



Charity gives, justice changes.

16<sup>th</sup> April 2013

Dear Minister,

Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service (GSYFS) is pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the House Standing Committee on Education and Employment regarding the Inquiry into the role of Technical and Further Education system and its operation.

#### About us

GSYFS is a well-established Melbourne based community service organisation; we work with disadvantaged young people, women and their families. We provide a range of individual and community capacity-building programs including financial counselling and microfinance, emergency accommodation, family support and family violence responses. Our Social Policy Research Unit has conducted action research into the emerging needs of our communities; recent projects include the impacts of microfinance, how women can rebuild after family violence, how economic abuse can be prevented, the financial education needs of disadvantaged women, and stories of young people disengaged from schooling.

#### The significance of TAFE to the people we work with

For disadvantaged Australians accessing TAFE courses has life-changing impacts. Across our services we observe the positive life changes in the parents, young people and women that we support to access TAFE courses.

Every day we work with people who have had few life opportunities and turn to TAFE courses as a way out of their current situation. They know, as we do, that economic participation is a key to long-term positive life outcomes and that gaining a vocational qualification is a vital step along this path.

In this submission we will present several case studies<sup>1</sup> that specifically address the following two terms of reference:

- 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.

These case studies show both how Australians improve themselves through TAFE, and how access to other services and supports is vital to successful TAFE experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> All case studies have been de-identified to protect individuals and are therefore able to be made publically available.

## TAFE breaks life trajectories of disadvantage

With the right supports, TAFE can enable anyone, regardless of their background to gain a qualification that gives them a passport to economic and social participation.

*Stephanie is a 23 year old single mother of three children aged 5, 4 & 12 months. She is supported through a transitional housing program, before which she and her children were homeless for over a year. Stephanie had a very difficult upbringing, running away from home in early adolescence and then being placed in out-of-home care. During these years she did not attend high school and consequently now has low self-belief in her abilities, in her own words: "I am stupid, I am illiterate". However, she has recently applied to attend a TAFE trade course in Carpentry and was accepted. Stephanie was able to access funding for single mothers to attend TAFE, without which she would not be able to take up this opportunity. Stephanie is attending the course consistently and for first time she has a brighter vision for her future. Stephanie plans to gain employment and subsequently transition off welfare payments. This will assist in her plan to secure a private rental property rather than be waiting for public housing, hence enhancing a positive future for her children.*

Stephanie's story shows how TAFE access can provide an opportunity to increase life and employment prospects. It also demonstrates some of the theory of change behind these outcomes: building confidence, providing achievable steps, replacing the previous negative self-image with one of competence, and being a valued social contributor as a student and then employee, private housing tenant, and good role model for her children.

Our experience delivering support programs in disadvantaged communities makes it clear to us that associated funding support and other holistic services are required to ensure access to TAFE for those seeking to turn their life around through education and training. This includes the TAFE system providing vocational support workers at each TAFE who can facilitate careers pathways and counselling.

**Recommendation: That holistic support services are fully funded to ensure that disadvantaged Australians are not excluded from the TAFE system.**

## TAFE is there when mainstream school fails

TAFE provides a second chance for those young people who become disengaged from schooling early. However, for young people who are financially and socially disadvantaged additional funding and support is required to secure this opportunity.

*Brad is a 16 year old male struggling in alternative education after losing interest in his previous mainstream school which he found too academically oriented. Brad was victim to bullying at that school. Brad was assessed as eligible for 'job ready' courses in TAFE and is being supported to attend a local TAFE through the VCAL program. However, the TAFE fees are too high for Brad, even the Concession fee is quite expensive at \$198.00 per semester, plus TAFE identification costs. Our case manager was able to secure funding through a scholarship scheme outside of the TAFE system. Without this he would not have been able to attend. Brad is actively engaged with his TAFE course and his prospects now look good for future employment.*

Brad's story highlights how young adults on a very low income can access TAFE to create opportunities for themselves. It also highlights the brokerage work of community organisations in securing Brad additional funding support. VCAL and its linkages with other school systems are also vital for young adults such as Brad.

VCAL at TAFE provides alternative learning opportunities for young people who have left school early. Many young people, especially those who have had a disadvantaged upbringing, thrive in a more adult environment that TAFE offers. Once a young person has left mainstream schooling early their options are limited and their education often stops at that point, severely limiting future employability. Additional supports should be funded to ensure that young people can access this second chance. VCAL programs provide a unique alternative learning environment that successfully engages disadvantaged young people who have left school early.

**Recommendation: That VCAL continue to be offered by TAFE providers.**

### **Current TAFE funding cuts are thwarting positive life goals**

Unfortunately there are many other disadvantaged individuals who are unable to reach even the simple first step of starting a TAFE course, despite their motivation.

*Rachel is a woman who has had a traumatic up-bringing, but has regained confidence to do further study after participation in our volunteer support program. Rachel has always wanted to work with animals and with support she applied to do a Vet nursing course at TAFE. Rachel was accepted into the course which lifted her confidence and motivation. She was subsequently notified that the TAFE had dropped this particular course as result of funding cuts. Rachel was extremely disappointed with this news and has not regained motivation to try anything else at this point.*

Rachel's story highlights that role that TAFE can play in assisting vulnerable people in building motivation. Women too use TAFE as an entry point to a second chance in life and a sufficient range of courses needs to be maintained so that women are not excluded.

**Recommendation: That a diverse range of courses continue to be offered by TAFE providers in order to provide pathways to both social and economic inclusion.**

### **TAFE is now out of reach for some young people**

The current TAFE cuts have had significant negative impact on a number of the disadvantaged individuals we work with.

*Arie has been looking for a job for about a year and currently receives Newstart Allowance. Arie would like to enrol in TAFE to become a cabinetmaker however he simply cannot afford the upfront costs. There is a \$700 a downpayment for her TAFE course and then about \$400 for textbooks and tools. Arie is not eligible for an Advance Payment from Centrelink, as he is currently paying off an Advance Payment that he took out to cover the costs associated with looking after his young son. Even if Arie were eligible for an Advance Payment, the maximum amount he could receive would be \$500, which is not enough to cover his TAFE fees and associated costs. For Arie, accessing TAFE is out of reach.*

Arie's story illustrates how TAFE can be out of reach for those who cannot afford the upfront costs. Disadvantaged people who are doing it tough should not be excluded from TAFE because of fees. Our secondary school system is currently failing to adequately lift the educational outcomes of children from low income backgrounds. We are a country of unacceptably low educational equity in the primary and secondary schooling systems. Although there is potential for the 'Gonski Review' recommendations to eventually correct this trend, it is our vocational and tertiary system that must, for the foreseeable future, deliver equity within our education system. However, the success of TAFE as a pathway to employment for those from disadvantaged backgrounds is dependent on public policy that ensures courses are accessible, for all Australians.

**Recommendation: That adequate concession arrangements be available so that fees and materials are not out of reach for those seeking to enrol in TAFE.**

### Education and training options for single mothers

On many measures of financial hardship, single mothers are the most disadvantaged group in Australia. Providing pathways to economic participation is critically important for this group.

*Kirsten is a single mother who has just completed a basic Certificate in Social Welfare Studies at TAFE. Upon completion of this first course Kirsten identified the goal of continuing her studies with an Associate Diploma. This further study would greatly enhance Kirsten's employability. However, Kirsten cannot afford the course fees so she remains in limbo, unable to complete the next level and unsure whether to enter the workforce with the basic course.*

Kirsten's story highlights the struggle of single mothers surviving on low incomes. TAFE courses are becoming unaffordable for the most disadvantaged group and Kirsten's story illustrates how her pathways to economic participation are inhibited simply because of course fees. The situation of many single mothers is deteriorating due to income support payments being too low, and in fact is being actively reduced by the shift from Sole Parent Payment to Newstart Allowance. TAFE providers must ensure that they continue to provide opportunities for to overcome past disadvantage, fees and costs do hinder single mother's ability to enhance their economic participation. There is a danger that the positive achievements of the TAFE system in enabling people to 'catch up' economically will be undermined by becoming unaffordable for the very people who need TAFE most.

**Recommendation: That government policies address the affordability of TAFE fees for those on low incomes, including those on income benefits.**

### Lack of coordination with Centrelink

There are system barriers are making TAFE inaccessible for those who are disadvantaged and are trying to navigate the system.

*Abdul is a young man who came to Australia as a refugee from Afghanistan. He and his wife have a baby daughter who was born in Australia. Abdul is receiving Youth Allowance to enable him to study at TAFE, and his wife receives a parenting payment from Centrelink. The family was living in a friend's house in outer Melbourne – a fact which they reported to Centrelink immediately. Centrelink provided them with rent assistance for many months before advising them that this was a mistake. Until this time, Abdul and Farha were unaware that they were not entitled to rent*

*assistance. They are now paying back Centrelink a debt of around \$1,500. They are not able to afford essential household items, such as a fridge. The family is now in a precarious financial situation and continuing the TAFE course is extremely difficult under these circumstances.*

*Loretta is a young woman who is receiving Newstart Allowance. Loretta would like to enrol in TAFE to become a disability support worker. However, Centrelink has advised that she is not eligible for Youth Allowance due to the prior studies that she has undertaken. This is in spite of the fact that Loretta's current qualifications have not enabled her to find a job. Loretta remains on Newstart Allowance, without a job, and without access to a course that could enable her to find meaningful employment.*

Abdul and Loretta's story illustrate how Centrelink can become a gate keeper to TAFE for disadvantaged Australians. Those on Centrelink payments should not have to 'work the system', rather they should be able to trust that Centrelink coordinates with TAFE's to enable people to transition to economic participation. It is a concern that Centrelink's policies regarding welfare payments and work incentives do not always support the training and employment goals or needs of recipients.

**Recommendation: That there be greater coordination and communication between Centrelink and TAFE to address the current systemic barriers so that TAFE courses are accessible to all Australians.**

To sum up, we find that our clients who attend TAFE rely heavily on community funding which is sourced through the work of case managers. Without this assistance there would be no pathway available to this vulnerable group. With less community funding available and the increase in TAFE fees, without reforms, accessibility for disadvantaged Australian's will decrease. The ability for this cohort being able to move out of poverty is at risk.

Yours sincerely,

Robyn Roberts  
Chief Executive Officer  
Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service