

The Committee Secretary

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment

Parliament House

CANBERRA ACT 2600



Dear Sir / Madam

Please find attached my submission to the Inquiry into the role of Technical and Further Education system and its operation.

NB: I am happy for this submission to be made public, but request that it be kept anonymous.

Regards

Declan Hart

Former Information Technology Teacher

North Coast Institute of TAFE

17 April 2013

SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT'S INQUIRY INTO THE ROLE OF TEACHNICAL AND FURTHER EDUCATION AND ITS OPERATION.

Term of Reference 1: The development of skills in the Australian economy.

TAFE as an incubator of skills for the future:

The future Australian economy is clearly reliant upon a workforce that embraces lifelong learning and the ability for members of the workforce to engage with skill development as and when national and global trends dictate. The TAFE system plays a critical role in lifelong learning by providing an accessible, reliable and trusted path for learners to take. The current trend to commercialise TAFE's recurrent funding and open it up to contest between TAFE and other RTOs threatens the future of TAFE, a taxpayer asset with a vast capability across most vocational areas. TAFE has inbuilt services to help those retraining in for new careers as well as upskilling in their current industry. These services, such as support for those with physical or intellectual disabilities, counselling services, library services, language and literacy support come at substantial cost and are services not provided by most of TAFE's competitors.

Constant cutting of budgets serves to impact on the quality of the training that can be delivered as less contact hours are available per student. Reduction of recurrent funding to TAFE endangers the sustainability of a range of programs that are successful and have resulted in clear and positive outcomes for the community. These include (from personal experience) the Certificate 3, 4 and Diploma of IT Networking offered by North Coast TAFE.

The problem with the "Entitlement" model:

The proposed "entitlement" model for funding is flawed as it will only allow a student one subsidised course (as opposed to no restriction as before). It (along with the introduction of VET FEE HELP) places almost the entire burden of risk onto the student who is punished for wanting to upskill or retrain. This risk should be shared equally between employers (who want and need employees with current skills) the taxpayer (who wants and needs a flexible and adaptive workforce) and the student (who wants to build their skills). No weighting is given to the student's sacrifice of time and opportunity to undertake study as opposed to all other pursuits.

Such a model provides little incentive for a student to study. The more skills that members of the community have, the richer and more innovative the community will be, with or without a direct link to an employment outcome.

- Technology skills are becoming more commonplace across all industries and drive innovation
- Fine Arts skills are especially relevant to Northern NSW which is seen as an area with a high concentration of artists, galleries, cottage industries, crafts markets, etc

Centralised decisions such as the defunding of Fine Arts Training are impulsive, poorly considered and will impact worse on regional areas where training market size is insufficient to allow for a high degree of competition.

Term of Reference 2: The development of opportunities for Australians to improve themselves and increase their life and employment prospects.

My personal experience:

My introduction to TAFE was as a student in 1999 attempting to retrain to re-enter the workforce after an extended period of welfare dependence. TAFE supported my retraining, nurtured and developed my IT aptitude, assisted with finding opportunities for work experience and paid work and ultimately employed me as an IT teacher. In 1999, I really needed encouragement to take the risk in training and then work and if there was a substantial fee or debt that I had to pay to take the chances that I did, it would have been hard to make the decision to retrain. As a result, the community benefitted by the training producing a teacher who is not only a productive, taxpaying member of the community but is also someone who has helped many others since take similar pathways. For me the transition from welfare dependency to productive employed citizen was much smoother than was otherwise possible without TAFE being as accessible as it was.

TAFE as a service for the disadvantaged:

TAFE has always been the place where people from a background of disadvantage have been able to get a chance at skills development and, ultimately, meaningful employment. While a teacher / head teacher, I participated and over saw programs directed at students with disabilities (courses directly marketed towards students with Asperger's syndrome, and hearing or vision impairment) as well as various efforts to provide skills to severely disadvantaged communities (Jubullum, Box Ridge, Muli Muli, Cabbage Tree Island, long term unemployed) . These efforts may be limited in direct employment outcomes, but made large differences to the confidence and esteem of the students involved.

Term of Reference 3: 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

Teacher Recruitment:

The lack of economies of scale in regional areas makes it difficult to maintain an effective teaching staff. This staff is highly casualised (approx.80%) and teachers with the requisite skills and currency to teach students appropriately have had their hours gradually cut to the point where such teachers will pursue other opportunities in order to be able to pay their bills. This affects the ongoing sustainability of all courses offered as a casual teacher does not need to give notice and replacing a casual teacher with another with the same capabilities is very difficult.

Online Delivery:

The North Coast Institute has been pushing recently to put everything online that can be (including units of competency that are part of face to face courses). While this is promoted as providing flexibility for the student, it is clearly more about cutting costs. While online delivery does have an important role in training, it fails to be able to build employability skills and presumes a level of literacy and time management skills that many students lack. There are also areas where practical demonstration and experience is critical – many students only start learning when they have an opportunity to obtain some hands on experience. The management of NC TAFE is also promoting new job classifications in the current Enterprise Agreement negotiations that would see casual

teachers paid less for “tutoring” and “assessing” students that undertake online study. This is being dishonestly promoted as “new and exciting” opportunities, rather than the same or similar work for less pay.

Whenever I mention to students the option of studying online rather than face-to-face, almost always the student is reluctant and appreciates the teacher interaction that comes with face-to-face delivery. A role for online and flexible delivery but in my area student feedback is entirely supportive of F2F delivery as it is near impossible to provide technical practical experience online.

Connections to Local Communities:

During my time with North Coast TAFE, many local organisations have benefitted from the ICT training provided by North Coast TAFE. These organisations have received workforce development training services, employed trainees trained by North Coast or provided work and work experience opportunities for TAFE students. They range from State Government departments (Industry and Investment, Public Works, DEC Northern Region ICTU, Northern Area Health Service), local councils (Lismore City Council, Ballina Shire Council, Richmond Valley Council), large retailers (Officeworks, Harvey Norman, Dick Smith Electronics) local schools (Kadina HS Lismore HS, Ballina HS, Richmond River HS, Trinity Lismore, St Johns Woodlawn, Kyogle HS), Sothern Cross University and many small businesses (Summerland Credit Union, Adaptive Computer Services, NCIT, Bazar, Advanced Computer Support, Rainbow Power Company, Webpub.com.au, Work’n’Play Computers).

This is clear evidence that North Coast TAFE has built and maintained strong relationships with its community. TAFE’s role in providing local training often means that students obtain employment locally and do not need to leave their families and travel to metropolitan areas to find work.

Term of Reference 4: The operation of a competitive training market

Insufficient Training Market Size in Regional Areas:

The lack of economies of scale in regional areas means that although there is a demand in regional areas for staff with national accredited VET qualifications, this demand does not have the critical mass to provide sufficient demand for competition between RTOs. Forcing such competition will mean that all RTOs will fail the student, either by underbidding and therefore sacrificing quality to meet the lower price, or by no RTO attempting to win the marginal business. TAFE is currently equipped to meet these training needs and should be sufficiently funded to do so.

Training where establishment costs are high:

Market forces will also dictate that RTOs will aim for courses that are cheapest to establish. Industry areas where capital expenses are high will not be targeted by RTOs, not just because of the prohibitive entry costs, but also because funding that is contestable is not reliable and return on initial investment is not assured. TAFENSW has long been the place where such high cost training is available and this should continue to be the case as this capability will be difficult to re-establish once dismantled.

Teacher currency:

The issue of teacher currency in TAFENSW is an important one – TAFENSW needs to invest in its workforce who currently has no release from teaching to access professional development. A recent ASQA audit on currency in North Coast TAFE resulted in staff (once again) sending copies of their qualifications for central storage as well as staff completing a “Currency Calculator”. This lip service may be sufficient to pass an ASQA audit, but the organisation did not make any significant investment in professional development for its staff to assist with ongoing compliance. In fact, the organisation changed its policy of funding TAFE courses undertaken by its staff to one that reimburses staff for successful completion of (non-commercial only) TAFE courses. Staff also lost 1hr of release for Professional Development in the last award negotiations in about 2009.

Term of Reference 5: Those jurisdictions in which State Governments have announced funding decisions which may impact on their operation and viability.

The NSW Government recently announced that it would cut spending in Education by \$1.7b and also announced that 800 FTE jobs would be lost in TAFE alone. They further announced that all subsidies would be removed from TAFENSW Fine Arts courses and made no accommodation in their plans for this transition to be implemented. (I note that a recent government Creative Industries working group has criticised this defunding, acknowledging the robustness of the creative industries and asking for the funding to be restored)

As a result, my then Faculty (ITCI, North Coast TAFE) implemented a restructure that saw savage cuts to Fine Arts, Screen and Media, Design, Fashion and Information Technology. The Faculty’s intention was to best position itself for the “Smart and Skilled” reform that is to be implemented in 2014. The new model requires a non-specialist head teacher to manage course delivery across a range of training packages. This new position will not be sustainable as the new head teacher will not have sufficient understanding of all of the industry areas under their management to give each area its required attention without divulging responsibilities down to the remaining teachers. This will further affect the ability of the teachers to teach and will add to the already high stress of the job.

The reduction of teachers has reduced the Faculty’s capability with no certainty that “Smart and skilled” reforms will go in the direction that the Faculty has predicted. As a result, Faculty staff morale is at an all-time low. I also understand that the restructure process will now be followed by a recruitment process in an attempt to undo the damage done.

Throughout this restructure process, I feel that there has been little or no respect for the professionalism of the affected staff. I feel personally taken for granted and unsupported in my role. I and the other teachers and support staff around me have worked hard to give the community the best of TAFE – improving outcomes wherever possible and meeting any and all performance measure requested. The only real measure that means anything to the decision makers is reduction of cost – a narrow sighted perspective that future generations will have to ultimately pay for with the lack of training opportunities that these cost-focussed strategies will create.