



**Submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislative
Committee**

***Inquiry relating to Higher Education and Research Reform Bill
2014***

Amendments to the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014

TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) welcomes the amendments to the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014 put to the House of Representatives by the Hon Christopher Pyne MP on 3 December, 2014. The amendments will expand access to Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) funding to Higher Education students studying in the nation's TAFE Institutes and remove the upfront fees for students who currently access Fee Help loans.

If supported, the Bill will address funding inequities in the current system and will have significant flow on effects for Australia's industries, workforce productivity and Australia's standing in international tertiary education markets.

The significant growth in provision of higher education qualifications by TAFE Institutes across Australia is in direct response to industry demands for work-ready graduates with specialist higher education qualifications due to a mismatch of graduate supply and labour market requirements.

Over 20 of Australia's 58 TAFE institutes are delivering approximately 130 higher education qualifications across a range of niche industry disciplines, and across a broad spread of geographical locations throughout Australia. The integration of work and learning, high levels of academic and career support, smaller class sizes, innovative delivery models and strong job opportunities on graduation make TAFE higher education programs attractive to an increasingly diverse student population.

To date, Commonwealth funding is allocated almost exclusively to university students for undergraduate course enrolments and completions. Yet, many TAFE students are first in family to undertake higher education, and are often from lower SES and disadvantaged backgrounds. Domestic and international research demonstrates that the prospect of university education can be intimidating and a 'step too far' for many of these students. Greater choice in higher education provider, along with more equitable funding arrangements, may ease barriers to participation and will be welcomed by many students and parents.

The opportunity for students to remain at TAFE as they undertake higher qualifications is a key benefit of the reforms. Students who respond well to TAFE's applied and supportive learning environments can continue to study through supported sub-bachelor pathways to bachelor and post graduate level study in TAFE or university. This is important as TAFE has a high percentage of students who progress from VET to higher education. There is clear evidence that these pathways in TAFE can reduce the attrition rates of under-prepared higher education students. Given the fastest growth (153%) in university admissions has been at lower ATAR ranks (30 – 49), the supportive learning environments provided by TAFE can contribute to reduced student drop-out rates and the subsequent impact on public expenditure.

TDA's international experience indicates that Australia is slow to support the emergence of integrated tertiary providers, such as TAFE. Australia lags in comparison with our counterparts in the United Kingdom, United States, Hong Kong, China, Indonesia, the European Union and Canada. The rapid development in industry-focused higher education qualifications in these institutions highlights Australia's vulnerability to international competition when universities are the only recipients of CSP funding.

TAFE Directors Australia recently surveyed 5,000 Higher Education students studying at TAFE. The survey outcomes, which are provided as Attachment 1, show that TAFE provides an alternative pathway into higher education for an increasingly diverse range of students, attracted by the specialist, technical training and work-ready qualifications.

The survey also found overwhelming 86% support for TAFE higher education students to receive the same Commonwealth funding as those studying at university.

One of the real strengths of the TAFE higher education experience is the practical and applied nature of the learning from teaching staff with up-to-date industry experience, together with the work-ready nature of the training

TDA submits that it is fundamental that students have the choice of either a university or a TAFE Institute in deciding on their careers, and that students be treated equitably when it comes to Commonwealth funding assistance.

18th February 2015

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HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENT SURVEY REPORT

'Smaller classes. Great Teachers. Hands on learning'

November
2014



Executive Summary

TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) commissioned a national survey of TAFE higher education students during October 2014. The aims of the survey were to determine:

- Who is studying higher education in TAFE;
- Students' views of higher education in TAFE;
- Students' satisfaction with the educational experience; and
- What students think about the higher education reforms currently proposed by the Commonwealth Government.

An independent survey company Insync Surveys administered the survey (attachment 1) in collaboration with TDA's Higher Education Network. The survey attracted a 20% response rate from TAFE students nationally across a range of industry disciplines. Findings from the survey demonstrate that students:

- Value the applied nature of learning in TAFE;
- Believe that TAFE higher education courses are a good alternative to university and reflect current industry practice;
- Rate the quality of courses (87%), the quality of teaching (86%) and academic support (84%) as the most important aspects of higher education study;
- Are highly satisfied with the TAFE educational experience, in particular:
 - communication with teachers (84%);
 - the skills and knowledge they are learning for work (82%); and
 - the quality of teaching (81%);
- Are less satisfied with facilities at TAFE and flexibility in delivery (although these factors rate 78% and 75% respectively);
- Strongly support greater equity in access to Commonwealth Supported Place funding for non-university students and for sub-bachelor courses as proposed in the Commonwealth Government's reforms to higher education.

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Survey Responses.....	4
Part 1: About You	4
What studies have you completed?.....	4
Are you employed?.....	4
Why are you undertaking a higher education course?	4
Part 2: Your views of higher education in TAFE	5
Do you think TAFE higher education is as good as a university courses in the same area?	7
Part 3A: Your satisfaction with higher education in TAFE.....	8
I would recommend a TAFE higher education qualification to others.....	9
Part 3B: How important is each of the following to your study at TAFE?	10
Part 4: Reforms to higher education in TAFE.	11
Part 5: Qualitative data	12

Introduction

This report summarises the results of a national survey of TAFE higher education students commissioned by TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) in the fourth quarter of 2014. The survey was administered in both online and hard copy format by Insync Surveys during October in collaboration with TDA's Higher Education Network. The aim was to capture a national snapshot of:

- Who is studying higher education in TAFE;
- Students' views of higher education in TAFE;
- Students' satisfaction with the educational experience; and
- What students think about the higher education reforms currently being proposed by the Commonwealth Government.¹

The survey is timely given the growth in the provision of higher education in TAFE and other non-university higher education providers (NUHEPs) over recent years, and also in light of TDA's continued advocacy for Commonwealth funding for TAFE students. Currently, there are 10 TAFE HEPs and over twenty institutes delivering higher education qualifications from Diplomas and Associate Degrees to Bachelor and Master Degrees. Over one half of the 130² higher education qualifications available in TAFE are Bachelor Degrees (64). Six Masters are available in the Music, Network Security, Accounting and Creative Industries fields. While the number of higher education students in TAFE is small relative to other NUHEPs and universities, TAFE's importance as a NUHEP exceeds its size (Wheelahan et al., 2012) for the alternative pathways it provides to higher education for an increasingly diverse range of students and its response to calls by industries for higher specialist technical skills in the workplace and 'work-ready' graduates.

The survey was open to over 5,000 TAFE students studying higher education in TAFE institutes nationally in a broad range of industry disciplines including:

- Accounting
- Agriculture/Horticulture
- Arts and design
- Aviation
- Biotechnology
- Business
- Commerce
- Construction/Facilities Management
- Early Childhood Education
- Engineering
- Fashion
- Health
- Hospitality
- Information Technology
- Music
- Science
- Sports Media
- Education

Overall, 901 responses were received to the survey with the largest number received from students aged 18-24 (549), followed by those aged 25 – 29 (157). 90% of the respondents were studying fulltime at the time of the survey (886) and 70.2 % were working in some capacity (5.2% fulltime). The majority of respondents came from Hospitality (208), followed by Engineering (123), Health (116), Arts and Design (103) and Early Childhood Education (72), with a slight majority being female (57%). Over a thousand (1,077) qualitative responses were received.

¹ Reforms to higher educations were before a Senate Committee Inquiry at the time the survey was administered and before the Senate as the report was written. A summary of reforms is available at: http://www.apf.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_LEGislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bid=r5325
Access date: 15 January, 2015.

² Figures were obtained in November 2014.

Survey Responses

The following summary of responses to the survey follows the order the questions appear in the survey (Parts 1 – 4). Comments from the qualitative data are provided in each section of the report and are summarised by theme in Part 5. Industry disciplines with less than 20 responses were deemed statistically invalid in the analysis but are provided in the report highlighted with an asterisk (*). Sample sizes (N = X) and numbers of responses by discipline (X) are also provided.

Part 1: About You

What studies have you completed?

Of the 901 students who responded to the survey, 58% (N=526) have completed year 12 with most (91%) completing their studies somewhere other than TAFE. This suggests that 42% of respondents have entered higher education in TAFE through alternative entry pathways without an ATAR or equivalent score. Only 9% (N=82) of students followed VET in Schools (VETiS) pathways and, of these students, 27 obtained their qualification from TAFE. The highest percentage (34%) of all VETiS students studied a Hospitality qualification.

Approximately 33% of respondents (N=310) have completed a certificate qualification, of which 203 (66%) have completed their certificate at TAFE. The industry disciplines with the highest number of certificates (at TAFE or elsewhere) include Engineering and Hospitality (51). The highest number of certificates completed in TAFE is in Early Childhood Education (34), Arts and Design (29), and Hospitality (28). Almost 30% of respondents (N=271) have completed a Diploma qualification with approximately 74% (200) completing the Diploma at TAFE, the majority in Hospitality (56) and Health (53). Of the 108 students who have completed an Advanced Diploma, 73% (79) did so at TAFE. The strongest industry field for Advanced Diplomas is Hospitality (39) where 64% of students (25) completed the qualification at TAFE. All Accounting*, Arts and Design*, Commerce*, Engineering* and Science* students who responded indicated they have an Advanced Diploma from TAFE.

A high number of respondents (N=222 or 25% of the survey sample) indicated they have completed a Bachelor degree with 73% (162) having completed the degree at TAFE. These students may be undertaking a change in career (where their current bachelor is in another discipline). 9 students have completed a Vocational Graduate Certificate (3 in Engineering), and 11 students have a Vocational Graduate Diploma (in Agriculture, Arts and Design, Business, Engineering, fashion, Health and Hospitality). 13 students have a Master Degree with the largest number in Early Childhood Education (3). Of the 27 respondents with an 'other' qualification, 11 are engineering students.

Are you employed?

Of the 888 students who responded to this question, 35% are employed casually, 31% are employed part time, 5% are working fulltime, and 27% are not employed. 7 students are retired. The highest numbers of students working fulltime are studying Engineering, Early Childhood Education and Science* (12.5 % respectively). The largest number of students who are not working are studying Accounting (52%), Music* (50%), Sports Media* (46%) and Business (40%). Retired people are mostly undertaking Arts and Design qualifications.

Why are you undertaking a higher education course?

Most respondents to this question indicated they are undertaking higher education to start or further a career, and/or to update their skills and knowledge (Figure 1).

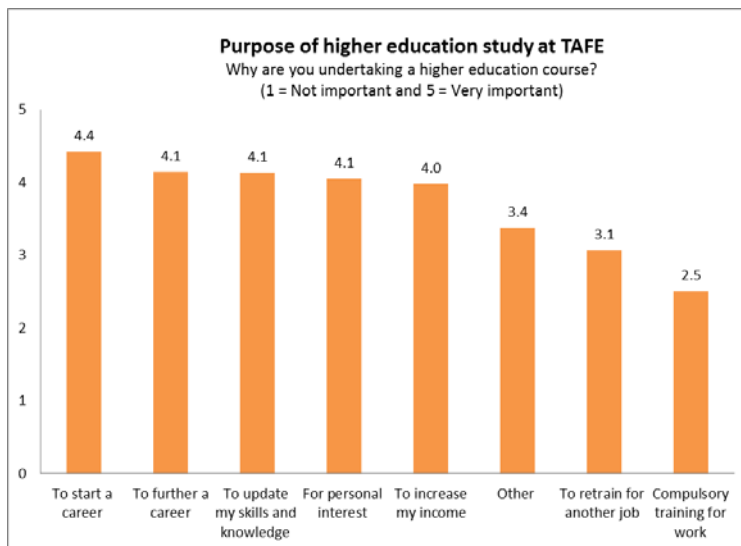


Figure 1: Why are you undertaking a higher education course?

The largest number of students who nominated starting a career as the main reason for undertaking higher education in TAFE (N=837) are studying Media*, Fashion, Science*, Information and Communication Technologies, Business and Health. Students studying Early Childhood Education, Music*, Health and Hospitality rated ‘furthering a career’ (N=812) as the most important reason for studying higher education. Early Childhood Education and Health students rated updating vocational skills and knowledge (N=788) as most important, as did Arts and Design, Sports Media* and Agricultural* students. Personal interest (N=801) was most important to Fashion, Arts and Design, Education* and Sports Media* students and increasing income (N=780) was most important to Information and Communication Technology and Sports Media* students. Retraining for another job (N=744) was most important to Science*, Sports Media*, Accounting and Engineering students.

Fredman’s (2014) study also found that the most common reason students (VET and higher education) undertake their first qualification is to get a job and the most common for undertaking a second qualification is to get extra skills for a job. Notably,

... the next most common reasons overall for undertaking a first qualification were for personal interest or enjoyment (given by 26.7% of respondents) and to improve general education skills (24.2%) (ibid.: 97).

Part 2: Your views of higher education in TAFE

Overall, students agree that higher education courses in TAFE reflect current industry practice and knowledge and that TAFE teachers are industry specialists (Figure 2). The strongest agreement with the statement ‘TAFE higher education courses reflect current industry practices and knowledge’ (N=884) came from Science*, Media*, Arts and Design and Early Childhood Education students. These students also agreed that ‘TAFE higher education teachers are industry specialists’ (N=882). Both views are reflected in the qualitative data.

Higher education in a TAFE is filled with case studies of the real life business. We get to dissect the industries and find out how they are operating, what are the key essential indicators for their success.

Courses delivered by industry practitioners = high degree of industry relevance = very satisfied student.

I believe that TAFE employs lecturers with relevant industry knowledge and contacts. It allows you to make integral industry contacts for the future.

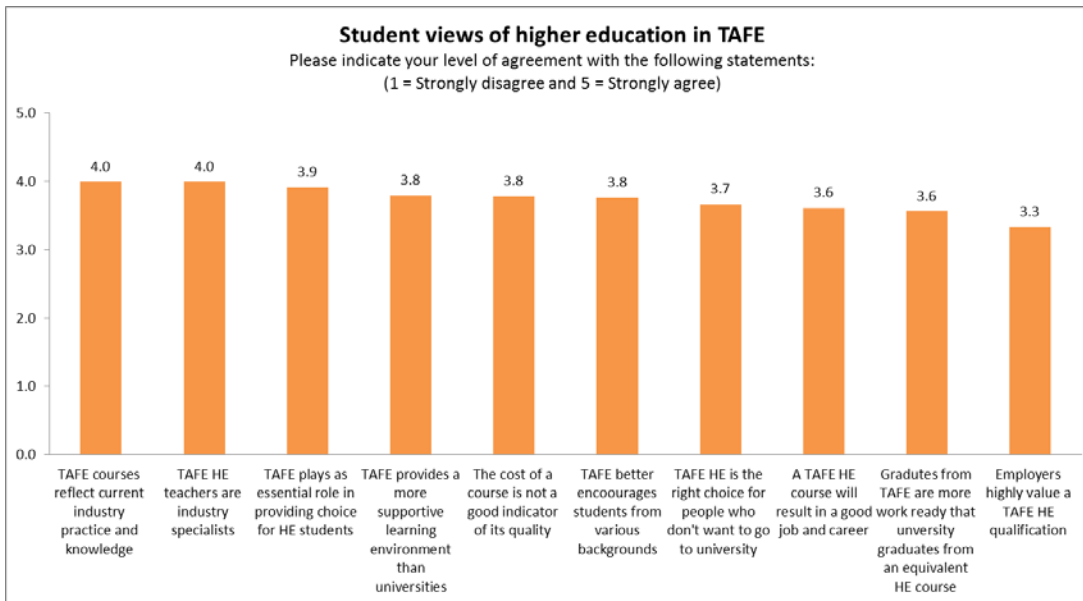


Figure 2: Your views of higher education in TAFE

Responses to the statement ‘TAFE plays an essential role in providing choice in higher education for students’ (N=880) rated third in this question with the strongest responses coming from Media*, Science*, Music*, Arts and Design, Early Childhood Education and Biotechnology* students. The statement ‘TAFE provides a more supportive learning environment than universities’ (N=878) rated fourth overall with Early Childhood Education and Music* students in strong agreement. However, comments in the qualitative data indicate that some students felt, having not been to university, that they could not comment. This response also applied to the qualitative question, ‘Do you think a TAFE higher education course is the same as a university course in the same area’, as discussed later in this section.

Media*, Science* and Early Childhood Education students are most confident that TAFE higher education courses will result in a good job and career (N=877). However, this statement attracted a high level of uncertainty with Information and Communication Technology and Business students expressing the least confidence. There is generally slightly less confidence in the statement, ‘graduates from TAFE ‘are more work ready than university graduates from an equivalent HE course’ (N=877) with Information and Communication Technology and Business students again less confident. This statement attracted the highest level of uncertainty (47%) in the survey. Media*, Science*, Music*, Arts and Design and Early Childhood Education students are most confident that employers will value their TAFE qualification (N=864) and Information and Communication Technology students are least confident. The uncertainty is generally reflected in the qualitative data.

The market is so competitive now that if someone has done a Degree from TAFE, the employer is still going to support someone who has a degree from a prestigious university.

A lot of workplaces have a stigma against TAFE courses. I feel like somebody who went to Uni (e.g. Melbourne Uni) would get a job over me even if we both had the same qualification.

Universities offer more recognised courses.

Do you think TAFE higher education is as good as a university courses in the same area?

79% of respondents to this question (N=837) agree that a TAFE higher education course is as good as a university course in the same area. The strongest agreement came from Education*, Early Childhood Education and Sports Media* students. However, the qualitative data indicates a degree of ambiguity in views.

A TAFE course is more applied than a university course, so I don't think they are the same, but they are certainly of an equivalent standard. In my case, the TAFE course is aimed at practitioners in the field, whereas the university equivalents are aimed at training laboratory technicians so they have different purposes.

I have Uni degrees and think the TAFE degree is as good if not better - very hands on. In my TAFE course, I have gained a much more intimate and individual learning experience, much, much better than the one I received at a renowned university.

Having completed a B. Ed at Uni, I think the bachelor's degree that I'm completing at TAFE is certainly at the same high level.

Same opportunities. As a nursing student, we go to the same hospital as the university students.

TAFE isn't valued as much as university but it provides more practical work and in-depth theory. They should be valued the same.

[TAFE] is as good in the way it supports its students, but not as good because it can't offer the same level as a Uni.

You're learning and developing just as well in TAFE. Going to TAFE isn't something to be seen as a negative or a disadvantage. It's beneficial in areas where universities lack degrees and caters for a broader range of students.

Not many people know TAFE provides higher education. They only think you are a TAFE student.

Science* and Information and Communication Technology students disagreed most strongly that TAFE higher education is as good as a university. Further comments in response to this statement are provided in Part 5.

Part 3A: Your satisfaction with higher education in TAFE

As Figure 3 indicates, the highest level of student satisfaction with higher education in TAFE is with communication with teachers (84%). This satisfaction (N=886) is highest in Education*, Science* and Early Childhood Education students and, in the qualitative data, is linked to smaller class sizes, supportive learning environments and helpful teachers.

TAFE courses generally have much smaller class sizes in the first year. Direct contact with lecturers is significantly higher at TAFE than at a university, and there is a more structured and industry-specific environment in which to complete your studies.

Classes are small enough for students to openly ask questions and have the ability to learn well. The way of teaching here is very good. Lectures are clear and teachers are very helpful. Good revisions are provided as guidance before exams which really helps.

Great courses, professional and knowledgeable teachers, great one on one support and amazing facilities and equipment.

TAFE provides students with opportunities to experience some important aspects of their entire career through work experience and practical classes and assessments.

I think TAFE produces students are employment ready as they receive practical, hands on training whereas a university education is only theoretical.

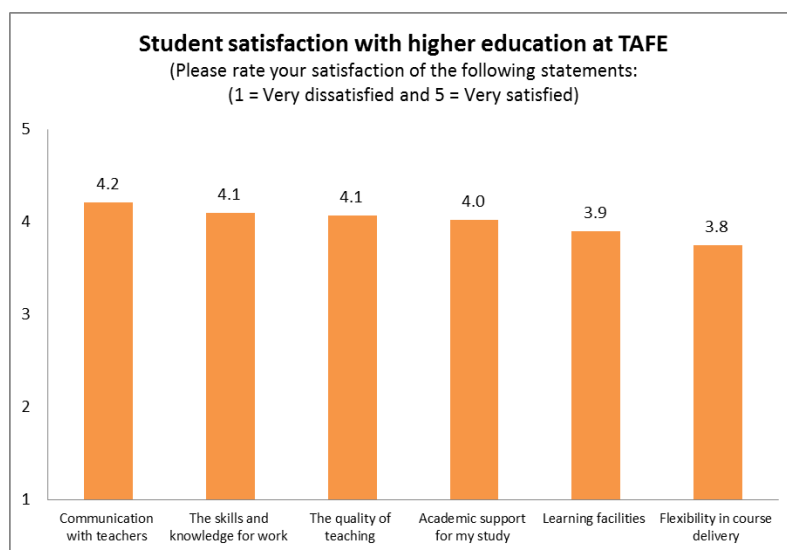


Figure 3: Student satisfaction with higher education in TAFE

Satisfaction with the skills and knowledge required for work (N=887), and the quality of teaching (N=889), also attract high levels of satisfaction (88% and 81% respectively). Students studying Science*, Media*, Early Childhood Education, Arts and Design and Health are most satisfied they are developing the skills and knowledge needed for work. High levels of satisfaction with the quality of teaching (81%) are significant given the importance attributed by students to this aspect of higher education (Figure 4). Satisfaction levels are highest in Arts and Design, Media*, Science* and Early Childhood Education courses which might be attributed to the ‘distinctions in pedagogy’ developed from the differences in curriculum and industry disciplines, and the way teachers respond to students (Moodie et al., 2011).

However, while overall satisfaction with the quality of teaching is high, comments in the qualitative data suggest some inconsistencies.

This year there has been some changes in the lecturers that are not all positive. It is very important for any lecturer to be able to carry the subject in which they have been given.

Satisfaction with academic support for students (N=889) is highest in Education*, Music*, Media*, Early Childhood Education and Business* courses.

Satisfaction levels are lowest with learning facilities in TAFE (N=887) and flexibility in course delivery (N=882) although these still rate at 78% and 75% respectively. Media* and Business students are more satisfied with facilities in TAFE, whereas Commerce* and Agricultural* students are less satisfied. Comments in the qualitative data reflect a range of experiences and views.

There is a range of learning facilities available . . . great simulation facilities and extra clinical placement times to gain more experience. Well equipped facilities with great teachers with good knowledge and industry practice.

The facilities are better [than university], our lecturers know my name; there are no more than 20 students in my studio classes; better community; industry standards; practical education.

The library is great even though resources are limited. The librarian is very willing to help.

The resources available to students are highly limited and difficult to access. Our campus lacks any computer resources, library or research facility. TAFEs unfortunately don't stack up with facilities and programs and guidance when compared to universities.

Media*, Early Childhood Education and Health students are most satisfied with flexibility in course delivery (N=882), whereas Accounting students are least satisfied. General comments include:

There is no flexibility in what times our classes start or what suits us better with other life commitments. For my course, online learning was not an option. Classes must be attended to receive content. If a class is missed, it is very hard to catch up.

I don't get to choose my subjects and my timetable. There are some subjects that I'm interested in and I can't have. Sometime the time table is not good for me. I am an adult and I have things to do.

I would recommend a TAFE higher education qualification to others.

Of the students who responded to the statement, 'I would recommend a TAFE higher education qualification to others' (N=856), 42% would strongly recommend (42%) or recommend (34%) a TAFE higher education course to others with Media*, Science*, Arts and Design and Early Childhood Education students providing the strongest responses.

Part 3B: How important is each of the following to your study at TAFE?

The quality of courses and the quality of teaching feature as the most important aspects of higher education in TAFE for students (Figure 4). These aspects are followed by academic support and employment opportunities available after graduation.

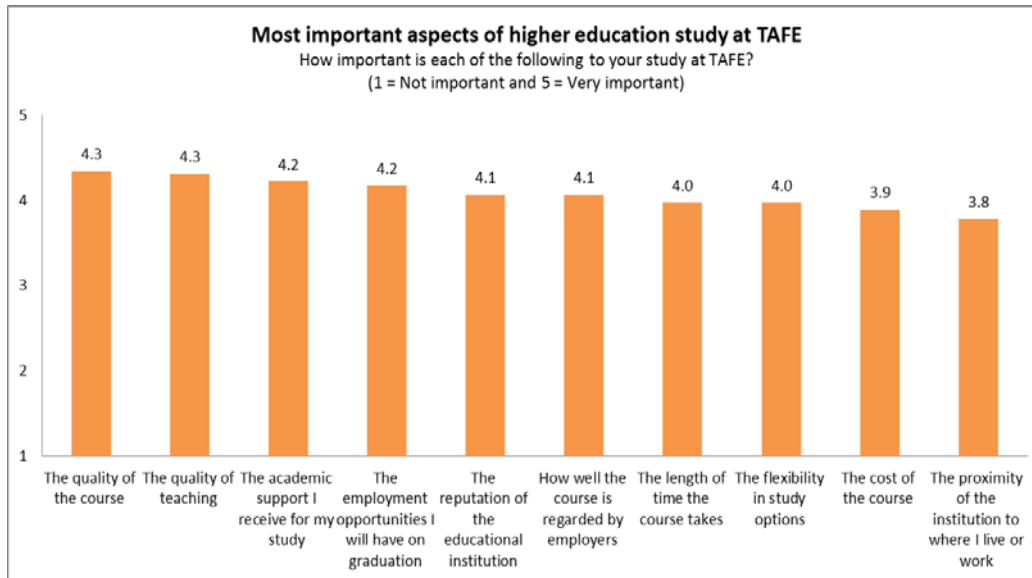


Figure 4: Important aspect of higher education in TAFE

The quality of courses (N=882) and the quality of teaching (N=878) rated highly across the spectrum of disciplines surveyed, most notably with Science*, Music* and Art and Design students. Academic support (N=882) is most important to Media*, Music*, Science*, Early Childhood Education, Arts and Design and Information and Communication Technology students, while employment opportunities after graduation (N=870) are important to Music*, Sports Media*, Fashion, and Information and Communication Technology students. The reputation of the education institution (N=875) is important to Science* and Music* students.

While, the statement ‘How well the course is regarded by employers’ (N=874) rates highly (82%), it is not a top priority for students. Neither is ‘the flexibility in study options’ even though this aspect of higher education rated lower in terms of satisfaction (Figure 3). How well employers value a course is important to Media*, Science and Arts and Design students and flexibility in study options is most important to Music*, Science* and Arts and Design students. The cost of a course is most important to Music*, Science* and Arts and Design students and attracts numerous comments in the qualitative data. These suggest that students (including international students) are experiencing financial stress which is having an impact on their studies.

Students are smart but because they work so hard to pay for their course, they start to skip a class which makes it hard to pass subjects. A lot of times students don't have the ability to pay the fees which stops them from completing their study.

Part 4: Reforms to higher education in TAFE.

Responses to statements regarding the proposed reforms to higher education indicate that TAFE higher education students are calling for equity in financial support for bachelor and sub-bachelor qualifications (Figure 5).

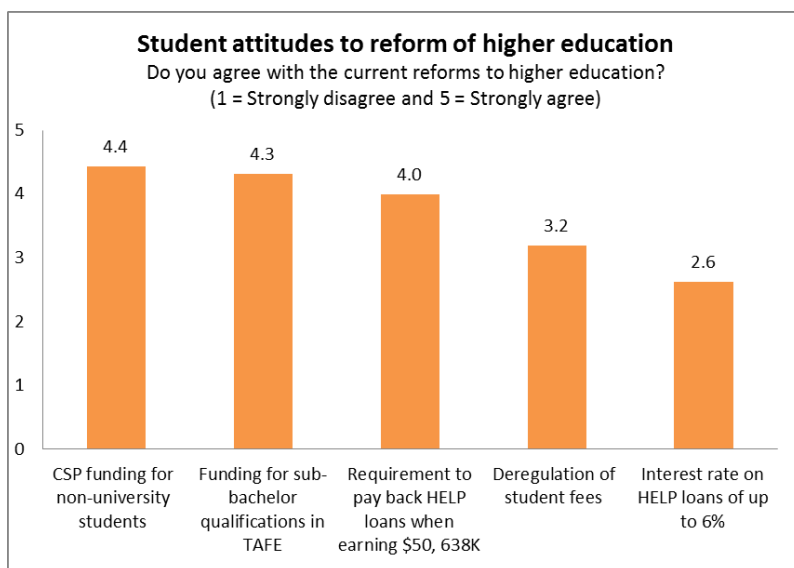


Figure 5: Student attitudes to proposed reforms in higher education

84% of students (N=860) either strongly agree (64%) or agree (22%) that funding assistance should be provided to support students studying higher education at TAFE and other NUHEPs. 81% (N=856) also strongly agree (54%) or agree (27%) that funding should be provided for sub-bachelor qualifications. Media* and Education students were in strongest agreement with this statement.

We are doing the same course, to receive the same qualification. Why should we not have the same rights as university students? I have two small children and living on one wage. If there is no access to financial support, I could not do this course.

As a student I spend a large proportion of my time with absolutely zero money, and am unable to have the same quality of life as my peers who are not studying. . . . This is a great deterrent for higher education if you are from a family that can't afford to support you while you study.

We need it just as much as the students of universities. It will assist vulnerable people who cannot afford higher education otherwise.

It is a way to relieve the financial border of a mature aged student leaving FT employment in order to commence study.

Slightly less than half (46%) of respondents (N=853) disagreed that a higher interest rate of up to 6% should be applied to HELP loans (instead of the current rate of 3.8%) and most (69%) agreed (N=856) that students should only be required to start paying back their loans once they are earning over \$50,638. While there was a relatively high degree of uncertainty (34%) in responses (N=846) to the statement, 'University and non- university providers should be able to set their student fees', comments in the data indicate strong opposition.

Part 5: Qualitative data

The qualitative data provides further insight into what student's value about higher education, what is distinctly different about their higher education experience in TAFE, and where there are opportunities for improvement in the design, delivery and support of courses. Students were asked to respond to the following qualitative questions in the survey:

1. Do you think TAFE higher education is as good as a university courses in the same areas?
Please tell us why;
2. Please comment on your general satisfaction with higher education in TAFE.

Over 1,000 comments were received to the questions and were categorised into five key themes:

1. The applied nature of the learning and 'work readiness' of higher education courses;
2. The quality of courses and teaching;
3. Academic and career support;
4. Facilities and resources; and
5. Articulation pathways.

1. Applied nature of the learning

The majority of comments from students reflect the high value they place on the applied nature of learning in TAFE, the industry experience of teachers, the industry focus of the curriculum and opportunities for work integrated learning through work placements, internships and simulated work environments. Students use various terms to describe the experience such as practical, hands on, personal, work-based, real-life, career-focused, work/job-ready, industry-specific, getting results, realistic, specialised, industry relevant and on-the-job learning. The importance of being prepared for future employment and the opportunities for a good career are regularly cited. The following comments are typical:

- *Studying at TAFE will help you learn all the basic and appropriate sets of skills needed in your career.*
- *[TAFE] not only helps students develop a concept about the world, it also gives students a chance to practice and get more experience in reality.*
- *Love the relevant hands-on learning style.*
- *TAFE provides you not only with the knowledge required from a university degree but the practical skills needed to succeed in industry.*
- *I think the course is very impressive and I feel prepared to work in the industry.*
- *The teachers are in industry and treat us like future members of the industry.*
- *While the course is also research based, there is a lot of practical based work with lecturers who help you.*
- *The ability to understand realistic situations within the industry and great support from industry-experienced teachers.*
- *It gives me a more practical aspect that I believe would be lacking in a Uni course of the same level. I believe this course makes me more employable in my field.*
- *TAFE has good employment opportunities for its students and employment is the only thing for which we all take higher education.*

- *I believe having an opportunity to work with the real equipment is much better than trying to learn just the theory without a real chance to apply it real time on equipment used in industry.*
- *Educators at TAFE are more informed in their qualifications and updated with what they are teaching.*
- *TAFE provides students with opportunities to experience some important aspects of their entire career through work experience, practical classes and assessments.*
- *In my opinion, the hands on approach allows for not only a stronger understanding but the possibility of making practical mistakes from which you learn more than from theoretical mistakes.*

2. Quality of courses and teaching

Echoing high levels of satisfaction students have with the quality of courses and teaching (Figure 3), students attribute the quality of their learning to the applied nature of the learning, industry specialisation of teachers, industry focused curriculum, small class sizes, access to teachers, high levels of academic support and inclusive learning environments.

- *Quality is of the essence and more hands on = better learning.*
- *It's all about student focus and direction.*
- *We get a supportive learning environment and teachers have industry experience that gives us good, realistic knowledge.*
- *For someone starting from scratch, the associate degree of accounting is a good choice offering more support in terms of ability to directly speak to teachers and in the longer classes to give a slower working pace (first year in particular).*
- *In terms of quality of teachers I feel that they all appear interested and knowledgeable and the structure of classes is very good.*
- *The courses have driven me to achieve excellent results and provided relevant experience.*
- *Having studied both TAFE and University you learn as much and work as hard in both.*
- *I have studied at 4 TAFEs. The courses have driven me to achieve excellent results and provided relevant experience.*

While few in number, comments in the data that indicate variability in the quality of teaching:

- *This calendar year there have been some changes in lecturers which have not all been positive. It is very important for any lecturer to be able to carry the subject they have been given.*

Comments that call for greater flexibility in course delivery to better fit work and family commitments appear more frequently.

- *There is no flexibility in what times our classes start or what suits us better with other life commitments.*
- *The teachers at TAFE are generally very skilled in their area; however flexibility in terms of part time options, completing the course in my own time, and taking elective subjects that I am interested in has been very unsatisfactory.*

- *For my course, online learning was not an option. Classes must be attended to receive content. If a class is missed, it is very hard to catch up.*
- *I don't get to choose my subjects and my timetable. There are some subjects that I'm interested in and I can't have. Sometime the time table is not good for me. I am an adult and I have my things to do.*
- *There has been a lack of flexibility with class times where lecturers keep students in class for the full class session. While this may be good for some, others have different learning styles.*

3. Academic and career support

However, there are high levels of satisfaction with learning environments in TAFE. With a few exceptions, most respondents indicated they felt well supported by teachers and support services including academic support. The inclusive and individual learning environment is highly valued, particularly by those who lack confidence in undertaking higher education.

- *Not having been at a schooling facility for a number of years prior, I found that TAFE has enabled me to adjust to a learning environment without overwhelming me.*
- *Smaller class size means better ratio for students to lecturer. Less chance to fall through the cracks. TAFE fills the void for less academic students.*
- *TAFE courses generally have much smaller class sizes especially in the first year. Direct contact with lecturers is significantly higher at TAFE than at university and there is a more structured and industry-specific environment in which to complete your studies.*
- *You can't get lost in the system at TAFE as easily as at university.*
- *TAFE has smaller classes which allows for more possibilities to communicate with the lecturer. It is very important when learning new subjects.*
- *Teachers have more time to spend with students as the student ratio is less than universities.*
- *Teachers know most of the students in the class so they can support their learning needs. I feel more valued as a student.*
- *Due to the smaller numbers of students in each class, the teaching becomes more personal and can be developed in a way that can benefit students better.*
- *Having earlier in my life done a university degree, I find the TAFE teaching system to be more to my liking, where teachers are very approachable.*
- *As a young student, I've received a lot of insights from people studying here which I wouldn't have got from Uni.*
- *I found the smaller class sizes an advantage and the teaching staff know who you are, not just a number.*
- *The study environment is the more inclusive than universities and teachers and students are more in touch.*
- *The level of support from professional teachers who work in the industry creates excellent learning environments for students.*
- *Access to different styles of learning that can be accessed by everyone - NOT just academic style learners.*

- *I have been supported through a number of different student services (personal counselling, study counselling, tutoring, assistance with Centrelink, etc.) and it has been absolutely essential to my success at TAFE.*
- *I have a personal relationship with most of my lecturers, who are also our tutors and lab technicians for practicals, and this has greatly assisted my commitment, enthusiasm and confidence. I feel this would be less available at a university.*
- *In TAFE, I can communicate more with the teachers and they actually care about how we do in the course and if we find any difficulties, we can easily talk to them and check our solutions.*
- *Lecturers are available for one on one help when needed.*
- *I went to a university before and disliked lecture times, timetabling and scheduling. Difficult to build rapport with other students due to mixed classes with 200 others – TAFE is more hands on and I feel more involved here.*
- *Teachers are very helpful and the guidance they give is very good.*
- *The teachers and other people working in a TAFE give the students full support and are ready to help at any time. The facilities, learning and other things provided in a TAFE are very helpful.*
- *I am very satisfied with my TAFE experience. I attended a University in the past and felt no support, merely felt like I was a cog in the money making machine.*
- *At TAFE I feel I am learning useful knowledge and skills and that the teaching staff are personally invested in my success.*
- *Learning at TAFE is well supported by the facilities and teachers. We are given many resources and practical opportunities. It is difficult to fail as long as you make an effort, which is important for confidence.*
- *In TAFE, the lecturers can focus on students more effectively than universities.*
- *I believe there is more support available resulting in a more personalised and tailored learning experience. The teachers actually know our names and want to see us succeed.*

These comments reflect Thomas' (2012: 12) observation that 'feelings of belonging' (relatedness or connectedness with an educational institution) in undergraduate students in particular are associated with academic engagement. These feelings can lead to improved retention and outcomes and are enhanced by meaningful student-staff contact, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, respect for diverse learning styles and co-operation among students (Chickering and Gamson, 1987 cited in Thomas, 2012: 15). However, as students do not always recognise the value of engagement, or have the ability to engage, the capacity of teachers to 'engage and be engaging' is critical (Thomas, 2012).

4. Facilities

Comments on the quality of facilities at TAFE constituted 2% of the quantitative data and reflect a range of views. Positive comments include:

- *There is a range of learning facilities available . . . great simulation facilities and extra clinical placement times to gain more experience.*
- *Well equipped facilities with great teachers with good knowledge and industry practice.*

Less positive comments express student concerns about library facilities, computer and other resources and student representation. Library closures are a contentious issue:

- *There are fewer resources at TAFE than at university e.g. my campus doesn't have a library or computers for students to use (such as ACARTS or an ATM). There are also less means for students' representation like a union student representative.*
- *Cut backs have affected my study. No library or computer access on-site makes it difficult if you are part-time.*
- *TAFE needs more resources and student representation and more funding to allow courses to provide the hours required for effective teaching of the course material. The learning facilities could be better (i.e. library).*
- *After experience learning hubs and student learning centres at university, I would say that the amount and level of student help given at Uni's is incredibly high in comparison to TAFE. Our facilities seem meek and boring when looking at Uni.*
- *The cuts in funding have majorly decreased facilities (library) and increased fees.*
- *Overall very satisfied but disappointed that on weekends and after 9 pm weeknights I have no access to oscilloscopes, DC power supplies, signal generators, other equipment necessary for performing testing of electronic circuits, internet, TAFE intranet, and good-sized computer screens. This has certainly been a disadvantage at times and my work could have been of a higher quality if these facilities were available.*
- *Good learning environment with small classes is ruined by a lack of modern equipment.*

The comments reflect Wheelahan and Moodie's (2009) findings that, while many higher education students 'thought their TAFE facilities were very good', there were complaints about the lack of resources in TAFE libraries and a lack of other resources such as computer laboratories.

5. Pathways

The high number of higher education students who have completed certificate, diploma and advanced diploma qualifications in this survey supports the value of pathways from VET into higher education as essential components in the development of higher education programs in TAFE (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2009). However, while few in number, comments in the qualitative data indicate that these pathways can be problematic.

- *For those who have completed earlier versions of TAFE's diploma and advanced diploma it would be good to see a clear articulation agreement to help see what pathway offers the quickest route to gaining whichever level of education is required.*
- *Several of the units do not seem to be much different from similar units at Diploma level in terms of knowledge learned. I'm not sure how this compares to university as I have not yet attended, but I feel there should either be an improvement in quality or more opportunity for advanced standing from Diploma to Associate Degree.*
- *Direct credit system means we are not regarded as studying the same level of education.*

Wheelahan and Moodie (2009: 39) cite how difficult transition to higher education can be, even when students move from a lower-level to higher-level programs in TAFE due mostly to the different learning environments, expectations and requirements and must 'be emphasised and placed at the forefront of issues that require consideration' (ibid.).

6. If TAFE students are given access to Commonwealth Supported Places subsidies, will this make your higher education study easier? Please tell us why?

- *Yes- I am currently studying a full-time degree and have a part-time job as I am not eligible for Centrelink or a government allowance. I go to school every weekday and work the weekends in order to support myself. This is taking a toll on my studies as I can barely keep up with the workload and do not perform to my fullest. Studying full time means I am dedicating most of my time to Uni while trying to work as well to support the studies and pay rent. Subsidies and fee help of any form is extremely beneficial.*
- *Yes – it will release the financial burden for me and my family. It mightn't make it easier, but it will make it fairer. Some students are really young and don't have jobs yet. Every little bit helps when you are studying and having to support yourself.*

7. If you were meeting with an independent senator, what would your primary message be in regard to these reforms?

- *TAFE is an institution we can be proud of – a legacy we can pass onto future learners. TAFE needs more funding and needs to be a higher priority in general.*
- *I am satisfied with higher education in TAFE but sometimes I think university education is more important in the eye of the Australian Government.*
- *TAFE is as important an avenue as universities for a 'smarter' Australia.*
- *Support TAFE studies. No everyone can afford to go to university. Imagine all the bright and talented minds that Australians might miss out on simply because of financial difficulty.*
- *The most important thing is access to quality education for everyone including those with a lower income.*
- *Providing education at a reasonable price = better educated people who give back to the community.*
- *It is imperative that politicians understand that TAFE and other forms of non-university study are just as essential to Australia as the universities. We all play a role in society and should not underestimate or undervalue TAFE's contribution.*
- *Reduce course fees for international students to an acceptable level.*
- *I don't understand why it has to be as expensive as it is – more government funding is needed. Trade jobs are just as important as any other.*
- *Think long and hard before changes are made. Many students in TAFE come from lower income families. We are studying because we want to better ourselves, find gainful employment so we are not using welfare. We do not want to be uneducated and unemployable, nor do we want an expensive empty degree that will not help us into the future.*

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