



Standing Committee on Education and Employment Inquiry into the role of the technical and further education (TAFE) system and its operation

ForestWorks ISC is the national workforce development organisation for the forest, wood, paper and timber products industry. ForestWorks ISC thanks the Standing Committee on Education and Employment for providing this opportunity to comment on the proposed Inquiry into the role of the TAFE system and its operation.



Forestworks' activities are assisted by funding provided by the Commonwealth Government through the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education.

Introduction

ForestWorks ISC is pleased to respond to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment's Inquiry into the role of technical and further education system and its operation.

As we understand, the terms of reference are:

TAFEs have played a critical role in the training and development of Australians for more than one hundred years. For many Australians, TAFEs provide a critical pathway to training and skills which are increasingly needed to access employment. They also play a critical role in regions and in providing access for disadvantaged groups.

The Committee will inquire into and report on the role played by TAFEs in:

- the 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; and
- those jurisdictions in which State Governments have announced funding decisions which may impact on their operation and viability.

Response

We are aware of the depth and breadth of responsibilities and roles that TAFE's undertake across Australia, and are therefore concerned that the committee would attempt to undertake such a broad ranging inquiry into the highly significant and influential role TAFE plays in such a short period by which to make submissions.

The role as described above confirms the breadth of responsibility the TAFE system has to regional, remote and urban communities, to people who are seeking work, as well as those in work. It also ensures access and pathways as people move across industries, move in and out of work and manage their life demands.

The responsiveness to local and national economies is also critical, and in the forests and timber industry, the means to address thin markets where skill development is not attained through pre-employment qualifications but rather on site, at work is a required level of flexibility of the TAFE system.

The RTOs for the forest and timber products industry are:

- TAFE, with small numbers of teachers working in small independent units supplying services to this industry and

- industry-based, not for profit RTOs with few full time staff (between 3 and 10) and with a limited number of industry specific qualifications on their scope OR
- very small RTOs with single or small numbers of units of competence on their scope

Currently there is evidence of the need for high levels of responsiveness by RTOs to industry demand as:

- the workforce is across jurisdictions
- training is workplace based
- employers and employee associations are actively supportive of promoting the importance of national skills development and recognition

Along with state government funding cuts for training delivery, proposed regulatory costs from ASQA create a significant headwind for workforce development in our industry, a headwind that is inconsistent with a supportive government approach to building Australia's future workforce.

If the cost of registration to deliver training increases to the magnitude proposed, smaller RTOS will be forced out of the market resulting in a further demand on the TAFE system to auspice or form partnership models with specialist delivery organisations or, as a community and economy, we will be faced with potentially an irreplaceable loss of incredibly important skills development capacity in regional Australia.

Similarly, the diversity of qualifications offered in regions might also decline if providers choose to reduce financial risk by offering only established, high-volume courses where the necessary "critical mass" of enrolments were likely to be present.

We do have good examples of large TAFE institutions responding with best practice delivery, in each of the cases this has been achieved via small specialist units operating within the larger institution with an almost 'small RTO' flexibility that attaches itself to the economies of scale benefits as part of the bigger RTO.

The professional development and expertise of TAFE teachers in both direct classroom based learning with groups, at site on the job teaching, assessment, auspicing and working flexibly with enterprises are paramount to a successful skilled workforce. That is, the TAFE workforce is a critical component of the capacity and resourcefulness of any of the TAFE systems.

The future of our forest and timber products industry and the development of its workforce are influenced not only by macroeconomic challenges including the high Australian dollar but also by product, resource and investment uncertainty. The industry is starting to stabilise after a key period of restructuring. In an industry profiled by integrated processes and skilled occupations, significant job losses create serious consequences for businesses through the proliferation of skill shortages.

Enterprises need continued support to improve their current workforce development systems to enhance innovative competencies in the workplace. The vast majority of training for the industry is delivered in the workplace. Any increases in cost borne by RTOs, as well as major funding cuts, will inevitably be passed on to enterprises. This cost shifting will occur in an already difficult operating environment adding further barriers to accessing the nationally accredited training and assessment required to build its workforce skills for future success.

Industry preference is that workforce development needs are catered for by a range of RTOs providing diversity of completion and options for industry. This allows an enterprise to address both technical and generic skills development. It is clear that the current funding environment and pressure on TAFEs may threaten this diversity and may in fact deal a near fatal blow to the current delivery structures to the industry.

Once again, we thank you for the opportunity to provide comments in this inquiry and we would be happy to discuss these in more detail.

Yours sincerely,

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CEO

ForestWorks



FOREST, WOOD, PAPER & TIMBER PRODUCTS INDUSTRY



Australian Government
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Forestworks' activities are assisted by funding provided by the Commonwealth Government through the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education.

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