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JE

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this Inquiry into the role of Technical and Further Education System and its operation. I believe that the experience I have gained while working as a Teacher Consultant for students with physical disabilities and medical conditions has provided me with insight into how TAFE is meeting the needs of disadvantaged students in NSW. I am happy for the information below to be made public and trust that it is of some value to this inquiry.

For over 30 years TAFE NSW has engaged the services of Equity Coordinators, specialist Adult Basic Education Teachers and Teacher Consultants to service the needs of disadvantaged students which includes; Aboriginal students, CALD students, students with low levels of language, literacy and numeracy and students who have a disability. The success of these Teachers, Coordinators and Consultants in supporting disadvantaged students to undertake TAFE courses is evident in the large number of people in NSW who have successfully gained skills and gone on to secure employment.

I could provide many examples of how TAFE NSW has fundamentally changed the lives of people who have disabilities but I realise that you have limited time to read each submission. For this reason, I ask that you take the couple of minutes needed to click on the link below and watch the short video clip that tells the story of one of the students I have worked with recently.

<http://youtu.be/Uqg-iGoTto>

Obviously, there is a cost associated with providing VET programs and specialist support to disadvantaged students but it should be noted that since this DVD was filmed the student concerned has secured employment and is no longer reliant on the Disability Support Pension.

It is my understanding that in 2012 Access Economics, through a study commissioned by NVEAC, calculated the cost of providing benefits to support one individual over an average life time to be well in excess of \$1M per person. Therefore, when implementing change in the VET sector it is essential to consider the cost of providing support to disadvantaged students against the cost of NOT providing students with the support that they need to develop skills and to gain employment. However, it is also essential to also consider the human cost of change to VET programs as well as any cost benefit analysis.

At a community consultation I attended on "Smart and Skilled" in November 2011 training providers present were asked how they would accommodate for the disadvantaged. The response given by one representative of a private RTO seated at my table was "my company cannot afford to cater for the needs of everyone" and from another "we don't have people trained to work with people like that". Therefore, it is apparent that some RTOs believe that they should be able to cherry pick

candidates for their courses and that they have no community service obligations. Does this mean that under “Smart and Skilled” VET providers will be able to apply for tax payer funds to run VET programs but will be able to discriminate against people who have a disability or are in any other way disadvantaged?

The recognised failure of VET reform in Victoria has clearly demonstrated that policies and procedures need to be put in place to protect the quality of VET programs and to ensure access to VET programs for all before any changes are implemented.

While TAFE, as the public provider of VET, has almost disappeared into oblivion in Victoria, TAFE NSW currently has over 550,000 students enrolled on an annual basis of which 6%, or 33,000, are students who have a disability. However, if VET in NSW is allowed to follow the same path as Victoria it is inevitable that disadvantaged people will have less and less access to vocational training programs. It is certainly going to be interesting to monitor the statistics on VET enrolments and outcomes of people from equity groups for 2014 and beyond and compare these to the statistics provided in the TAFE NSW Annual reports for 2007 – 2011.

Therefore, if funds from the public purse are to be made available in a contestable market to private RTOs through “Smart and Skilled” it is essential that training providers are not able to discriminate against disadvantaged students wishing to access training programs. The question this raises is, what policies and procedures have been developed by both the NSW State Government and the Commonwealth Government to be incorporated into the tender process and documents to ensure that disadvantaged people will not be discriminated against by RTOs when VET reform is implemented in July 2014 in NSW and do these policies reflect relevant discrimination legislation and standards, eg the DDA 1992 and the Disability Standards for Education?

Also, as evident in the DVD, sometimes students need to be provided with pre course training in the use of inclusive technology to enable them to undertake a course of study and to do this in a way that will enhance their independence and prepare them not just for a VET course but also for future employment. In the new contestable market, what provision will be made to enable people who have disabilities to have access to the equipment needed to undertake courses and the training needed to use this equipment?

In addition to this, a large number of the students I have worked with over the years are people who have sustained an injury later in life, those who have degenerative conditions and those who have developed medical conditions such as heart or kidney disease. Many of these individuals have come to TAFE NSW because they are no longer able to work in the industry where they have been working in the same capacity. They are people who are looking to retrain so they can return to full or part time employment. What is going to be done to guarantee such individuals the opportunity to retrain

and to secure the support needed and will students still be able to undertake courses on a modified basis over a longer period of time when needed to accommodate for their particular needs?

Although "Smart and Skilled" will not be implemented in NSW until July 2014 it is evident that some TAFE Institutes are already looking at ways of saving on costs and have earmarked a number of the Equity Coordinator positions for deletion. This includes, the deletion of Co-ordinator positions to provide support to students from Non English Speaking Backgrounds, (IMAC Positions) in some institutes and deletion of Co-ordinator positions to develop and implement courses for disadvantaged and disengaged people, (Outreach Positions) in other institutes. In addition to this, several Equity positions are not being filled when staff members retire or are being filled on a temporary or contract basis.

Also, in some institutes specialist Teacher Consultants for students who have disabilities have been turned into general positions and staff are now expected to meet the needs of all students with all types of disabilities irrespective of their area of expertise.

Budgets provided to many Equity units have also been cut which means that there is less support available to meet the needs of students who have disabilities, are Aboriginal or are from a CALD background who are undertaking mainstream vocational courses and access courses previously offered through Equity Units can now only be offered if they are going to generate an income to cover the cost of course delivery.

One example of this is a TAFE NSW institute where students who have an intellectual disability are now required to pay \$1,000 plus to undertake a 3 hour per week access course aimed at assisting them to develop the skills needed to be able to gain entry into mainstream VET courses. Individuals do not have the means to pay are therefore now being denied the opportunity to develop the skills needed to enter vocational courses and to gain skills that may lead them to employment.

As an alternative, in some institutes, Equity Staff now have to approach vocational sections and ask these sections to provide the funds needed to run discrete courses for students who have disabilities. However, this new way of funding access programs is not being met favourably by the vocational sections concerned because this is leaving them with lesser funds available to offer other VET courses.

In 2013 all funding for ESOL courses has been cut in one institute and in another there will be a 50 % cut to the budget to run ESOL courses with no indication of how such programs will be funded in 2014 when NSW moves to entitlement based funding model. Individuals from CALD backgrounds

will therefore find it more and more difficult to develop the level of literacy in English needed to gain employment or advance in their careers.

In another TAFE NSW institute Teacher Consultants for students who have disabilities have been told that they are no longer able to travel to interview students. They are now required to conduct interviews over the phone or via video conference. While Teacher Consultants do communicate on an on-going basis with students via the phone and or video conference it is essential that they have the opportunity to meet the students on a face to face basis as a first point of contact to determine their level of need and to discuss support options. This is especially important in assessing the needs of students with a physical disability as need for assistive/adaptive/ergonomic equipment is based on the specific needs of the individual and/or in assessing the needs of people who have a mental illness.

However, it is often at the initial face to face interview that TAFE NSW Teacher Consultants are able to identify if an individual is pursuing vocational goals that are inappropriate and use this opportunity to encourage them to follow a different career path. If Teacher Consultants have to rely on the information provided to them by a potential student over the phone it is to be expected that more and more people will end up in the wrong VET courses and as a consequence many will lose out on the opportunity and their entitlement to undertake appropriate training.

In another institute it has been suggested that Teacher Consultants for students who have disabilities should be using non-government agencies such as Vision Australia to undertake assessments of students support needs. While such agencies are well equipped to provide support and assistance to people who have disabilities they do not engage professionals with skills and expertise in Vocational Education and Training.

In addition to this, as funding for many non-government agencies is outcomes based some services have a history of enrolling people in inappropriate VET courses just to secure a placement and the outcome they need. Without the necessary input from Teacher Consultants many more people who have disabilities in NSW will be open to exploitation by agencies driven by the goal to derive funds from placing people in VET courses irrespective of the appropriateness of the placement.

In the alternative, DES providers and community agencies are becoming frustrated in their efforts to access appropriate entry level training for their clients as lower level courses are no longer being offered by TAFE NSW. Therefore, they feel that there is no alternative but to enrol their clients in higher level courses and hope that the Teacher Consultants will be able to provide the student with the level of support needed to complete the course. The reality is that while many individuals would

be able to complete a Cert II course or above many need to develop skills from entry level courses first to lay the foundation for progression and success at a higher level.

The prospect of funding being tied to student outcomes is leading some vocational teachers to question the enrolment of some students from equity groups because they fear that the students may not complete a course of study and that this will impact on their ability to achieve outcomes and thereby derive the funds needed to finance their section on an ongoing basis. Therefore, the potential of many people from equity groups to undertake vocational courses and to gain employment is being undermined by VET reform as this is encouraging discrimination at a very personal level.

One means of accommodating for the needs of students who have disabilities, eg. students with a spinal injury, has been to enable such students to undertake a course of study over an extended period of time, ie over 12 months rather than over 6 months. Unfortunately, while this has worked really well, some vocational teachers are also now reluctant to allow students with disabilities the option of undertaking a course on a reduced program over an extended timeframe because this will reduce completion rates, (or outcomes), and the level of funds going to the section.

What this demonstrates is that even before “Smart and Skilled” is implemented in NSW people who have disabilities, or are disadvantaged in some way, are already open to discrimination. One can only anticipate that it will become harder and harder for individuals who are disadvantaged to gain access to programs and appropriate support once the NSW Government implements “Smart and Skilled” unless, as I stated above, policies and procedures are put in place that will prevent this from occurring.

There is also talk of additional funding or a loading being provided under “Smart and Skilled” to support students who have disabilities as part of their entitlement for training. But who will be eligible for this support, how will they access this, who will determine the level of support a student is eligible to receive etc etc.?

Recently I was asked to put a figure on how much it costs to provide support to assist students who have physical disabilities and/or medical conditions. The problem with such a question is that there appears to be an assumption that all students who have disabilities need the same level and type of support. People who have disabilities are no different to anyone else. They are individuals who have personal interests, strengths, aspirations, skills and experiences although I would have to say that many have a level of determination and tenacity that is lacking in the general population.

In conclusion, I would like to state that a nation is generally measured by how it regards and treats its most disadvantaged people. Changes to organisations, such as TAFE, that threaten the means by

which disadvantaged people can access basic human rights have the potential not only to undermine equity and fairness in our society but also the way that Australia is regarded throughout the world.

Yours sincerely

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