



# Blue Mountains Community Sector Submission to the Parliamentary inquiry into the role of the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system and its operation

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*April 2013*

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## *Inquiry Terms of Reference*

*TAFEs have played a critical role in the training and development of Australians for more than one hundred years. For many Australians, TAFEs provide a critical pathway to training and skills which are increasingly needed to access employment. They also play a critical role in regions and in providing access for disadvantaged groups.*

*The Committee will inquire into and report on the role played by TAFEs in:*

- the development of skills in the Australian economy;*
  - the development of opportunities for Australians to improve themselves and increase their life and employment prospects;*
  - the delivery of services and programs to support regions, communities and disadvantaged individuals to access training and skills and through them a pathway to employment;*
  - the operation of a competitive training market; and*
  - those jurisdictions in which State Governments have announced funding decisions which may impact on their operation and viability.*
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Mountains Community Resource Network (MCRN) is the peak body for the Community Sector in the Blue Mountains LGA.

MCRN convenes several interagencies, including the generalist interagency, Blue Mountains Community Interagency (BMCI); this Submission is made at the request of, and on behalf of, BMCI.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the discussion on the valuable role played by our public provider of vocational education and training.

## Terms of reference

### The development of skills in the Australian economy

The Blue Mountains campuses of Western Sydney Institute of TAFE are valued by the local community as:

- ✓ reliable providers of high-quality, affordable, and accessible training in key skills;
- ✓ providers of training which is valued by local employers in key industries within our region - such as hospitality and tourism; environmental sustainability; community development, child care, welfare and counselling;
- ✓ contributors in other ways to local industries and our community (for example, students and teaching sections participate in workplace or community projects as part of their training and assessment activities).

The community sector, education and tourism/hospitality are all significant employers in a region where work can be difficult to find; so such training meets the needs of the various industry/community sectors at the same time as assisting with the development of the local economy.

*This year a TAFE teacher ran an outreach course for workers in Childcare to attain their Certificate 3 in Child Studies (this Certificate has become a compulsory qualification for all childcare workers). The teacher travelled from Werrington to Hazelbrook on several occasions to run classes; she ran classes on Saturdays and on some evenings. This saved the participants - who were all Mountains residents - from needing to travel to Penrith; thus providing a much-needed service to our community and sector.*

Connect Child and Family Services

Western Sydney Institute of TAFE (WSI) offers courses desired by the community within each local area/region. TAFE staff consult with local stakeholders to determine training needs, and over time TAFE has built trust and a consultative relationship with the Blue Mountains community which ensures delivery of courses which the community and business want.

The Blue Mountains Community Sector, and the broad community we represent, is concerned that current and mooted proposals to centralise decision-making (eg decisions on which courses are offered, based on statewide data), will not provide the skills that the local economy and community require. In addition, moves to outsource these courses to private providers will lose local knowledge and break consultative/collaborative relationships; and is likely to negatively impact on both the perception of the offered training, and its value to the local community.

Potentially, with tourism in a down-turn, the current (and proposed further) cuts to TAFE NSW can threaten local jobs in an already depressed market.

## **TAFE's role in the development of opportunities for Australians to improve themselves and increase their life and employment prospects**

The Blue Mountains campuses of Western Sydney Institute of TAFE (WSI) are highly valued partners of the BM community sector. TAFE NSW has a long and distinguished history of opening pathways for people to engage in education and training, and complete qualifications that may have otherwise seemed unattainable. This has been achieved, to a very large extent, by the provision of equity and support programs and measures.

TAFE makes a major contribution to our local community by:

- ✓ providing pathways to higher qualifications such as TAFE Diplomas or University degrees, for many people who would not otherwise have opportunities to gain these;
- ✓ offering many services and facilities for students, many of which are not offered by private providers (such as careers and course counselling, excellent library services, support for students with disabilities, programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students);
- ✓ providing 'second chance' education opportunities for those who may not have enjoyed successful educational experiences previously;
- ✓ contributing to local community development and social inclusion goals through equity programs and courses embedded within local communities.

We are very concerned about the cuts and losses already announced in TAFE NSW; and even more concerned that there may be further cuts or reductions planned which will impact on BM TAFE's ability to meet the needs of our local community. For example, the Mountains Multicultural Interagency (MMI) has noted with concern the recent significant reductions in language and literacy programs (particularly for those from Culturally & Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds). The sector also notes with concern the removal of specific supports and targets (eg for those with disabilities, or indigenous students) and their replacement with (fewer) resources for a broad, non-specific, 'equity' group.

While these measures are extremely concerning, there is currently even more worrying talk of courses and programs being cut across Western Sydney Institute, teaching sections being amalgamated, and teaching and administrative jobs lost. If these trends continue, there is the potential for closure of smaller campuses such as Blue Mountains, with negative consequences for our community, industry and employers.

*The Neighbourhood Centre has partnered with the TAFE over the last few years to offer outreach courses to people of the Lower Mountains at the neighbourhood centre's base in Blaxland.*

*'Live locally, learn locally' is the motto offered by one of our course participants, and this shows what a great opportunity for learning at any age that TAFE offers through its outreach programs. Many people feel nervous about adult learning and hesitate to take the big step of enrolling in a course that will develop their skills, whether that course is in computers, financial management, or community services.*

*These courses enrich the local community by enhancing the lives of the individual students. Students demonstrate new skills, confidence and knowledge, and that is fed back into the community through gaining paid work or offering volunteering and mentoring skills.*

*Some comments from participants of our courses include:*

*'Brighten up your day and take the first step to learn some new skills'.*

*'You never know if you never try.'*

*'Nature plus learning help the mind and spirit to soar.'*

*'Learning never ends. It is a journey – not a destination – so keep on taking trips.'*

*'TAFE and LMNC – working together with the community.'*

*'Learning, Sharing, Caring'.*

*'Learning doesn't stop when you retire.'*

*'LMNC, TAFE and the community: a three-way co-operative interaction.'*

*'A miniature university for the mature-aged.'*

*We strongly support the work of TAFE in our community. We can see first-hand the benefits of TAFE's outreach program, and we are deeply concerned at the potential impact the cuts to TAFE are going to have on the opportunities for adult learning in our community and, by extension, the impact on people's capacity to develop skills for both paid work and giving back to our community.*

Lower Mountains Neighbourhood Centre

## **The delivery of services and programs to support regions, communities and disadvantaged individuals to access training and skills and through them a pathway to employment.**

The BM campuses of WST of TAFE play an important role in regional communities such as the Blue Mountains, where transport options are limited, and a high proportion of people are on income support or low incomes; providing affordable, accessible training for our communities.

The BM Community Sector is extremely concerned that increases in fees, and doubling of the concession fee for people on income support, may well result in falling enrolment numbers as many of the community we serve cannot afford higher fees.

Beyond the provision of training, TAFE colleges also contribute enormously in other ways to the development and the life of the local community, particularly in rural and regional areas. TAFE colleges provide opportunities for local industry, business and community organisations to

participate in training - by hosting students on work experience placements, or participating in student learning projects involving real work settings, or employing work-ready TAFE graduates.

TAFE Outreach is a particularly valued partner of the Community Sector. It's work in delivering tailored programs assists us to meet the needs of our community – both in 'second-chance' programs, and in pathways to vocational education and training which can lead directly to further training and/or employment.

*Mountains Outreach Community Service has run a number of TAFE Outreach courses that are always well attended and appreciated. Women's Futures, Women's Lives, a very successful TAFE Outreach Course, was presented in partnership with MOCS as part of the Mid-Mountain's Community Hub programme. It was a 10 week course that took place in Hazelbrook in 2012.*

*The course was very well-attended with 12 women completing the 10 weeks. The Hazelbrook course attracted a wide range of women - from mums who had been out of the work force for some time while child rearing, to older women who wanted renewed employment or study opportunities.*

*The group of women became a close, supportive network for each other over the 10 weeks and all said they had got a lot out of the course.*



*"This course gave me an invaluable stepping-stone back into preparation for working life, after 7 years of parenting full time. Not only did this wonderful course give me the practical looking-for-work tools and career building skills, it gave me a caring and confidence-building environment to help me engage more with my local community. I only wish I had done this course earlier, as I (and many other women) had felt isolated from work and study for so long and with this isolation our confidence had also reached a very low point - and unnecessarily so. Meeting other women in similar positions as myself became a huge support for me."*

*"I am a self-employed woman in my 50's and the Women's Futures, Women's Lives course helped me to update my business plan, working towards retirement and how did I want my working life to look like over the next twenty years or so. It helped me look at what I wanted to add to what I already do,*

and in what direction I might want to take that. In my case, I am still practicing as an acupuncturist but have now expanded into community development, training and mentoring. My thanks go out to my teacher and all my class mates, as we all learned from each other.”

“I could not have taken part in these courses if they were not free, local and offered by TAFE Outreach programme. These courses are meeting the genuine and vital needs of the local community. Please keep them going. They contribute to the foundation of a healthy and resilient community.”

*Many of the women went on to complete another TAFE Outreach course (First Aid) to further enhance their employment opportunities. Several, inspired by the leadership skills they developed, also joined our Management Committee!*

*Mountains Outreach Community Services*

## The operation of a competitive training market

While the BM Community Sector supports the concept of competition in an open market situation, the situation with TAFE is a little more complex than the normal “market”.

Firstly, TAFE has community service obligations (access and equity measures). Other RTOs are not required to demonstrate the same level of commitment to ensuring that the most vulnerable in our community get the support and encouragement they need to engage in, and persevere with, study. To this point, TAFE fees have also been proportional to the ability to pay, and taken account of the fact that many of those commencing vocational training pathways are not in a position to pay high fees. We are concerned that recent NSW government decisions do not sufficiently consider the affordability of courses for isolated and vulnerable members of the community. If the aim is to skill the work force and increase the skills and qualifications of the working population, then the high support needs of many in these groups need to be addressed.

Secondly, the majority of RTOs tend to ‘cherry-pick’ their course offerings. They are more likely to offer courses which have low input/infrastructure costs (and thus relatively higher profits). TAFE has obligations to serve the needs of their local industry and community (quadruple bottom line), not just focus on the financial/income line. It is no accident that it is predominantly TAFE which offers vocational training in agriculture, hospitality, IT, design, environmental sustainability, and so on.

Thirdly, TAFE is obliged to provide the full range of student services (counselling, equity and support programs, career advice, and library services) - not all RTOs can or will offer this range of services. There will be a cost to the community if such services are not mandatory offerings, or withdrawn/cut.

We are also concerned that increasing contestability of training funds may impact negatively on the Blue Mountains. In an environment of reducing resources (time, expertise, people and

access/partnerships), due to a growing need to constantly source funds to maintain educational programs from year to year, this will inevitably impact on quality vocational education.

### Those jurisdictions in which State Governments have announced funding decisions which may impact on their operation and viability.

In 2012 the NSW Government announced funding cuts to education which will result in significant job losses across TAFE NSW, including teaching positions. The impacts of this first round are already having effect in the Blue Mountains (in uncertainty, job losses, reductions in services to the most vulnerable in our community, and stretched resources). We understand that a further round of cuts is contemplated.

TAFE Institutes are conducting “Products and Services reviews” to meet these identified targets. In some Institutes this has resulted in the complete or partial elimination of Access and Equity measures described above. Of particular concern to the BM Community Sector, Adult Literacy Officer positions, Multicultural Education, and Outreach Coordinators and their programs have been deleted in some areas; and others are currently under review. Funding for Art courses in TAFE – a significant contribution to our vibrant cultural economy and community – have been cut, and fees increased to a level which is not accessible to any but the wealthy (a term which hardly describes accurately the majority of TAFE students in the Mountains).

In addition, courses have been deleted from some Institute colleges, resulting in reduced choice for students and local employers, greater travel time and associated costs for students who can no longer study in their local area, job losses, and a potential reduction of community and industry confidence in TAFE as the public provider.

The Blue Mountains community benefits enormously from important and effective community development programs such as:

- the Aboriginal Artists in Blue Mountains Program (MOCS 2011-2013);
- *Paint the Blue REaD*, the early learning (0-3 brain development) population program, an initiative of the Blue Mountains Stronger Families Alliance.

Operating as it does on minimal funding, the BM Community Sector relies on community partnerships in developing and delivering these projects. For example, the sector has developed a strong symbiotic relationship TAFE Community Services education program, and it is no exaggeration to say that without the participation of regular placement teams of TAFE Students (Community Services Certificate 4 and Diploma) in services, many of these projects would not be possible. The projects are part of the important experiential learning for TAFE students, and expose them to invaluable cultural contacts and early learning engagement. This, in turn, benefits the wider community as they make their way into positions throughout the region.

**“TAFE is an intrinsic part of the fabric of community development in the Mountains, and is an important part of our exceptional efficacy. To erode this model is false economy.**”



**The community sector does so much with so little because of this positive working relationship with TAFE”.**