



A submission to the Australian Government

Vocational Education and Training Review

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January 2019

The gaps in Vocational Education and Training

Currently, many students who wish to pursue post-secondary education are encouraged to take up study at a university. There remains a narrative in public discourse that universities are a superior institution that provide greater public good than vocational education institutions.¹ Framing TAFE and other vocational learning options as being for those who would fail at university maintains elitist and classist perceptions about education, access, and capacity for learning.²

TAFE, as the primary public provider for vocational education and training, deserves specific mention. ABC News reported that enrolments in TAFE have dropped by over 20% nationwide in the last six years - in Western Australia, there was a 22% drop over one year after fees tripled in 2013.³ Fees for courses in 'aged care, IT and electrical engineering' quadrupled in NSW across 2015.⁴ Meanwhile, TAFE institutes struggle to maintain outdated technology and infrastructure with limited funding, affecting 'the quality of physical and online learning environments'.⁵ In Victoria, 40% of TAFE students are from a low socioeconomic background, as compared to 33% in private VET institutions and 14% in universities;⁶ there are clear arguments for TAFE's potential to deliver a public good through equitable education, but the capacity is dependent upon sufficient financial aid, as well as greater confidence from - or realistic incentives for - students who wish to pursue tertiary study at a non-university institute.

Recommendation: reverse cuts and fully restore funding for TAFE digital and physical infrastructure; ensure that funding incentives for private institutions are not structured to allow for exploitation of students; remove upfront fees for courses with high industry demand.

The future of work

With the growth of the gig economy and the decline in secure, lifelong work arrangements,⁷ there is a greater need for people entering or returning to work to develop transferable skills and refine their digital literacy. Pressure is being placed on both education institutions and workplaces to deliver this skills-based learning, and familiarity with how to effectively use information and communication technologies (ICT) is increasingly important. Despite growing

¹ Colette Snowden and Sally Lewis, 'Mixed messages: public communication about higher education and non-traditional students in Australia' (2015) 70 *Higher Education* 585, 590-91.

² *Ibid.*, 592.

³ Shalailah Medhora, 'Why is no-one doing TAFE diplomas?' ABC Triple J Hack (News Article, 22 May 2018) <<https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/why-is-no-one-doing-tafe-diploma/9777332>>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ TAFE for Victoria, 'Five Policy Priorities for a strong VET sector' (Policy Statement, Victorian TAFE Association, April 2018) 16.

⁶ KPMG, 'The importance of TAFE to Victoria's prosperity' (Final Report, Victorian TAFE Association, February 2018) 8-9.

⁷ Wayne Lewchuk, 'Precarious jobs: Where are they, and how do they affect wellbeing?' (2017) 28(3) *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 402, 403.

up surrounded with ICT in their day-to-day lives, younger generations hold misconceptions about the role of ICT, who can and ought to study it, and how to distinguish between consumer-roles and creator-roles.⁸ There is a growing awareness of the need to equip young people with targeted knowledge about ICT and other transferable soft skills in order to prepare them for a dynamic and sometimes precarious work environment.

Recommendation: include more details on information and communication technologies in secondary and post-secondary education; ensure transferable skills are built into core coursework in vocational study.

Current industry demand

TAFEs have a record of matching the call for changes in job patterns and industry requirements and assisting directly with filling labour shortages,⁹ and continue to do this quite well. There is still significant room for industry supply in the areas of telecommunications trades, engineering professions and technicians, teaching, and health support.¹⁰

The Victorian Model: free TAFE and matching industry demand

The Victorian Government recently implemented a model of free TAFE for priority courses to encourage young people to gain skills in industries that have significant demand. Potential student eligibility is focused on bringing young people and those without higher tertiary certificates into the Victorian workforce to fill labour gaps - achieving one of TAFE's key aims.¹¹ The use of the free VET model recentres TAFE as a key institution for skill development into the workforce.¹² With completion rates of VET courses across the country sitting at 47%, and TAFE at only 43% (recorded in 2016),¹³ the Victorian TAFE model removes the barrier of cost¹⁴ and has the potential to incentivise young people into workforces that are in demand.

Recommendation: remove the barrier of cost for TAFE priority courses nationwide, allowing the recentering of TAFE as a legitimate service provider.

⁸ Bronwyn Campbell, Marvis Leung, 'Engaging young people in information and communications technology training in TAFE NSW' (Research Report, TAFE NSW ITTELG Industry Liaison Unit, 2016) 22-25.

⁹ KPMG (n 6) 9.

¹⁰ Department of Jobs and Small Business, 'Occupational skill shortages information', *Dept. Jobs and Small Business* (Website, 4 October 2018) <<https://www.jobs.gov.au/occupational-skill-shortages-information>>.

¹¹ **The free TAFE model states that to be eligible individuals must either be under 20 years of age or not have a higher level of education than the TAFE course selected.**

¹² John Pardy, 'Free TAFE in Victoria: who benefits and why other states should consider it', *The Conversation* (News Article, 4 May 2018) <<https://theconversation.com/free-tafe-in-victoria-who-benefits-and-why-other-states-should-consider-it-96102>>.

¹³ NCVET, 'VET program completion rates', *NCVER* (Statistical Report, 13 August 2018) <<https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/vet-program-completion-rates-2016>>.

¹⁴ Medhora (n3).

Conclusion

The reduction of funding vocational education only serves to disvalue the role TAFE and private vocational institutions can offer the public and the ways in which practical post-secondary learning can bridge wider gaps within the workforce. Reliable and substantial funding is necessary to allow vocational education institutions to adapt with the changing workforce. Providing free TAFE for priority courses furthers this cause and cements public education as effective for the public good. NUS calls on the Australian Government to focus on expanding vocational education and training, committing to full funding, and supporting policies that grow a culture of respect and seriousness towards vocational study in order to secure a credible future for young people and the workforce.

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