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Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment
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Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Inquiry into the role of Technical and Further Education system and its operation

I make some observations from the point of view of someone who was a TAFE Counsellor for over 20 years. Most of my comments are relevant to one or more of the Committee's terms of reference.

My background in TAFE:

I joined NSW TAFE as a Counsellor in 1979. Part of my reason for joining TAFE was that I admired the broad range of education and skills training provided by TAFE and the help given to disadvantaged individuals.

My professional qualifications at that time included a BA (Hons) and MA (Hons). I am still a registered psychologist although I am now retired. My previous position prior to joining TAFE had been Senior Tutor in Psychology at Macquarie University.

I was a TAFE Counsellor at Mount Druitt College of TAFE, Sydney Institute of TAFE at Ultimo, North Sydney TAFE and Crows Nest TAFE, with brief periods at other TAFE Colleges in various Sydney suburbs. I retired in 2001. As a TAFE Counsellor I advised both prospective students and enrolled students. I assisted many people from all walks of life to use the educational opportunities available in TAFE to achieve their educational and vocational goals.

Importance of TAFE for local communities:

When I worked as Counsellor for five years at Mount Druitt TAFE College in the early 1980's, the community it served had many unemployed people and the courses available at their local TAFE College were very important as a means of interrupting the inter-generational cycle of welfare dependence. The TAFE courses provided education and training for local people, giving them skills to enter satisfying and productive employment. The College was held in high regard by the local community and students often expressed thanks for the opportunity to improve their lives.

Changes to TAFE NSW since the late 1980's:

Many of the high ideals of TAFE were progressively whittled down by various NSW State Governments and the higher echelons of NSW TAFE Management from the late 1980's onwards.

TAFE in NSW has suffered the effects of "restructuring" numerous times since then. It was disappointing to see the closure of courses & colleges and the introduction of student fees, first as a small "administrative charge" and later as substantial course fees. From reports in the media it would appear that fees are currently being further increased.

Trade training: Apprentices usually receive their formal trade training (theory and practical classes) at TAFE, by attendance one day a week (or by block release). Trades can be good careers for young people, with some trades providing an opportunity to set up a small business (plumbing and electrical trades being two obvious examples).

TAFE Counsellors were, on occasion, invited to give talks to school students. Trade training & apprenticeships were topics that I would always include in my talk, as the trades were often not well promoted in schools (although this may have changed in recent years).

I noticed, before I retired in 2001, that some trade training was being handed over to private providers. I do not believe that most private providers can do as good a job as TAFE in the area of trade training.

Certificate and Diploma Courses: There are many different vocational courses offered. Originally these were offered free or at low cost, now increasingly with a substantial fee. The vocational courses are well-regarded by employers. In some cases TAFE courses are more highly regarded by employers than university courses in the same vocational area. Many of these courses also provide a TAFE to University pathway.

Higher School Certificate & Tertiary Preparation Course: These courses are good examples of TAFE providing a "second chance" education. Many students consult Counsellors for help with study skills, advice on university course selection, and assistance with career choice.

Adult Literacy (Language, Literacy and Numeracy courses): People who have never learned to read and write are severely disadvantaged. These classes teach literacy & numeracy skills. They require significant investment of time and effort on the part of both the teacher and the pupils. There is a substantial pay-off in terms of students' self-improvement, increased life satisfaction and employment prospects. These classes are not a suitable target for "user-pays" course fees.

ESOL (English as a Second or Other Language): Migrants are assisted in learning English. As a TAFE Counsellor I often gave advice to individual ESOL students, including assisting with employment advice and job applications.

Art and Craft Courses: I have seen students gain confidence and skills by attending art and craft courses. They can also provide skills for paid work. Some of the shorter courses may not be needed in TAFE Colleges located in areas where there is already a good supply of short art and craft courses through other providers. However, in some regional and remote areas the local TAFE may be the only provider of some courses.

Support services for students: TAFE typically provides a number of ancillary and support services for students that are unlikely to be matched by private providers. These include Student Associations that are coordinated by staff Student Association Officers, who arrange out-of-class amenities and activities, including sport. Two other examples are the Counselling & Careers Service and the Disability Consultants, who help students overcome obstacles to successful study.

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