

To the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment
Inquiry into the role of Technical and Further Education system and its operation.

FE.

April 2013

This is a personal Submission from Paul Gunner to the House of Representatives hearing on the future of TAFE in Australia.

Background and Context

This personal submission to the committee is by way of my personal narrative around the privatisation of vocational training in Australia which has been at the forefront of debate for decades now. This submission will address the following terms of reference;

- A.** the development of skills in the Australian economy;
- D.** the operation of a competitive training market

My personal experience with TAFE spans back to the 1970's by way of undertaking a trade qualification in the automotive field. More recently (2008-2011), I have connected with the training industry by way of my role as a quality inspectorate technical adviser for the SA Department of Further Education, Science and Technology (DFEEST). I am also a member of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union Skilled Trades Committee through which I have been able to further see firsthand, the gradual dissolution of TAFE as the pre-eminent training provider in Australia over many years now.

Terms of Reference Points A & D.

There can be absolutely no argument that TAFE has played a pre-eminent role in developing a skilled workforce for Australia over many decades. My 40 year career in the automotive industry as a motor mechanic is a testament to the provision of a broad based quality training regime through the 1970's. I began my apprenticeship in 1974 and attended TAFE College at Croydon Park in SA for the term of my apprenticeship and undertook a number of post trade courses there and at the Elizabeth TAFE College.

What is important for me to say to the committee is that the quality of the training I received at that time has provided me with the opportunity to contribute significantly in the automotive industry for a long period of time now. I am currently employed as a Roadside Assistance Technician at the Royal Automobile Association. The broad based training and skills development I received from TAFE in the '70s has been a major source of support in a long career.

The now gradual destruction and fragmentation of many trades including the automotive industry, has resulted in TAFE having to redefine itself over the 80's and 90's and now in the 21st century against a notion of a traditionally structured trades to one of specialist trades. Arguably the driver for this restructuring of trades is a result of the free market attempting to gain greater profit from only providing the very specific services and productions which have the highest return and lowest capital input required. This is whilst leaving the more costly aspects of service and production delivery to be funded by either the government or more often now by the workers themselves. This must inevitably lead to a collapse of the trades where the trade qualifications will be all but worthless.

If this notion is translated into the training industry (which it inevitably must and indeed has) then the delivery of training and skilled workforce development if left to the free market, can only result in the further diminution and ultimate collapse of trade certification and enhanced skill development. There is nothing surer I argue, that the lack of funding TAFE has been faced with over the previous two decades along with the wholesale privatisation of the training sector is supporting the fragmentation of the trades and absolutely devastating any notion of quality skills acquisition.

As a nation, we **must** ensure proper funding to a publicly owned TAFE in order to ensure that we are not simply assisting the demise of a skilled Australian workforce. The linkage between quality training, high skill workforce, longevity in the trades and a robust Australian economy based upon a solid high skilled workforce cannot be denied in my view. The evidence is very clear in the automotive industry where one can see the result of the fragmentation of the motor mechanic trade and it's inevitable collapse. There are now specialist exhaust mechanics, specialist transmission mechanics, specialist suspension mechanics, specialist engine mechanics, tyre specialists, specialist engine management technicians to name but a few. The notion that we can somehow separate the dissolution of the trades from a quality training regime is nonsense. They are intrinsically linked.

The private free market approach to training cannot by its very nature, provide for a quality training regime. Quality training provision in the Metals and Automotive trades have significantly high infrastructure costs such as required for high end fabrication, welding, machining, engine management and powertrain technology, and high end computerised technologies in automotive and metals. These costs for the private market are prohibitive and thus the only courses and training they will provide are the ones where there is low set up cost and high profit return. This is the very nature of the system. The current example in SA is that TAFE has reacted to this private market pressure and reduced funding by attempting to provide what is seen to be a contemporary solution (read low cost) by advertising that student entitlement can be used to undertake a certificate 3 in floristry or health and beauty. Low set up costs aside, how can this possibly contribute or be of lasting benefit to our nation's productivity, skilled workforce development and wealth generation?

The operation of the competitive training market is something I can write about first hand from my experience as a quality inspectorate technical adviser for DFEEST in SA.

I undertook this role on a part time basis with a view to attempting to ensure as far as I could, that the quality of training in the automotive trades was of a standard that would benefit the workers (generally young workers and apprentices), the automotive industry and the Australian economy. Of course what I found was something completely contrasted with that notion. SA was to the best of my knowledge, the only state in Australia which employed (even on a casual basis) a technical adviser to assist the Quality Directorate. The private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) which I inspected during this period affirmed the notion that the private training market will only provide training delivery for the highest profit courses with the lowest set up costs. The introduction of a national VET Regulator in fact whilst a significant benefit to the macro picture, appeared in SA at least to have a deleterious effect upon the direct physical quality inspections of RTO's using technical advisers to the point where (as far as I am aware) they no longer take place. So quality appears to have taken a back seat to profit driven training.

The institutional delivery of certificate 3 in automotive is an area where I have been directly involved. I oppose such a notion of institutional delivery on the basis that it again deconstructs the broader skills acquisitions that are vital to a high skill model of workforce development. It is contrary to any such notion. The vocational aspect is far removed from the institution and the only benefactors of such a system are the training providers. The students or participants (particularly in the trades areas of automotive and metals) cannot take those skills and be practically recognised in the industry because the courses have little or no standing in the physical world of the metals and engineering and automotive workplaces. The connection between the training and the work which

was a hallmark of my apprenticeship era in the 70's and provided such a solid foundation for me and many others does not exist in this model of institutional delivery. It is highly contradictory for the training of a worker in a trade certificate to be removed entirely from the very work in which they are being trained to perform at a high skill level.

The provision training by the private market for a skilled workforce cannot in my view deliver anywhere near the level of competency required to ensure a long term sustainable and productive economy. It is again, contradictory to the extreme. My personal experience is such that I have no confidence in vested interests in the private training market providing critical skilled training delivery particularly in the metals and automotive trades' areas.

If we are genuine about increasing Australia's productivity, ensuring the long term viability of the nation's economy, and ensuring that workers of all ages have the capacity and opportunity to participate in the wealth generation of the nation through enhanced skilled workforce development, then we must provide quality skills acquisition and training. This as I have stated, can only be performed through a properly funded publicly owned and accountable training institution. Why would we do anything other than use TAFE as the vehicle for this? It does not need to be dismantled and it should not be. It should be rebuilt to provide a vital institutional resource which can only be to the benefit of Australia's economic and social future. The private market simply cannot deliver this.

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