

## **Submission**

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# **House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Education and Employment**

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

We would like to thank UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families staff who participated in consultations and made other contributions as part of the preparation of this submission.



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# About UnitingCare Children, Young People & Families

UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families (UnitingCare CYPF) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into the role of Technical and Further Education system and its operation.

UnitingCare CYPF is a service group of UnitingCare NSW/ACT, and is one of the largest providers of services to support children, families and individuals in NSW. In 2011/2012 UnitingCare CYPF provided services to over 32,000 children, young people and their families.

The Service Group is comprised of UnitingCare Burnside, UnitingCare Unifam Counselling and Mediation, UnitingCare Disability, UnitingCare Children's Services and the Institute of Family Practice, a registered training organisation. Its purpose is to provide innovative and quality programs and advocacy to break the cycle of disadvantage that affects vulnerable children, young people, individuals and families.

This submission draws primarily on the experience of UnitingCare Burnside (Burnside). Burnside delivers over 80 programs across NSW. We work in communities in South Western Sydney, Western Sydney, Central Coast, Mid North Coast and Orana Far West. We aim to protect children from abuse and neglect by breaking cycles of disadvantage and building on strengths. We achieve this by providing services across the continuum of care to support healthy family relationships, encouraging positive change through education and learning and building strong resilient communities.

It is critical to our work at UnitingCare CYPF to have an affordable and accessible TAFE system because so many our service users enrol in TAFE as a way to re-engage with the community, education and the workforce. As outlined in the submission, many of our services work in partnership with TAFE to support our service users.

Our submission focuses on three of the Inquiry terms of reference:

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

As outlined below our key concern is the impact of cuts to TAFE in NSW on vulnerable and disadvantaged people and reduced access to 'second-chance' education.

## What is happening in NSW

In September last year, the NSW Government announced funding cuts of \$1.7 billion to the education budget. Since then approximately 800 teaching and educational jobs have already been lost in TAFE NSW. As the Government has given each of the eight TAFE Institutes a directive to find the cuts from their own budgets, there is limited publicly available information about the exact nature of the cuts.

To fund the cuts, fees for TAFE will be increased by about 10% and many courses will move to 'full fee', costing thousands of dollars. In the agreement between the NSW Government and the Federal Government, the Premier indicated that there may be further rises in TAFE fees to fund the Gonski reform package for school-age education.

The Minister for Education, Adrian Piccoli, also announced that TAFE courses that do not fill skills shortages and directly lead to jobs will no longer receive State Government funding. Only courses the Government approves, according to a skills list developed in consultation with industry and labour market research, will continue to receive taxpayer-funded subsidies.

Next year the NSW Government will introduce a skills reform package: *Smart and Skilled NSW*. *Smart and Skilled* will introduce a 'competitive training market' where the Government will give funding to for-profit education providers rather than TAFE NSW.

## UnitingCare CYPF key concerns

We are concerned that the cuts to TAFE NSW together with increased fees and the introduction of a competitive training market will reduce the capacity of vulnerable and disadvantaged people to re-engage with education and gain skills and qualifications to join the workforce.

The cuts will have the biggest impact in disadvantaged areas in Western Sydney and regional NSW, where there is limited scope for schools to recoup money and for students and their families to pay more.

### TAFE Outreach

We are particularly concerned about the possibility of cuts to TAFE Outreach Programs. Outreach programs act as a stepping stone for marginalised people to re-enter the education system. Outreach programs ensure TAFE NSW is accessible to people who face barriers to learning such as:

- geographical and social isolation
- language and cultural factors
- financial hardship
- lack of educational confidence
- cultural factors
- a disability
- family commitments
- being in a correctional centre.

Outreach programs are offered in various locations in the local community rather than only being available at the TAFE Institute. This is very important, as often vulnerable and disadvantaged people have had negative experiences of school and lack confidence in their educational capacity. Through Outreach, participants have the opportunity to build up confidence in a community venue where they feel more at ease before going on to further study at a TAFE institute.

Program content is negotiated from a wide range of TAFE NSW courses, depending on local requirements. Outreach Coordinators talk to local communities, government and industry to determine the location, length, time

and type of course required.

Burnside has a long history of working with TAFE Outreach to support vulnerable people in disadvantaged communities to re-engage with education and employment. Our experience shows that through the TAFE Outreach Program, vulnerable and disadvantaged people build the skills and confidence to go on to further study at TAFE.

For example, we offer parents the *Women in the Workforce* (WOW) course in many of our Family Centres. This is a free course to assist women who have been out of the workforce to develop skills and gain employment or further study. The WOW courses have good success rates in getting women back into the workforce.

The Warnervale Family and Community Centre, a Burnside program on the Central Coast, for example, has worked in partnership with the Hunter TAFE Institute on three occasions to run WOW courses. The centre is currently working collaboratively with our Northern Lakes Family Centre and TAFE to offer a group called Event WOW. The participants include young women, Aboriginal women, women with disabilities and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Childcare will be provided to encourage inclusion of isolated women with sole childcare responsibilities and reduce barriers to participation. During the course the participants will learn event management skills to deliver a community event at the end of the course. Community Development workers from the centre will work alongside the women and share their knowledge, skills and experience of community events to assist the women with planning a delivering a successful event. Women will have the opportunity to apply the skills and knowledge learnt during the course to a practical event aimed at increasing community spirit and cohesion. This example also highlights the benefits that can accrue from strong partnerships forged between TAFE Outreach and the community sector to help vulnerable and disadvantaged people to overcome barriers to mainstream study.

Another example of how our programs work in partnership with TAFE Outreach is the Coffs Harbour Family Support Parents as Mentors initiative. *Parents as Mentors* helps young mothers to build confidence in their parenting skills and knowledge by participating in a TAFE NSW accredited mentoring program. Approximately 10 to 15 mentors train each year in TAFE accredited

courses to enable them to support other disadvantaged families in the playgroups and in the wider community. Notably, 95% of young parents who have participated in the program have gone on to further study and many into full or part-time work. As illustrated in the following case study, we have had three Parents as Mentors come back into the Family Support program to undertake their student placement as part of their TAFE or university studies.

### **Case study**

A young mother, Rebecca, is currently undertaking her TAFE student placement with the Coffs Harbour Family Support Program. She was referred to our program a few years ago after fleeing from Queensland to escape domestic violence. She was socially isolated knowing no one in Coffs Harbour and was tearful when describing her life of physical and emotional abuse. She received support through our supported playgroups and group work courses for women who have experienced living in Domestic Violence.

Rebecca then completed the 10 week *Parents as Mentors* program. She was nominated by our program for the Quota club 'Young Women of achievement Awards' for 2010 for her work supporting other parents in our playgroups. She has gone onto further study at TAFE currently undertaking the Certificate 4 in Community Services Work.

While the full extent of the impact of the cuts on TAFE Outreach is not known, the TAFE South West Sydney Institute cut their provision of Outreach courses by 80% in 2013.

### **Other courses and support for disadvantaged people**

There are a number of other TAFE NSW courses that help vulnerable and disadvantaged people to engage in further education. One example is the HSC Studies course which allows students to complete their HSC in an adult learning environment. We are aware that this course has been cut from TAFE at Randwick. This course provides a second chance for people whose life circumstances prevented them from completing high school education.

TAFE has also worked in partnership with our programs to enable Aboriginal staff to gain skills and formal qualifications. For example:

- On the Central Coast, the UnitingCare Burnside *Brighter Futures* program has worked in partnership with TAFE to provide an opportunity for Aboriginal staff working in the health and community services sector



to gain a formal qualification in the Certificate IV in Community Services. Burnside is providing the venue and TAFE is providing the trainer. Three of the participants are from Burnside and nine are from other services such as an Aboriginal Intensive Family support service, an Aboriginal community housing provider and an Aboriginal medical service.' Research shows that services delivered by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people are likely to be more effective.

- A training program was run in collaboration with TAFE at the Burnside Out-of-Home Care Program in Dubbo, which supported staff, particularly older Aboriginal workers, to improve their literacy and computer literacy skills. The program identified that a number of staff had not received formal literacy and computer skills training, but were cautious to raise concerns based on a fear of being singled out or 'shamed'.
- A TAFE teacher supported staff over a six-month period in weekly sessions. The training was conducted one-on-one with staff and focused on working with forms and templates that staff use in their daily work. The feedback from staff indicated that they valued receiving the training in an environment where they felt comfortable (rather than, for example, going to the TAFE campus) and the opportunity to work privately with the trainer.

Currently, TAFE NSW also provides specialised courses and individual support for vulnerable population groups including Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, people from non-English speaking backgrounds and women. This individual support is crucial in assisting vulnerable people to address barriers which otherwise may prevent their participation.

For people with disabilities, for example, TAFE NSW employs specialist staff, known as Teacher/Consultants for Students with Disabilities, to ensure students with disabilities have equal access to training. Each Teacher/Consultant has expertise in a specific disability area such as hearing impairment, intellectual disability or psychiatric disability. The Teacher/Consultants provide:

- pre-course counselling
- assistance with course selection and enrolment
- assistance to identify the most appropriate classroom support and assessment modifications

- access to tutorial support, adaptive technologies, sign language interpreters, note-takers or disability assistants.

At this point, it is still unclear exactly how the cuts to TAFE NSW will impact on the provision of such courses and individual support to disadvantaged people. However, given the extent of the cuts to the TAFE budget, we would anticipate that there is likely to be a significant reduction in the number of support staff employed to provide specialised support given that they do not have a front-line teaching role. As discussed below, the introduction of a competitive market is also likely to impact adversely on the provision of specialised support services.

### The introduction of a competitive training market

The NSW Government policy on VET training is called *Smart and Skilled* and is set to be implemented in July 2014. The draft framework for *Smart and Skilled* discusses the tender and assessment process at length, including effective contracting, performance monitoring and consumer protection.<sup>1</sup> However, it does not identify the extent or which courses will be put out to tender.

The paper recognises the need to consider '*how a community service obligation may be managed in a contestable market to ensure support for critical government priorities including improving outcomes for groups including Aboriginal people or people with a disability and to ensure access for those in remote areas.*' However, it is unclear how this will be achieved.

Our concern about the tender of TAFE NSW courses to private registered training organisations (RTOs) is the possible impact on both quality and availability that may arise from for-profit RTOs running training courses. This may result in a reduction of teaching hours, and other resources. In particular, courses for highly marginalised people are often highly resource-intensive in nature due to the complex needs of the students and the need to address barriers to their participation such as child care.

It is also questionable whether RTOs will be prepared to invest in infrastructure to deliver face-to-face on-campus training (rather than online

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<sup>1</sup> NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2013, *Smart and Skilled, Draft Quality Framework*, [https://www.training.nsw.gov.au/forms\\_documents/vet/skills\\_reform/draft\\_quality\\_framework.pdf](https://www.training.nsw.gov.au/forms_documents/vet/skills_reform/draft_quality_framework.pdf)

delivery) in rural and regional areas. This can be vital to help people with limited poor literacy and educational build their confidence and competency in a range of core skills. Research highlights the importance of face-to-face delivery and personal contact and support for disadvantaged students.<sup>2</sup>

As discussed previously, provision of individual support services such as literacy support and disability support are also critical in enabling disadvantaged people to overcome barriers to participation in education. We are concerned that RTOs are unlikely to invest to the same extent in these vital support services.

A competitive tendering model for vocational courses exists in Victoria, and has seen TAFE's market share drop below 50% and the cost of courses increase significantly.

Equity objectives are central to the COAG *National Agreement on Skills and Workforce Development*. The Agreement commits all governments to addressing the issue of social inclusion, including responding to Indigenous disadvantage.<sup>3</sup> However, a 2011 review of contestable funding in VET conducted by Allen Consulting Group found that, in general, Commonwealth and state and industry skills council guidelines for contestable funding do not include a significant focus on equity.<sup>4</sup>

### Eligibility for subsidised TAFE Courses

*Smart and Skilled* will introduce an eligibility requirement for subsidisation of courses. It is not yet clear what form this eligibility will take, and how this may impact on vulnerable and disadvantaged people. However, we anticipate that access to 'second chance' education for disadvantaged people will be greatly reduced. A leaked 'cabinet in confidence' document applying to TAFE Sydney Institute has recommended cutting of courses in a number of areas including pre-tertiary training.

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<sup>2</sup> O'Donnell, S. (2005). IT Education for Disadvantaged Students: Lessons from Europe. *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*, 24(3), 23-31, [www.susanodonnell.info/downloads/ODonnell-TandS-05.pdf](http://www.susanodonnell.info/downloads/ODonnell-TandS-05.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Council of Australian Governments, *National Agreement on Skills and Workforce Development*, [www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/skills/skills-reform/national\\_agreement.pdf](http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/skills/skills-reform/national_agreement.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> The Allen Consulting Group, 2011, *Competitive tendering and contestable funding in VET: approaches to supporting access and equity*, Report to National VET Advisory Council, [www.nveac.natase.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/57068/Competitive\\_tendering\\_and\\_contestable\\_funding\\_in\\_VET\\_-\\_approaches\\_to\\_supporting\\_access\\_and\\_equity.pdf](http://www.nveac.natase.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/57068/Competitive_tendering_and_contestable_funding_in_VET_-_approaches_to_supporting_access_and_equity.pdf)

## Conclusion

Education, including 'second chance' and further education, is one of the most effective pathways out of poverty and disadvantage. A good education system, which includes a strong focus on access and equity issues, is critical in creating a more socially inclusive society.

The cuts to TAFE in NSW and the introduction of a market-driven service for those with capacity to pay threaten to undermine a number of COAG and Federal Government policy objectives.

Any reduction in the availability of courses provided by Outreach, the HSC Studies course and individual support for vulnerable students, would hinder the Federal Government's policy objectives for moving parents from welfare to work and supporting teenage mothers to complete their Year 12 education.

Similarly, any reduction in investment in specialised courses and support for Aboriginal students will impede the COAG policy goal to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and other Australians by 2018.

## Further information

UnitingCare CYPF would be pleased to provide further information at the public hearings being held for the Inquiry. We anticipate that by the time the hearings take place we would be able to provide additional information on how the cuts to TAFE in NSW are impacting on disadvantaged people in the urban and regional areas that we work. To arrange this, or if you have any queries regarding our submission, please contact Romola Hollywood, Manager Social Policy and Advocacy on