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**Submission to the
House Standing Committee on Education and
Employment**

on the

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

18 April 2013

Deaf Australia is pleased to have the opportunity to make this submission to the House Standing Committee on Education and Employment Inquiry into the role of Technical and Further Education System and its operation.

The TAFE system or the VET system has evolved into a national system that drives the national economy by ensuring the national workforce has the appropriate skills to work in a wide range of industries. Deaf Australia believes that the VET system and more broadly large TAFE Institutes are very well placed to provide the necessary supports to enhance the training experience of students who are Deaf and hard of hearing.

For decades now TAFE has played a vital role in the education of people who are deaf. Many deaf people have not fared well in the school education system, not because they cannot be educated but because the system still does not meet their needs. This has meant that for many, university education has been unattainable. TAFE, however, has offered real opportunities and pathways to employment.

Deaf people are as keen as their hearing peers to develop the skills required to work in jobs that interest them, and they are able to develop these skills if given appropriate support. Deaf people who are employed are able to contribute to the Australian economy and society along with their hearing peers. It may be more costly to provide the support to enable them to acquire vocational skills, but this pays off long term because it keeps them out of the welfare support system and in gainful employment.

Over the years, some regions of the TAFE system, and even specific colleges within regions, have met the needs of Deaf students better than others.

In general, the types of support that Deaf people need include:

- bridging or preparation courses to supplement their school education to a level that enables them to study vocational courses;
- Auslan interpreting;
- Live captioning;
- Note taking;
- Tutoring designed specifically for Deaf students;
- Assistive listening devices.

In recent years, state governments, particularly Victoria and more recently NSW, have made dramatic changes to their state training systems by introducing contestability and student co-contributions and loan schemes to supplement dwindling state budgets. These changes are keenly observed by other states to determine whether or not these changes improve the system and continue to drive the state and national economy.

Deaf Australia and its state branches have become increasingly concerned about the implications of these changes for Deaf and hard of hearing students, particularly for the following groups:

- school leavers;
- mature age students who are long term unemployed;
- mature age students who want to become better educated and skilled.

Like other Australians, each of these groups of deaf people wants to improve their own economic and employment prospects and, for some, to move off the welfare system.

Deaf Australia has collected some real life stories and experiences of Deaf and hard of hearing adults who are navigating their way through this rapidly changing system and there

are reports that these changes are having an adverse effect on opportunities and accessibility for individuals to participate equally with their hearing counterparts.

Changes include budget cuts, changes to course eligibility, and privatisation of VET to name a few. These changes will move Deaf students away from becoming employable or improving their career prospects and will move them back into the welfare system, which will place a larger economic burden on the nation.

Some of the issues that are reported by members of Deaf Australia include:

1. Disability support funding

Deaf Australia knows that some 85% of deaf school students are educated in the mainstream either in regular classrooms across the state or in specialist facilities which provide specialist communication support to enable these students to participate in regular classes. The other 15% are educated in specialist deaf schools. From this statistic, it makes sense to assume that the majority of deaf school leavers would go on to take up post-secondary education through TAFE, university or a private training organisation.

Deaf school students have access to specialist support, the minimum being part-time access to a specialist teacher of the deaf on a regular basis. The role of this professional is to educate regular teaching staff and to support the academic and social outcomes of the deaf student. The belief is that once students graduate from school, each individual will be able to self-advocate in a mainstream setting and manage a post-secondary education without support.

However, given the very nature of deafness, many deaf young people do not develop sufficient communication, networking or advocacy skills to manage dealing with and communicating with a range of individuals in TAFE. The challenge of a system that requires them to **beg** to receive specialist assistance in order to be educated is often too big a hurdle for these students. They also grapple with how to explain their learning and support needs to the average TAFE teacher. TAFE teachers also tend to have a preconceived idea about how to teach a deaf student and may automatically assume that the individual cannot or should not participate in their class.

While it is admirable that there is a requirement for all TAFE teachers to hold the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAE10), there is nothing in that qualification that deals with the training needs of deaf students let alone students with a disability. Many people also assume that general disability training (which often covers physical access but not communication access) is sufficient for individuals. Therefore many TAFE teachers have a very narrow view of how to support deaf students and how to assess them against the benchmarks of training packages

As can be expected there are very few regular TAFE teachers who have the skills (e.g. Auslan skills) or the understanding to support deaf students directly. Therefore there are huge resourcing issues for disability staff in TAFE Institutes to ensure students are able to receive support to enable them to have equal access and opportunity to receive a qualification. Support needs for some disability groups (e.g. technical assistance or carer support) are often far less costly than employing note takers or Auslan interpreters to facilitate communication in the classroom for deaf students.

Deaf students who enrol in TAFE have varying degrees of hearing loss; students with a severe or profound hearing loss will face huge challenges in managing their participation in a classroom without some form of communication support. The following link will provide an

idea of what it is like to hear in a classroom and to try and lipread a teacher:

http://www.nmit.edu.au/about/centre_of_excellence/dvds_and_multimedia/navigating_tafe/

The cost of note taking is lower than the cost of interpreting, both on a per hour basis and because one note taker can work alone whereas often two interpreters are required to work as a team. Occupational Health and Safety requirements generally mean that for assignments longer than two hours, two interpreters are required; however, some flexibility is possible, for example if the intensity of the assignment allows the interpreter to have sufficient breaks then one interpreter may be acceptable.

Note takers are not an equal substitute for interpreters. Deaf people who use Auslan generally need interpreters for all classes, regardless of whether it is a theory or practical class. An interpreter enables them to access information from teachers and other students and to participate with their own comments and questions. A note taker enables them to receive information from teachers and other students but not to participate with their own comments and questions. Sometimes Deaf students need both interpreters and note takers at the same time, depending on their particular situation.

Support services have always been limited. Recent funding cuts have meant that supports have been reduced further. This is particularly the case with higher level courses where two interpreters are required. Lower level courses often have only one interpreter due to the slower pace of the classes at lower levels meaning that the interpreter's working conditions are less intensive and more conducive to rest breaks.

As an example of costs, the cost of providing Auslan interpreters in a TAFE class in Victoria can be as high as \$25,000 for a course that is 20 hours a week over 6 months. If the student requires the assistance of a note taker, the cost could be as high as \$9,000. Therefore for a student who needs both Auslan interpreting and note-taking, an investment of \$34,000 per student is required to ensure that student is able to participate fully in the course of study.

Many TAFE Institutes balk at this expense to their bottom line. State governments are making drastic cuts to disability expenditure in TAFE. At the same time, TAFE Institutes are expected to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and the subsequent Education Standards. There is clearly little understanding or recognition that this investment eventually reduces the long term costs to the national economy. This short-sighted view displayed by these funding cuts is hurting deaf people and their ability to participate equally in education through a refusal to provide adequate communication support.

Natalie's story

Some three years ago Natalie decided to enrol in a Yoga Teacher Training course and contacted the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) in Melbourne to discuss enrolment in a two-year part time course. The course would cost her \$10,000 over two years. She was informed that due to limited funding, CAE could not provide full interpreter access.

After several years of trying to negotiate provision of interpreters, Natalie sought advice from the Disability Discrimination Legal Service (DDLS), who advised that CAE indeed had adequate funds to cover the cost of Auslan interpreters. CAE claimed they could only provide up to \$6,000 per year in funding for interpreters when the total cost would have been approximately \$58,000 over two years.

While still negotiating her support needs, Natalie enrolled in the class, went through the interview process and was accepted into the course. CAE, who were now in partnership with Box Hill TAFE advised at the last minute that they could only provide a note taker for the theory component of the course and just one interpreter for the full-day practicum.

The course began in February 2013 and CAE would still not provide the level of support that Natalie needs so she had to withdraw from the course.

Natalie then took her issue to the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) and attended a conciliation meeting with support from a lawyer from the DDLS. Box Hill TAFE/CAE slightly improved their offer: in addition to an interpreter they would also provide a note taker for the practical classes to replace the interpreter when he/she was on a break; they would still only provide a note taker for the theory classes. Natalie disagrees as this is a fee-paying course and to access it on an almost equal footing with her hearing peers, two professional level Auslan interpreters for both the Theory and Practicum would be needed.

At the time of writing, Natalie is awaiting another, final, offer from CAE/Box Hill TAFE.

Stephen's Story

Stephen has recently completed his Certificate IV in Auslan and is currently studying a Diploma in Community Services and Case Management.

He is hearing impaired and found it difficult in the TAFE environment to get decent FM equipment to be able to hear teachers in the classroom environment whilst not hearing every other student speaking at the same time.

Stephen has returned the ancient FM equipment that TAFE supplied to him as it did not improve his learning experience. He is currently also not using hearing aids in the classroom as they amplify everything that is said at the same time by other students as well as the teacher, and this is disorientating.

He has found that while teachers are understanding, they are not very proactive in the learning place towards the needs of hearing impaired students. From his perspective, most teachers react with an overall exasperation that his hearing impairment means they have to do more work, such as wearing an FM system and ensuring it is operating, or turning on the captions when a DVD they are using has captions.

In addition, few of the DVDs used in the learning environment actually have captions that make them accessible for deaf / hearing impaired students. Stephen believes that not enough funding is being provided to support hearing impaired students.

2. Skill sets of Auslan interpreters and note takers

Each state jurisdiction has slightly different TAFE systems and this impacts on the level of skill the support staff engaged to support students have when they are working in an educational setting.

A minimum qualification of NAATI para-professional level qualification is required for Auslan interpreters to work in TAFE, due to the reduced funding allocations to TAFE compared to Higher Education. This means that more highly experienced interpreters who are best suited to interpret in TAFE seek work elsewhere. The Auslan interpreters engaged are often new graduates straight out of interpreter training programs. The para-professional qualification represents:

*A level of competence in interpreting for the purpose of general conversations.
Paraprofessional Interpreters generally undertake the interpretation of non-specialist*

dialogues. Practitioners at this level are encouraged to proceed to the professional levels of accreditation.

Source:

http://www.caldgroup.com.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=67&Itemid=97

It is a travesty that new graduates are coming into the TAFE industry and interpreting complex subject materials for industries such as:

- Automotive Engineering
- Community Services
- Information Technology
- Child care
- Hospitality and Tourism
- General Education

Poor quality support services means students are less able to learn well and develop good skills.

3. Lack of choice in courses studied

There is a disability funding criterion within TAFE, whereby deaf students who wish to undertake short courses to develop their own hobbies and interests are not provided with support services as there is no perceived vocational benefit. This is a short sighted view. The benefits of access to short courses are many:

- Social inclusion and mental wellbeing. Deaf people are at risk of being socially isolated. Being involved in hobbies and participating in society enhances mental wellbeing and reduces reliance on the welfare system.
- Career change. For many individuals hobbies can lead to vocational opportunities and can lead to career change.
- Classroom diversity. Deaf people bring diversity to the classroom which benefits everyone as people learn to engage with others and the visibility of deaf people doing things alongside others reduces ignorance and social barriers.

In addition, funding cuts have now led to Deaf students being 'encouraged' to study courses that they do not really want to study and this is particularly concerning for young school leavers who aspire to a certain career and are told that due to funding cuts this will not be possible. Such 'encouragement' happens if the course the student wants to study would require two interpreters.

Case study

A student who wants to study fitness training being pushed into business studies instead because that is a flexible learning class with only one interpreter required to work with several Deaf students.

4. Lack of courses to improve Deaf people's language, literacy and study skills

Recent national research revealed that deaf students are still leaving school with a reading age well below the average of their hearing peers. This is regardless of the method of

instruction (Auslan or speech) used to educate them. One of the largest changes to the TAFE system has been the increased emphasis on language and literacy skills for all industries. In addition, there is now a requirement across many industries for a minimum Certificate IV qualification to obtain gainful employment.

Deaf Australia recognises that poor literacy skills are not just an issue for deaf adults; many other minority groups face these same barriers to education and employment due to poor literacy. The concern for Deaf Australia is that millions of dollars in government funding is being spent on resolving this issue for many groups but none of this funding is targeting deaf learners.

Organisations such as the Centre of Excellence for Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing at NMIT have written submissions to obtain literacy funding from available funding programs to no avail due to the small numbers and the difficulty in ensuring sustainability across industries. This is a huge disappointment for Deaf Australia.

There appears to be an underlying assumption that deaf people are just deaf and cannot hear. For many that is certainly the case, but for others who have received poor school education there are issues that impact on their ability to read and write. The crux of this is that deaf people cannot hear **incidental conversation** in the home, school or place of work. If a deaf person is not told something directly, they will often not know until much later or never at all. 70% of learning is incidental and through dialogue; if that is not accessible, then how does a person learn the contextual information that is out there and available to hearing people?

This gap is what is different for deaf literacy learners and hearing literacy learners. Hearing learners they have that context, and can hear outside of class. Deaf people cannot so literacy support tailored to hearing people is not suited to the deaf learner and until the sector receives funding, many deaf people will not have access to the literacy training they so desperately need.

In the past, many TAFE colleges have had classes specifically for Deaf people, modified to suit their learning needs and improve their English, and in the case of Deaf migrants, improve their Auslan skills. With funding cuts, these courses and others such as basic computer skills and basic communication skills required for further study and employment are now disappearing.

5. Impact of restructures and funding changes on deaf students

Both Victoria and NSW TAFE systems operate as a contestable market which is designed to put TAFE on a level playing field with the private training sector. Deaf Australia sees many benefits in this approach including the opening up of training opportunities for deaf people in the private sector.

However, traditionally the private market has not embraced the opportunity to invest in diversity or to invest in student support as outlined in previous sections of this submission. There is a risk that many courses will go to private colleges, where there is no chance of Deaf students getting support in terms of Auslan interpreters for the Auslan users and a note taker and/or captioning for those who do not use Auslan.

Restructures involving merging and cutting courses and course hours have resulted in overcrowding of some classes and content taught in fewer hours. This means that the learning needs of Deaf students are affected with less individual attention provided to assist them in learning more difficult concepts. Many classes are now quite complex and the class

pace is too fast for Deaf students to be able to understand the content. As a result, many Deaf students are close to failing subjects that they need to pass to complete their respective courses. This adds to the failure of the system to support students who are disadvantaged through not being able to receive tailored and properly funded support to meet the needs of the individual and ultimately reduce their welfare dependence and drain on the economy.

6. Changes to requirements for staff qualifications – impact on Deaf students

It has been reported to Deaf Australia that some people working as disability support staff are being culled from the TAFE system on the grounds that their qualifications are insufficient. We do not have enough information to comment on this at length other than the following case study that was reported to us.

Case study

There has been a cull of many teachers working with students with disabilities due to their qualifications deemed as inappropriate to enable them to conduct learner support lessons including with deaf students. At a particular TAFE Institute, there are only two teachers qualified to provide learner support for deaf. One of these teachers struggles to find someone to support the students in terms of learner support lessons. Recently she has been told that funding is not guaranteed for the long term to support deaf students at TAFE.

7. Disadvantaged students find it difficult to complain

State governments are adamant that TAFE Institutes can absorb the costs of providing support to students with a disability and comply with the Disability Discrimination Act (1992). However, in many instances they seem to assume that students will not complain and test the system. Deaf Australia is aware that many deaf people generally find it difficult to make complaints when services do not meet their needs. For those that do, the onus is on them to prove discrimination and there is pressure to accept an inadequate conciliation which does not provide them with access.

English literacy and lack of self-advocacy skills makes it very difficult for students to believe they have a right to complain and it is very difficult for individuals to argue when staff say “there is no money to support you”. There has been no case in court to test these complaints but many have been conciliated under the DDA but are not made public due to confidentiality clauses being signed.

Deaf people also lack confidence in ‘hearing’ environments requiring formal complaints in English and find it difficult to understand and follow formal complaint processes. The additional pressures they are finding themselves in within the current TAFE situation is exacerbating this and further reducing their ability to complain.

8. The provision of Auslan training courses

In addition to all of these issues outlined above that directly impact Deaf students of TAFE Institutes, the Closure of and lack of courses to develop the Auslan interpreting workforce impacts on Deaf people generally, in addition to TAFE students who are deaf.

If they do not already have fluent Auslan skills, hearing people who wish to become Auslan interpreters need first to study Auslan, and TAFE has long been the best place to do this. Some TAFE Institutes have also had interpreting courses for those who have obtained an Auslan qualification.

However, while it is vital to Deaf people, the Auslan interpreting industry is a relatively small industry and so these courses attract small numbers of students, making them less attractive for TAFE Institutes to offer. Recent cuts in these courses is already having an impact on the interpreting industry, with an employer of Auslan Interpreters across Australia reporting that the volume of newly trained and accredited interpreters has diminished considerably since the closure of the Auslan course at Kangan Batman TAFE.

There is a need for more innovative ways to deliver these courses, for example:

- the development of E-Learning materials designed for distance learners of Auslan who want to gain Certificate(s) II, III & IV in Auslan (22075VIC, 22077VIC & 22078VIC) and/or Diploma in Auslan (22081VIC). Many potential learners of Auslan who live in regional or remote areas of Australia have experience learning non-accredited Auslan short courses but have no access to a formal course of study in Auslan.
- delivery of accredited Auslan courses online Australia-wide. The flexible delivery mode could be blended learning (face-to-face classroom and course online delivery) or eLearning only.

In Victoria there is currently a tender process underway and the expected provider/s must innovate ways to ensure Auslan training is more accessible to everyone in Victoria using e-learning and blended delivery modes. The concern is that we will face the same problem nationally as Victoria experienced, which was largely due to market failure and the challenges of a niche training program surviving in a contestable market?

(http://www.nmit.edu.au/pdf/centre_of_excellence/nmit_Review_of_Auslan_Training_and_Delivery_in_Victoria_Exec_Summary.pdf).

Fiona's story

Fiona was studying the Diploma of Auslan at Kangan Institute in Melbourne in 2012 and was due to finish at the end of 2013. Because of cuts in government funding to Victorian TAFE colleges, the course at Kangan resulted in being fast tracked and she had to complete the course in April 2013 rather than December 2013. The fees were raised to a sum which she could not afford.

Although she was determined to complete her Diploma, she could not stay at Kangan as she could not afford to pay the fees so she decided to make the move to Perth to study Auslan at Central Institute of Technology. Her decision to move there has not been fulfilling and she is extremely disappointed in the course there as she believes it is not of the same high standard as the Melbourne course.

Fiona was told that Centrelink provide a lump sum payment of up to \$5,000 to students moving interstate to study. When she consulted Centrelink about this, they replied that this payment is only for *university* students. Fiona asks: why do TAFE students get all the cuts and no benefits?

So due to the TAFE system, Fiona has had to uproot her life entirely for very little benefit. And because the course in Perth is not of the same standard as the course at Kangan, she does not believe that she will be fluent in Auslan by the end of the year. So her involvement in the TAFE system has been overall very disappointing.

About Deaf Australia

Deaf Australia Incorporated was established in 1986 by members of the Australian Deaf Community. It represents the views primarily of Deaf people who use Auslan (Australian Sign Language) as their primary or preferred language. It is a true Disabled Person's Organisation – it is the only national organisation that is wholly managed and controlled by Deaf people themselves.

Deaf Australia provides information about Deaf people and practices systemic advocacy on a range of issues of importance to Deaf people of all ages, from birth to old age.

We work with Australian governments and collaborate with key stakeholders to ensure that Australia complies with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

For further information or to discuss this submission, please contact:

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