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I was until recently a Diploma student of Fine Arts at the Lismore NSW TAFE campus. Towards the end of the year, as we were preparing for our final exhibition, we were notified that the funding was to be cut. It was with this uncertainty and sense of sadness that students and teachers prepared for the exhibition.

I began TAFE as a mature age student, following the loss of my career due to a serious car accident. I had been suffering Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as well as ongoing pain as a result of my injuries. TAFE was my pathway to re-entry into a normal life. In my class, we had a nurse, a teacher and a policeman, all of whom had worked for many years in their professions, and all of whom were suffering psychological problems related to their former jobs. At the end of our diploma, one returned to work, one was applying for university, and one had gained a position in an art school in Sydney. I am working on a book, and plan to exhibit my art. There was also another man with a disability that confined him to a wheelchair; he is working towards having an exhibition. We all made the most of the experience that was offered, and it gave us the confidence to undertake further employment or education. The Arts course was a springboard for richer and more productive lives for many, and in some cases, an opportunity for a feeling of self-esteem, belonging and opportunity to contribute. In a country town people have more limited opportunities than those in the city.

There were a number of young people in our class; two of these have used the TAFE art course to go on to university, one to study art, the other an arts degree focussing on social science. One was an early school leaver who lacked confidence and direction. TAFE helped her find and develop her talent.

Many people, for many reasons, can't or don't go to university or find employment, particularly in rural areas, and TAFE is the entry to further education and employment. I began my former career in social welfare and community development by beginning with the TAFE welfare course and then going to university to get my degree.

The quality of teaching at TAFE was fantastic, as were the facilities. It saddens me greatly to see that the life work of the department head to build the reputation and equipment of the department, is being wasted, and his position taken by someone far less qualified. Two of our permanent teachers are, last I heard, vying for one job. A number of us would have gone on to do the Advanced Diploma, which has not run now due to not having enough enrolments. People cannot afford the new fee structure, and having lost some of the teaching staff, it is not as attractive a proposition. The Diploma course was run over three years, long enough for students to learn the skills. Now it has been cut to a one-year course, which really means that to gain entry people will already be required to have the skills that we were given time to learn. This will exclude many.

Financially, the Arts department at Lismore TAFE supports not just teachers, both permanent and casual, but the maintenance person, the campus cafe, and the art supplies shops and small galleries in the town.

It's not just about money. How are we to measure the value of the arts in society? The arts enrich the lives of so many people, and are what is left of a culture long after the financial institutions and businesses have been forgotten.

Sincerely,  
Amanda Hale.