



**House of Representatives' Standing Committee on Education and
Employment**

Inquiry into the role of the TAFE system and its operation

Joint Submission

Brimbank Social Justice Coalition and Brimbank City Council

April 2013

Overview

The western region of Melbourne, including the Brimbank City Council, experiences poor educational attainment rates, high rates of unskilled workforce participation and high levels of unemployment and the recently released SEIFA score for Brimbank on the Index of Relative SE Disadvantage is in the lowest decile of LGAs in VIC with a score of 926. In this context, ensuring our community, especially young people, have access to a range of opportunities in vocational and further education is critical in breaking the cycle of poverty and improving life, health, citizenship and social outcomes.

For a variety of reasons, formal education participation rates in the western region, although improved, are low. Providing appropriate additional options in further educational engagement is therefore even more crucial. Vocational education and training targets this gap in the provision of accessible educational alternatives available in our community. Improving broad pathways into technical and further education will improve access and success in student achievement and supply positive post school options. This will result in not only improvements in educational attainment and participation, but will also support an increase in labour market skills in Melbourne's western region and the employability of local residents in our local region.

Enabling further educational engagement, such as that provided through vocational education has considerable flow on benefits; to others in the family and their educational outcomes, broader participation and citizenship engagement, personal fulfilment and improved health outcomes; in fact the broad range of benefits that flow from higher socio economic status.

"Educational qualifications are one of the most important indicators of socio-economic status." (Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing).

Youth context

Brimbank municipality displays all the characteristics of a low socio economic area; this includes low levels of educational attainment and high rates of unskilled, unemployed and underemployed workforce. Young people, particularly youth males, are disproportionately disadvantaged in such environments as they are much more vulnerable to economic downturn (noted in NCVER report *How did young people fare in the 1990s economic downturn?* by Vu, Gørgens and Bray, published August 2012). Nearly one in five young people in Brimbank are disengaged from education and the workforce. It is likely that their ability to engage in employment is strongly related to their educational attainment. Vocational education therefore becomes an area of critical importance for this group, as their participation in formal education and higher education is limited. It is therefore important that vocational opportunities are strengthened and increased in this context, not limited or cut.

Additionally it has recently been documented (see NCVER paper, *Youth transitions in Australia; lessons for other countries?* by Tom Karmel, May 2012) that the two key factors underpinning employment for young people in Australia during a strong economy are:

- High levels of post school education, (with a consequence that there is not a large cohort of young people 'flooding' the labour market), and

- A flexible education system which gives individuals multiple choices.

Vocational education meets these needs very well, providing diverse and flexible provision of post-secondary education.

Young people's experience of completing Year 12 positively correlates with increases in their participation in further education (p.41 Vu et al). The young people more likely to do this are those that attend non-government schools and those with highly educated parents, both of which are in short supply in Brimbank. The context of young people continuing their education is significantly affected by the educational background and employment status of their parents, and whether they attend a public or non-government school. Therefore young people in Brimbank are disadvantaged with regard to the "prior credentials and background influences in education." (p. 41 Vu et al) and if fewer choose or are able to attain Year 12 for access to higher education, as is the case for young people in Brimbank, vocational training becomes even more important.

A recent report (2011) by the Western Melbourne Regional Development Australia (WMRDA) committee entitled *Melbourne's West – Victoria's Gateway: a Regional Plan* notes that Western Melbourne region has:

"higher than average unemployment, youth alienation, lower than average educational and skill levels, health problems and barriers faced by new migrant groups. Social inclusion is a key priority. We need to make sure that all our residents have the opportunity and resources to participate fully in the life of our community. Underlying all of this is educational outcomes. In particular, Year 12 outcomes in the region are around 40% lower than those of many of Melbourne's eastern suburbs. This does not mean that young people in the West have less abilities – it just means they have had fewer opportunities.All young people should be able to achieve their full potential, no matter where they live or what their interests happen to be. Closing these gaps in educational achievement is incredibly important to the future of the region. So too is the need to provide lifelong training for mature aged residents, to ensure that their skills stay current with industry needs and are transferable over the years to different industry sectors." (pp.2-3)

This report, which includes municipalities of Brimbank, Hobson's Bay, Maribyrnong, Melton, Moonee Valley and Wyndham, notes that Brimbank has the lowest proportion of all western Melbourne residents with post school qualifications, at 40.8%, which is also significantly lower than the Melbourne metropolitan average.

It goes on to state that

"Data shows that more disadvantaged individuals are most likely to study close to home. So a stronger community education sector is desirable to offer first steps in learning with pathways into Victoria University, Kangan Institute or other providers. ...The Victorian Government gives rural vocational education and training providers additional funding to help them provide a range of educational opportunities to thin populations. Similar funding is required for the outer western population, based on its poor educational participation rate, so that residents can also access a range of educational opportunities." (p.14)

In this context vocational education is even more important to City of Brimbank residents as a key enabler to improving educational outcomes and options.

Nearly one in five young people in Brimbank are disengaged from education and the workforce. We need to enable more opportunities for further positive educational engagement for these young

people and more local and flexible vocational education options in Brimbank is a very necessary response to this evidence base.

Vocational Education Training (VET) in Schools programs

A recent report (2012) commissioned by Leadwest entitled *Social Impacts on Melbourne's west of TAFE Funding Cuts* reported that

"Cost to families for VET in Schools programs

There will be a general increase to the costs of VET in Schools courses of around 30% (TAFEs such as VU had previously subsidised delivery of these programs from other courses. The loss of other courses will make VET in Schools courses more expensive).

VU reports that all existing VET in Schools course tuition fees will increase next year from between 17% to 54% above 2012 fee levels. In 13 out of the 28 courses offered at VU, course costs will increase by more than 25%. This includes price rises of more than \$300 for units in Business Services, \$400 for courses in Hair and Beauty, \$500 for pre-apprenticeship cabinet making, and \$600 per unit in both Plumbing and Electrical.

Some families will struggle to meet these costs, with the likelihood that some will decide not to participate in VET programs. Total costs for units range from \$1200 - \$2200. While schools can meet these costs, in some cases they do not have the budget to do so, and pass these costs on to families. Access to VET in Schools programs also looms as a major issue for students in the schools of Melbourne's west. The impact will be two-fold.

2 October 2012 13;

- *First, reduced levels of TAFE staff employed at VU and other TAFE Institutes will result in a lack of trained teachers capable of delivering VET programs for school students (there will be 20% teaching staff reduction at VU); and*
- *Second, that the cessation of delivery of Certificate I and 2 qualifications will have longer term consequences disrupting the student pathway to Certificate IV and Diploma level courses. Pulling the rug out of lower level certificates will potentially undermine the pathway for some young people into the trades.*

To date, schools have generally used the TAFE system to deliver VET programs, due to their stability, and their capacity to subsidise school programs from other sources. Victoria University, like other TAFE providers across the state, indicate a need to discontinuing activities or apply full fee recovery for activities which are currently cross-subsidised by government funded enrolments. At Victoria University this has led to increased fees for VET in Schools programs based on full cost recovery and the inability to 'underwrite' the Trade Training Centres currently planned for construction in Werribee & Melton.

Access to VET in Schools programs

Campus closures will restrict access to VET in Schools and VCAL programs."

Local Response to Community Access to Education

Brimbank City Council recognises that "Education is a strong predictor of long-term health and quality of life... health, human development and well-being are dynamic processes that are closely related to socioeconomic status (SES) and educational attainment. An individual's health is highly correlated with his or her social position, and success in school, and years of schooling are major

factors in determining social and occupational status in adulthood.” (<http://virtualmentor.ama-assn.org/2006/11/pfor1-0611.html>)

As well as limiting employment and income opportunities, poorer education and learning leads to poorer health outcomes in what is now well established as the social determinants of health. “The social determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age (and) are mostly responsible for health inequities.” (www.who.int/social_determinants/en/)

Council recognises the importance of education as a means of addressing disadvantage and the following documents are Council’s response; the Social Justice Charter, the Community Plan, the Community Strengthening Policy, Community Learning Strategy and Economic Development framework. Council also recognises the importance of working in partnership with local service providers. For further details see; http://www.brimbank.vic.gov.au/About_Council/Governance/Council_Policies_Strategies_Plans

Barriers to Education for Our Community

Of the 46% of residents born overseas a significant proportion has low or no English literacy (24% compared to 13.9% in Greater Melbourne). Many residents born overseas speak English as a second language, this means that knowledge of and ability to navigate VET is limited by;

- Language skills
- Knowledge of the VET systems
- Lack of family or community experience with the VET systems.

Some residents experience intergenerational unemployment which limits their knowledge of tertiary education and creates complex barriers to accessing tertiary education.

Further analysis of Australia’s PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results by ACER (Australian Council for Educational Research) reveal the extent of inequity in educational outcomes depending on socio-economic status in Australia. (See report, *PISA in Brief – Highlights from the full Australian Report: Challenges for Australian Education: Results from PISA 2009*, Sue Thomson et al, ACER.) Secondary school educational outcomes for low SES students are 2-3 years behind high SES students. This is significant for our community in Brimbank. This gap makes it difficult for low SES students to achieve entry scores to win university places, which means that VET may be the only option available or may be used to bridge the gap to university entry.

With low numbers of residents with tertiary qualifications there is limited experience of, or ‘literacy’ in relation to tertiary accreditation or VET pathways and that creates difficulty in navigating VET systems. In addition making complex judgements regarding the different VET offers or course outcomes may be impacted by knowledge of the system and or by English language skills.

A significant number of residents have had interrupted education and learning pathways which adds to the complexity of navigating the VET system. However understanding the VET system is critical to provide access points for returning to education and therefore accessing better employment outcomes and cuts in block funding have significantly impact on the TAFE sectors capacity to provide extension services for special needs.

Cost

Low incomes also limit educational choices in Brimbank so this means that any increase in the cost of VET will result in further educational disadvantage due to an inability to pay the higher cost of education. We know that when training is subsidised, and made more available economically, more people participate. The cost of training is especially important to our community as it is dominated by low Socio-Economic Status (SES) members and less money is available to members of our community for training. "This growth in the training market is being driven by government subsidised activity" from *Key findings, Victorian Training Market Quarterly report, Q3, 2011, Skills Victoria, DEECD, p 4.*

Indigenous Community

Brimbank has a small but growing community of indigenous inhabitants who also face specific disadvantage in experiencing and accessing mainstream education (2011 Census 701 people, or 0.4%). In order to enable this community's continuing connection to positive life outcomes, education plays a key role. The TAFE Reform has resulted in cuts to block funding that has significantly impact on the TAFE sectors capacity to provide extension services for special needs.

Specific needs of newly arrived and refugee communities

The Keilor/St Albans Schools' Network conducted an audit of the educational needs of refugee students in 2009. The transition from school to employment and/or further education was noted as a particularly challenging period for newly arrived and refugee community members. A subsequent report was commissioned by the BMLLEN entitled "*Transition from school to employment or further education of refugee students from government secondary schools in 2010 in the City of Brimbank*", published June 2011. This report notes that "it is well documented that students with disrupted schooling, as in the refugee experience, need additional assistance at the transition points of their pathways to education and employment. In addition, it is reported ...that the educational levels of refugee students may not match their aspirations, hence other pathways are necessary." (p.4). Due to the additional support that TAFE provides, noted in the next section, compared with private RTOs, TAFE institutes are much better positioned to provide these enriched pathways that refugee and newly arrived community members require.

The *Refugee Status Report: a report on how refugee children and young people in Victoria are faring*, published by DEECD in July 2011 points out in the school and post-school pathways section that "there are multiple barriers to refugee parents participating in their children's schooling... and that the proportion of students who meet education benchmarks across all levels is lower for refugee students than for Victorian children overall." (p.74) This report again provides an evidence base that vocational pathways into further post school educational options is essential for significant members of our Brimbank community and TAFE institutes can best meet these specific needs.

Why TAFE delivery of Vocational Education & Training is important to the Brimbank community

TAFE institutions have traditionally provided infrastructure to support students that most private providers don't have. This infrastructure is particularly important to low SES students;

- libraries and learning commons
- computers - low SES students may not have access to a computer or to the internet
- student union/services
- student villages

- transport – campus buses
- careers counselling
- counselling services (pastoral care)
- learning support services
- disability specific services
- special measures for specific disadvantaged groups such as indigenous students.

Tertiary institutions such as Victoria University have shared facilities for VET student and university students that have a twofold benefit of reducing the duplication of infrastructure and enabling VET students some exposure to higher education and therefore presenting future opportunities or pathways.

TAFE institutions;

- have connected pathways between VET courses and higher education
- have clear pathways for recognition of prior learning
- provide certainty with qualification / accredited courses
- cooperation between institutions that strengthen student & organisational outcomes
- provide an environment, through large student numbers, for creating a community learners
- provide a significantly higher number of contact hours for broader learning that support students being work ready
- have a strong focus on employability
- have a strong relationships with schools and some institutions share infrastructure with schools
- have systems to transition overseas qualifications to locally recognised qualifications.
- Have strong links into local communities and local economies

The importance of clear pathways for recognition of prior learning and connected pathways between VET courses and higher education is a high priority for Brimbank residents; whose family have no experience with tertiary education, who were born overseas or those who speak, and read, English as a second language.

Concerns regarding private VET providers

There are some concerns regarding the quality of VET delivered by some private providers. Some have more limited infrastructure, don't network sufficiently with other providers and are not complying with quality standards in relation to training delivery and assessment. In particular given the high numbers of recently arrived and CALD students in Brimbank there is a concern that more disadvantaged students may be more vulnerable to poor quality providers and may also have more limited ability to seek redress. In light of the restriction on subsidy for repeat of same level qualifications we would recommend better monitoring of quality of outcomes for students to ensure they are being adequately trained at each level of certification.

Some private providers have a profit mandate that diverts funds from educational outcomes. This may not be a concern for students who are able to pay for their education but has the potential to have a more substantial impact on low SES students.

Private providers generally have a smaller range of courses and subject choices within courses that limit opportunities for students. They are also likely to limit their course to those that attract the highest subsidies.

Actions to strengthen access to VET

- Create strong positive links between low SES communities and post-secondary educational institutions to reduce barriers
- Clear pathways for recognition of prior learning
- Multiple access point to enable people with interrupted education to access VET
- Clear pathways between VET and higher education
- Clear concise information regarding; course requirement, employment opportunities related to courses, alternative pathways
- Clear concise information that enables prospective students to evaluate the quality or outcomes of the courses offered by different VET providers
- Minimising the cost of VET /increase subsidies for low SES students
- Special measures to counter poorer educational outcomes due to poorer socio-economic status
- Range of services for disabled students
- Geographic access
- Culturally specific vocational education programs