

## **INQUIRY INTO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS**

There is relatively limited access to publicly funded Vocational Education and Training or apprentice schemes on Norfolk Island.

### **No Commonwealth assistance for apprenticeships or VET on Norfolk Island**

The Island cannot obtain assistance from the Commonwealth Government to help those young Islanders wishing to work on Norfolk Island or who may wish to complete all, or part, of their training on Norfolk Island because of family, financial or employment reasons.

Apprentices on Norfolk Island, or those who complete any part of an apprenticeship on Norfolk Island, are excluded under the Commonwealth Government's New Apprenticeships Incentives Programme. Commonwealth funding and assistance for Vocational Education and Training is also not available on Norfolk Island. Other Commonwealth Government benefits - such as Austudy - are not available to young Islanders wishing to work and study on Norfolk Island. To qualify for these, they must move to Australia and enrol there and hope they meet the eligibility requirements. Also, unlike communities elsewhere, Norfolk Island parents and families are not eligible for other Commonwealth Government benefits (such as family allowance) that would offset the costs and problems caused by isolation.

The Commonwealth Government's reason for excluding Norfolk Island is that 'Norfolk Island residents do not pay Commonwealth taxes and should not receive Commonwealth funding assistance'. However, as explained below, this is open to question.

### **Norfolk Island Government assistance is limited because of lack of funds**

The Norfolk Island Government is limited in the assistance that it can provide to young Islanders interested in TAFE or industry training on Norfolk Island in taking on apprenticeships. The Government's limited revenue base and rising costs of delivering services has meant that the Government must direct scarce funds into other priorities such as social services, health, welfare and primary and secondary education. The Government is now reviewing its finances and services, to try and develop a sustainable system of government for the Island. The review has yet to report.

Education on Norfolk Island is fully funded by the Norfolk Island Government. In accordance with a Memorandum of Understanding with the Commonwealth Government, the Norfolk Government purchases an education package including teaching services from the NSW Department of Education and Training. Norfolk Island's school provides free infant, primary and secondary schooling. In 2000/2001, education cost the Norfolk Island Government in excess of \$1.8M

The Norfolk Island School does what it can with what it has. A limited number of TAFE subjects are available on island through the school (Information Technology Certificate II and units in Hospitality). These units can count towards TAFE

accreditation. However, their availability is subject to VET accredited teachers from NSW applying and then being selected to teach at secondary classes on Norfolk Island. Students may also still enrol in off-island units or course components to obtain their qualifications. There are also relatively limited resources available for VET teachers and students on Norfolk.

Some TAFE subjects are also available to Norfolk Island students through distance education and on the Internet. Information Technology (Certificate II) classes have been extended to community members, through the School, with great success.

The Norfolk Island Government provides a Vocational Education and Training Scholarship to assist with the cost of travel to the mainland for study purposes. However, these scholarships are relatively small and are not designed to cover the full costs of relocation and study. This is currently a(n unrealistic) \$20 book allowance and an airfare, paid in two parts (\$321.25 x 2).

There has been an arrangement with NSW that allows residents of Norfolk Island to be regarded as being registered in NSW, but complete the practical component of their apprenticeships with Island employers. However, Norfolk Island apprenticeships must still complete their technical studies on the mainland. **This arrangement no longer exists.**

Technical training in NSW is usually done one day per week throughout the year. This means that Norfolk Island based apprentices, their parents or their employers can be faced with six or seven additional airfares, greater accommodation costs and the like in any one year. It is unrealistic for Norfolk Island based apprentices to consider this option because of airfares, accommodation and the constraints of travel arrangements. A limited range of block TAFE courses is available in New South Wales.

In contrast, technical training for apprenticeships in Queensland is provided in one block of four or five weeks a year. However, Queensland education authorities have advised Norfolk Island parents that apprentices on Norfolk Island, who wish to enrol in Queensland, but do their practical training on Norfolk Island, cannot be registered or indentured in Queensland. This means that they must pay the much higher trade or commercial rates that apply to 'non resident' apprentices. This has been as much as \$2995.20 (\$10.40 per hour)

Some Norfolk parents have also been advised by TAFE Institutes in NSW that funding is not available through the NSW Department of Education and Training for apprentices from Norfolk Island even though they are indentured through New South Wales and they may have to pay full commercial fees, which can be \$3000 or more per year.

The Norfolk Island Government has written to the NSW and Queensland Governments seeking their assistance in having students from Norfolk Island charged at the same rate as Queensland or NSW students, but without success to date.

The result is that Norfolk Island employers and parents can be faced with prohibitive costs with little or no prospect of assistance from the Government. This only

compounds the obstacles facing Island families interested in enrolling their children in apprenticeships or traineeships.

These include:

- 1) **The absence of any process to register as an apprentice or trainee**
- 2) the higher cost of living on Norfolk Island than communities elsewhere;
- 3) the relatively limited range of VET opportunities on-island;
- 4) the limited pool of employers on-island able to provide relevant and ongoing work experience and training;
- 5) the lack of incentives provided to Norfolk Island employers to take on locals for apprenticeships and training;
- 6) the difficulties in finding employers in NSW and Queensland interested in employing and training apprentices from Norfolk Island, exacerbated by Norfolk Island's exclusion in the New Apprenticeship Incentives Programme; and
- 7) the financial and social costs involved in having to move far away from the island to study or to find employers willing to take islanders on and train them.

In 1994 the Norfolk Island Legislative Assembly established a Select Committee to inquire into Youth Employment and Opportunities on Norfolk Island. The Committee reported in 1996 and detailed a range of concerns raised by Island residents at that time, including:

- 1) The difficulty of providing both general and vocational training at the Norfolk Island school, due to the small number of students and lack of teaching resources
- 2) The lack of opportunities on the Island for apprenticeships/ traineeships for school leavers on a sustainable basis.
- 3) Inadequate community / parent awareness about training options available in Australia in what is an ever changing education environment. This means that students often have to investigate and negotiate available vocational training options on their own initiative.
- 4) Correspondence courses conducted by TAFE/universities usually require frequent and expensive residential sessions (see above).
- 5) There are increasingly large number of adults on the Island seeking assistance from the school in obtaining and upgrading qualifications;
- 6) There are no on-island training facilities such as TAFE or industry accreditations;

- 7) There is a significant group of residents seeking assistance with study skills and word processing skills.
- 8) Limited classroom space and limited library/research material and support services.

Our concerns are that:

In relation to 3), the inadequate awareness extends to the Norfolk Island Government.

In relation to 6), training facilities are available through the School in Hospitality (Certificate II), Information Technology (Certificate II) and Building and Construction (Certificate I)

The Committee recommended, among other things, that:

- 1) Year 11 and 12 students should be offered opportunity to gain relevant vocational expertise and experience.
- 2) A teacher at the Norfolk Island school should be charged with coordination and development of a vocational education and work experience program for students at the school and with assisting Norfolk Island school leavers gain apprenticeships and traineeships on and off the Island. It is our recommendation that the position be filled by a full-time Careers Advisor.
- 3) The Norfolk Island Government should develop and fund a pilot programme to encourage local employers to recruit apprenticeships and trainees.

These recommendations have generally been acted on. However, as explained, budget constraints, funds and competing priorities limit what the Norfolk Island Government and community can do on its own.

It is our strong recommendation that the teacher appointed to co-ordinate and develop vocational education and work experience programs for students should be a trained Careers Advisor and that the appointment should be full-time.

### **The Importance of VET to Norfolk Island**

VET's importance to Norfolk Island community was highlighted by the Commonwealth Grants Commission in its 1997 *Report on Norfolk Island*. The Grants Commission found that greater technical and vocational training services and opportunities were needed to assist the Island's economic growth and to improve the efficiency of service delivery in both the Island's private and public sectors. Also, if these services were available on the Island, more residents might be able to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to do the jobs on the Island currently held by non-residents. Norfolk Island currently relies heavily on workers recruited from overseas, especially skilled tradespeople and professionals. The availability of VET courses on-island might even reduce the number of people, in the 15 to 24 age group, leaving the Island.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's *National Inquiry into Remote and Rural Education* (May 2000) also highlighted the importance of VET in terms of individual development, especially when offered through secondary schools - such as the Norfolk Island Central School. It pointed out that VET courses in secondary schools can assist in developing numeracy and literacy skills while offering opportunities for transition into TAFE programs and jobs. The Inquiry also found offering VET options in schools can assist in the retention of students within the education system, especially boys.

It is important therefore that the Commonwealth Grants Commission's report concluded that:

The provision of government funded Vocational Education and Training services, other than for Norfolk Island based apprentices, is below that offered in remote areas of the mainland. This is resulting in an under trained workforce and is a threat to the long term viability of the Island (at page 83).

As explained above, Norfolk Island based apprentices are now facing serious problems. **There is no facility to register as an apprentice or trainee.**

### **The need for the Commonwealth Government to assist**

Elsewhere, education is largely a State and Territory responsibility with the onus on State and Territory Governments to develop and implement VET. However, in Norfolk Island's case, the Commonwealth does retain some responsibility for ensuring that appropriate VET services and opportunities are available to the community.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, in its *National Inquiry into Remote and Rural Education*, concluded that the Commonwealth Government's responsibilities for education funding and coordination and under international law meant that it remained responsible for ensuring the appropriate provision of VET in remote and isolated communities - such as Norfolk Island. That is, while the Commonwealth Government's role in education is largely limited to that of funding and not service provision, "the Commonwealth's funding capacity enables it to some extent to coordinate policy and to fill gaps in provision and quality". This includes gaps caused by differences arising from students' socio-economic background or geographic location. More importantly, the Human Rights Commission noted that, "for the purposes of human rights, VET forms an integral element of all levels of education being an element of the human right to work as well as the human right to education." Under international law, it is the Commonwealth Government that is ultimately responsible for ensuring the enforcement and protection of human rights such as the right to an education.

The Commonwealth's justification for not providing assistance with VET on Norfolk Island has been that residents living on Norfolk Island do not pay Commonwealth taxes and, therefore, should not be eligible for Commonwealth assistance. However, this is open to question. For instance:

- 1) The Commonwealth Government has already taken the decision to exempt the Island from the payment of Commonwealth taxes because of Norfolk Island's unique circumstances, including its economic and social situation.
- 2) Norfolk Island residents do pay Commonwealth taxes on income earned or transactions in the States or other Territories.
- 3) The Commonwealth Government provides assistance to Australia's other External Territories that far exceed the amount they contribute by way of Commonwealth Taxes. In particular, the Commonwealth Government provides funding through the Department of Transport and Regional Services for the provision of vocational training services, including the administration and training of apprenticeships and trainees, on both the Cocos (Keeling) Islands and on Christmas Island. This is detailed in the Commonwealth Grants Commission Report on the Indian Ocean Territories published in 1999. These Territories are also exempt from the Commonwealth Goods and Services Tax.
- 4) The Commonwealth Government has extended financial and other assistance to Norfolk Island knowing that the Island is exempt from Commonwealth taxation. At the same time, successive Commonwealth Governments have confirmed their commitment to the continuation of Norfolk Island's internal self-government and separate financial arrangements.
- 5) Commonwealth assistance with VET on Norfolk Island is required to ensure equity and equality of access and a level playing field. It ought not to be solely about cost recovery.
- 6) The Commonwealth Government under the Norfolk Island Act 1979 has reserved to itself powers over education on Norfolk Island. The Act requires all laws concerning education passed by the Norfolk Island Legislative Assembly to be sent to Canberra for vetting before they can be made into law.
- 7) Perhaps most important of all is the promise made by the Commonwealth Government in 1976, just prior to the establishment of self-government on the Island, that it would *continue to accept responsibility for maintaining Norfolk Island as a viable community*.

The Commonwealth Grants Commission has found that the lack of adequate government funded VET on Norfolk Island is a threat to the long term viability of the Island. Ensuring access to a comprehensive VET scheme presently remains beyond Norfolk Island's ability to fund alone. The Norfolk Island Government is doing what it can, while trying to expand its revenue base and secure a sustainable financial base for the Island. In these circumstances, the onus is on the Commonwealth to help in accordance with its earlier promises.

There are a number of possible solutions that could be considered. These include:

- 1) The Norfolk Island Government - through the Norfolk Island School - becoming a registered TAFE provider and receiving Commonwealth assistance and funding to present a wider range of TAFE courses to local students without them

having to leave the Island.

An alternative might be for VET providers registered in NSW or in Queensland to be eligible to obtain Commonwealth funding for services provided on Norfolk Island and to help the Norfolk Island School establish an on-island VET skill centre. This could extend to the use of Workplace Assessors, currently in the School, working in partnership with OTEN-DE or the New England Institute of TAFE.

- 2) Extension of Commonwealth benefits and programs - such as the New Apprenticeships Incentives Program - to those Islanders who wish to work on Norfolk Island or who wish to complete all or part of their training on Norfolk Island.
- 3) Commonwealth financial and other assistance in undertaking feasibility studies and in obtaining the necessary equipment and training for teleconferencing to be used at the Norfolk Island school and to improve the delivery of internet based VET training and courses.

It is important to remember that

- young people wishing to participate in apprenticeships are Australian citizens
- it is more than likely that at least part of their working life will be spent in Australia, where they will pay Australian taxes.

The priorities at this time are to

- Establish a process for registration of apprentices / trainees
- Resolve the issue of Incentives
- Resolve the issue of cost for TAFE component of apprenticeships

Thank you.

Patricia C Magri and Helen Pedel  
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