



Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Secretary,

I present forthwith our response to the government's proposed VET Student Loans system and the course eligibility list.

Background

Canberra Academy of Dramatic Art has been a registered training organisation (RTO 40859) since 2014. Our mission at Canberra Academy of Dramatic Art is to build a generation of performers through a sense of self and story. Self, because we believe in building up, rather than tearing down; we believe in building confidence and skills which contribute to the whole person. Story, because all performers are storytellers - and by telling stories, they become culture-makers and culture-changers. We have over 540 children enrolled in our weekly after-school drama programs around Canberra. In addition we are delivering accredited training to 28 full-time students and another 29 enrolled in part-time studies.

Before becoming a registered training organisation, CADA delivered Canberra's first accredited actor training courses under the auspices of Unity College (RTO 6330). When Unity College received VET FEE-HELP accreditation in 2013, CADA's students were able to access student loans for our Advanced Diploma of Performance and our Diploma of Musical Theatre through our ongoing partnership.

CADA receives no government funding apart from the access to VET FEE-HELP student loans students we have had through Unity College.

While there are multiple acting schools in other states, there is only one offering accredited training in the ACT – Canberra Academy of Dramatic Art. CADA developed actor training programs at a time when the Australian National University was in student uproar over the closure of its drama programs due to funding cuts. The Loxton report, otherwise known as 'Review of the Arts in Canberra' (2010) highlighted a need for performing arts training and CADA was able to directly address some of its concerns as it developed its training products. Stepping into the breach, CADA was able to provide what other institutions were not. (CADA was thereafter recognised for its innovation in the ACT through a number of Canberra BusinessPoint Awards and its co-founder, Elizabeth Avery Scott, was an ACT finalist in the 2013 Telstra Businesswomen's Awards.) In so doing, CADA has assisted in stemming the "talent drain" to other cities; previously, without this education, students had to move interstate for actor training, incurring significant additional expenses.

Why doesn't CADA have VET FEE-HELP?

Under VET FEE-HELP, you had to be registered for five years before you could apply. CADA only became a registered training organisation in 2014, so to access VET FEE-HELP, we had to partner with another

organisation who already had it. Under the new proposal, we would be eligible to apply for VET Student loans – but the irony is that our courses are no longer on the list.

More actors are needed

Coinciding with the ACT government's investment in the local screen industry, more TV series and feature films being made in Canberra, and most recently, initiatives like the Film Distillery¹, CADA's training means that local, skilled actors are available to apply for and participate in the roles that are becoming available. Our view is for the long term: the film industry, in particular, is growing in the ACT, and actors will be required to meet the demand over the next five to ten years. The production costs associated with "away from home" expenses when actors are imported from interstate may be avoided when there is a pool of performers to draw on locally.

Why are these courses not on the ACT Skills Shortage list?

CADA has not gone down the path of securing an ACT Funding agreement (and therefore being able to nominate courses for the list) for the sole reason that we are a small team administratively, and applying for an agreement adds another layer of administration and compliance we would have to adhere to. At the moment our reporting requirements are once a year, and we meet the Standards for RTOs. This is manageable when only two personnel are available for administration within our organisation. In the light of the current proposed changes to VET loans it looks like we would have to enter this process to demonstrate the necessity for our courses if CADA wished to apply to offer VET Student Loans. (Having had our arrangement with Unity College it has not been necessary to find additional funding or subsidies for our students.)

Our graduates get work

Our students and graduates have also appeared in local theatre productions, such as at the Street Theatre, have been cast in TV commercials, have done voiceovers for local advertising campaigns or worked in radio. Some have appeared in short and feature films, web series, and government and corporate videos. Some have developed and staged their own shows. Several graduates have now won awards in local competitions such as the Short + Sweet Play Festival, Lights Canberra Action, and the Canberra International Film Festival.

The myth of a 'glut of performers'

There is no risk that actor training in the ACT will produce a "glut" of actors. Our class intakes hover between 5 to 15 students in most cases, so there can be no suggestion that funding these students is going to result in a huge expense to the government with no job outcomes at the end of it. It is highly likely, at the present time, that CADA graduates will be able to find paid acting work in the present climate.

But it is also a matter of understanding that the actor's life is 'project to project'. Most performers become freelance – self-employed - so it is statistically difficult to measure how many graduates get "jobs" at the end of their training (as one may measure jobs in IT, business, hairdressing, etc). Actors and other performing artists work for multiple employers in any one year: they will do a TV commercial for one client, then a stage play for a theatre company, then perhaps a series of voiceovers, and maybe a guest appearance on a TV drama. On the other hand, it may also be that a commercial with national or international brand will secure them a year's income – which is also hard to record statistically, it's just one project which may appear on paper as a couple of days' work.

Apart from the well-known A-list film actors, however, most actors - even those we see in Australian drama on our TV screens - will have another job to support themselves, as well as their freelance work, and will so be contributing to the Australian economy in other ways, as well as to Australian cultural life through acting. Needless to say, to successfully audition for a role, and earn the income as an actor, requires some level of training. Content producers need a range of looks, sizes, shapes and ethnicities for their projects and so a broad pool of people are required.

Course ethos

Our Advanced Diploma of Performance is designed to make students versatile performers. We have included a number of units we call “Entrepreneurship” units, in which we train students to be active business people who can make their own work. This is necessary in a ‘regional’ area like Canberra, which is away from the busier industries in Sydney and Melbourne. In our Diploma of Musical Theatre we have also selected units from the training package which allow for this approach to becoming a performer. It is my observation that this is not included in most other accredited acting courses in Australia. Were another acting course to be included on the eligibility list, and not ours, it would likely not suit our local context.

It is also worth mentioning that not all who undertake our training do so with a view to becoming professional actors. Some move into related areas, like writing, producing, teaching, or go onto further study at other institutions. But it is also important to understand the transference of these skills to a range of industries. One of our graduates won her dream job when she became an educational presenter at a leading Canberra institution – using all the skills of an actor in science communication. As a scientist, she came into our Advanced Diploma of Performance hoping to get the skills to do this work. VET Fee-help enabled her to achieve something she’d always wanted to do.

Additionally, Advanced Diploma courses have always been a pathway to higher education for those who in Year 12 may not have had the marks to access their desired uni course. A number of our students have gone onto higher ed at places like the prestigious Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) and the Australian Institute of Music (AIM). Still other CADA graduates take their skills back to their former workplace. To cancel student loan support for our training limits these students’ future prospects.

How the changes will affect our students

The removal of VET FEE-HELP through our partnership with Unity College – since one of the issues is that the government is proposing to cancel student loans to those organisations like ourselves who are in partnership agreements to receive VET FEE-HELP – will impact our students in the following ways:

1. Some of our students who are currently enrolled in our Advanced Diploma of Performance are not due to complete their studies till July 2018. The government has only guaranteed their VET FEE-HELP till the end of 2017. This means they are disadvantaged over other enrolled students because the government is refusing to fund their final semester of study when the students signed up to study believing that they would have a secure loan over that period. Capping of loans will prevent some students from finishing their studies as the loans will cut out before they get to the end of their training.
2. Some students, who in our estimation could have a bright future in the entertainment industry, will not be able to complete higher level training in the Advanced Diploma or Diploma of Musical Theatre courses as they simply can’t afford it. VET FEE-HELP was always designed to remove barriers to education and removing it for some courses simply reinstates those obstacles.

3. It follows that students who are from lower income groups in Canberra, who cannot access student loans here, would find it even more difficult financially to move interstate to study. So were VET Student loans be awarded to another acting school in Sydney or Melbourne, ACT students would still be disadvantaged. However, there are NO ACTING QUALIFICATIONS from any school, in any part of Australia, on the course eligibility list.

Since there is no training package qualification in acting (apart from the Diploma of Musical Theatre, which includes singing and dance) it is necessary for education providers to develop their own accredited courses. However, accredited courses will only be approved by the government where an industry need for them has been established. Therefore, if there is an 'industry need', and the student loan system is to be for courses identified as being 'needed', then it follows that student loans for CADA's acting courses is justified.

Moreover, when the creative industries contribute \$90 billion per year to the Australian economy it is short sighted not to fund courses in this area; 5.3% of Australia's workforce work in the creative industriesⁱⁱ, and this is one of the fastest growing sectors in the Australian economy. To compare – building and construction makes up only 6% of the workforce and yet these workers are seen as providing essential services. Creative workers are also increasingly working outside the creative sector,ⁱⁱⁱ so to only look at employment of arts graduates in the creative industries does not take into account the full picture of what creative individuals are doing within the Australian economy.

To exclude performing arts from the student loan system seems irrational in the face of these statistics.

Capping costs

Currently our students are paying on average around \$15 per hour for their tuition, all of which is face-to-face; this is not an exorbitant fee over a two-year course and CADA operates frugally. Over two years, our Advanced Diploma costs around \$23,000. Our Diploma of Musical Theatre, is also face to face, and sometimes requires a singing teacher, dancing teacher and acting teacher working with the students in one room together due to the nature of the task, is a little more expensive per hour at around \$16 per hour, comes to \$13,725 for one year. While the latter may come in under a \$15,000 cap, the former would not.

It is important to understand this in the light of university student loans, which are not affected by a cap. One of our teaching staff has worked in a prestigious higher education institution for many years before coming to us at CADA a few months ago, recently observed:

1. The content taught in our courses does not vary greatly from content being taught in higher ed performing arts courses;
2. The small size of CADA means that organisationally, CADA can respond quickly to change and industry need, whereas a university institution cannot;
3. The intimate training environment at CADA allows for good, focused, individualised attention and thus potentially better training outcomes for graduates;
4. Cuts to university funding means that universities are cancelling private singing lessons for musical theatre students, which means that the quality of graduates is falling, while CADA can still retain private singing lessons for its students under its training model;

5. Several students entering her performing arts university course each year had already completed studies in vocational education prior to being accepted.

When caps are placed on course loans, the government is effectively asking students to make a co-contribution. The proposed co-contributions are not required for student loans in higher education, and it is discriminatory to ask for a co-contribution in vocational education. Meanwhile it is entirely possible that a small RTO like CADA can provide a higher quality of actor training to students than fully funded higher education institutions offering similar courses.

Job creation strategies

As an organisation we have been looking at multiple ways to create work for those who move through our courses.

In 2015 the founders of CADA created Honest Puck Theatre, a theatre company to showcase graduates of our school, among other aims. Two productions have provided work for graduates so far. We believe this can be replicated on a larger scale with the help of an interested investor and we are in negotiations to develop this and other initiatives for actors in Canberra.

CADA itself is a key employer of actors in Canberra, currently providing regular work for 20 theatre, film and television professionals, many of whom are teaching Canberra's children through our many drama classes throughout the ACT. We are in the unique position to advocate for actors, create work for actors, and liaise with local industry to facilitate introductions to the quality graduates we are producing.

We have also facilitated work for graduates by providing actors to the Australia National University (ANU). Each semester the migration law department requires actors for role plays. These actors play characters for the law students to interview as part of their class assessment process. This is excellent pay for young actors and the work returns on a regular basis.

CADA also connects graduates with industry through networking events, showcase performances, and publicising a range of local opportunities to the students. Production houses also come to us to with audition call outs, or asking for us to source particular talent for particular projects. We are known as the go-to place for actors in the Australian Capital Territory.

In conclusion

We call on the government to:

- a) Recognise the growing film and television industry in the ACT, which will require more actors into the future, as well as the value of actor training to other professions
- b) Add the accredited course 10010NAT Advanced Diploma of Performance and its subsequent revisions (given it is up for reaccreditation shortly, and the number may change) as eligible courses for student loans, on the understanding that the course is tailored to the needs of the Australian Capital Territory
- c) Add the CUA50213 Diploma of Musical Theatre as an eligible course for student loans
- d) Reinstate partnership arrangements between organisations as acceptable ways to access student loans, where compliance is demonstrated

- e) Refrain from capping student loans to performing arts courses, which are for the most part delivered in face-to-face format due to the experiential nature of training, and are costed accordingly.

Thank you for reviewing our concerns and we look forward to hearing from you soon.

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ⁱ <http://www.thefilmdistillery.com/> - The Film Distillery is a new independently funded film production agency in Canberra, making 4-6 independent feature films per year.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.cci.edu.au/node/1457>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.cci.edu.au/node/1669>