great service to students, who could now get telephone help outside of our office hours. The problem is that the tutors do not seem to be HSC teachers and don't have familiarity with our HSC programs and texts. We suspect that they are providing speculative and unhelpful advice, and of course, the whole service comes out of our budget, and help fuel the charge of higher management that we are not operating within our budget. This points to one very cynical thing about the way the State govt. drives the downsizing of TAFE: we are told we need to be competitive, we need to run like a business; and yet, unlike any other business, OUR business

lacks the freedom to make so many decisions about our own budget or operation, our hands are tied by higher management and the state government. One other example is that we have a new phone system that is very inefficient, which constantly has us handling and transferring calls to other people, because we are not supposed to give out our direct number. However, I did want this to be a reasonably brief response and I believe I have made the general point.

The focus seems to be on cutting costs, rather than on the task of educating. When the upper managers mention 'customers', they are actually talking about industry and employers, not the poor students who pay the fees!

Thank you.

P.S. I almost forgot to mention the ongoing tension among fellow staff, as we wait to see where the axe will fall next.