



Date: Monday, 15 April 2013 6:28:47 PM

To: The Senate Inquiry into the Role of TAFE

Dear Committee Members,

As a retiring Fine Arts teacher with over twenty five years' experience, I'm writing to primarily to argue for the reinstatement of funding for TAFE Fine Arts courses in NSW.<?xml:namespace prefix = o ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office" />

I've been disappointed at the recent decision to de-fund these courses. The introduction of a fee-for-service model excludes a great many people whose potential contribution to our culture and economy is stymied because they do not have the means to pay up-front or incur the debt. Narrowing the offering to those who can afford to pay therefore limits the pool of trained creative people on which the wider society depends for its cultural workers. Previously funded TAFE Fine Arts courses represented a way into a socially productive life and often further tertiary education for many people.

The five issues identified for the Senate Inquiry to examine are:

- 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
- Those jurisdictions in which state governments have announced funding decisions which may impact on their operation and viability

I want to make my case, which implicitly addresses all of the five points above, by drawing on my experience with two groups of people – one a specific group of indigenous students; and the other a general group which emerges during the enrolment period each year – young people ranging from school-leavers to those in their early twenties.

Indigenous people

As a Fine Arts teacher working in mainstream courses at Nepean TAFE in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I came into contact with a group of local indigenous students who'd entered TAFE through an affirmative action program. This started as an outreach program attracting potential students to a small, fairly informal, print-making workshop being run in someone's garage. As the appeal of the art-making process deepened, students whose horizons had never included any kind of further educational training were encouraged to enrol in one of the certificate courses in Fine Arts. These courses acted as feeders to the mainstream Diploma course. In Dec 2001 to February 2002 a group of fifteen students who had participated in these affirmative action and mainstream programs exhibited their work in *Putting Myself in the Picture* at Penrith Regional Gallery. Although the gallery is not a commercial enterprise we managed to set up a private sale system which resulted in 60% of the exhibited work being sold privately.

As an art history/theory teacher I had taught all of these people at some time during the course of their studies and through that experience, learned first-hand the value of funding fine arts education. Literacy was an issue for the majority of these students, but their success in their studio practice was enough of an incentive for them to persevere with the theoretical aspects of the courses. I watched the growth in confidence and self-esteem develop with each achievement and witnessed their horizons broaden as opportunities within the arts community opened up for them. Most of them completed the Diploma and two achieved the Advanced Diploma. Without funding this would not have been possible.

Young people

The enrolment period at TAFE has traditionally yielded two groups of young people:

- those who have identified a desire to pursue arts training and have applied unsuccessfully to a university fine arts course. They then enrol in a TAFE Fine Arts course in order to create a credible portfolio with which to later apply for university study. This strategy has a high success rate.
- and
- those who are directionless. Usually these young people have not done well at school and have no idea what they want to do in life. They may have exhibited some drawing ability and are applying to do a fine arts course only at the suggestion of either a parent or friend.

This second group often benefit significantly from their fine arts education. Once they experience the satisfaction to be had from image-making, they start to engage with other aspects of the course. Their experience of previous disaffection becomes the subject matter of their artwork, and it is often this group who produce the most imaginative and innovative imagery. Without funded fine arts courses, both of these groups miss out on the opportunity of fulfilling their creative potential and contributing to the wider culture.

I have written of these two groups because in my long career teaching in TAFE Fine Arts courses, these are the two groups I think are the most obvious beneficiaries of fully funded fine arts training. That said, I also see the way TAFE fine arts courses benefit groups of people whose non English speaking backgrounds limit their ability to express themselves. Fine arts training gives them the skills to express themselves using the universal language of image-making. So often I have encountered NESB students who have struggled to explain what they want to say to me in the class-room, but when I visit the studio and see their work, I gain access to what was previously not comprehended. I've seen the delight and growing confidence writ large on their faces at these times.

As I said I am about to retire from teaching – I'm taking a voluntary redundancy as part of the NSW Government's decision and TAFE's Change Management plan as it affects Fine Arts employees within the Northern Sydney Institute. I can make this decision because retirement was on the horizon for me in the next year or so anyway. However I would like to finish by making some observations about funding decisions which impact negatively on the future of TAFE Fine Arts courses.

At present students enrolling in the Diploma or Advanced Diploma are eligible for VET Fee Help, however the Certificate courses do not attract VET Fee Help. Traditionally the Certificate courses have been feeders for the Diploma course. The Certificate IV in Fine Arts is currently costing circa \$5000. This has had a disastrous effect on enrolments with most potential students opting to apply for a Diploma course (circa \$7000) where they are at least eligible for VET Fee Help. Struggling TAFE Fine Arts schools have little option but to accept these students even though their skill level is not Diploma entry level standard. The result of this is that the standard of the Diploma, now a one year course, will fall. Next year, without certificate courses feeding the Diploma, enrolments in the Diploma will fall and gradually the viability of the qualification courses will be eroded.

It is a sad time to be retiring – I feel I'm watching the destruction of everything in which I've believed and for which I've worked over a professional lifetime. Despite being presented with a significant body of research which refutes the position that Fine Arts does not produce 'job outcomes' (for example see David Throsby and Anita Zednick's work 2010, Australia Council for the Arts) the NSW Government has persisted with this implausible argument. I write in the hope that this submission may add my thoughts to your deliberations.

Yours sincerely
Elin Howe