Submission to:
IPART Review of the Skills Base in NSW and the Future Challenges for Vocational Education and Training

from
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on behalf of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) – NSW Division

NTEU is an industry-based national union representing staff in tertiary education. In all Australian universities, NTEU represents academic and research staff, general staff, ELICOS teachers, and staff of Student Unions and university companies. In Victoria, NTEU represents TAFE general staff and all staff in Adult Education. NTEU is growing steadily and has over 26,000 members.

The NTEU fully endorses the view that education and training provision is crucial to meeting the challenges facing labour force participation as a result of changes in the nature of work and an ageing population. In relation to this, the NTEU has an interest in the Tribunal’s review in the following areas:

1. the role of public adult education providers and metrics of effectiveness;
2. the implications of any expansion in VET participation for the education and training of VET teachers; and
3. pathways from VET to higher education.

1. The role of public adult education providers and metrics of effectiveness

Australia, alongside the OECD, UNESCO and many other nations, has placed lifelong learning on its policy agenda. If an effective lifelong policy agenda providing for early childhood through to late adulthood is to be developed and implemented, public investment at all stages of people’s educational career is essential.

DEST commissioned research reports by Watson (2003) and Watson and Ryan (2003) point to a high participation in education and training in Australia, and that they occur both formally and informally. One important finding from the research is that there is widening socio-economic gap in participation in education and training, that is, those who are in highly paid/highly skilled jobs tend to participate more in education and training than those in low paid/low skilled jobs. This may be attributed to the increasing emphasis on self-funded learning that creates a barrier to universal access to lifelong learning.

While recognising the different roles that private provision, including in-house education and training and informal education and training can play, the NTEU maintains that it is critical for Australia to have a vibrant public education system. As Watson (2003) claims, “as it presently stands, the emphasis the lifelong policy agenda places on individuals’ co-financing of their own learning contradicts its stress on lifelong learning as a remedy for social exclusion” (ix). The research also shows that small businesses are less likely to invest in education and training than larger firms (Ryan and Watson, 2003). This reinforces the need for a strong public education and training system that makes education and training accessible and affordable for all workers, irrespective of where they worked. In terms of the economy, and supporting small business to flourish, employee access to publicly funded education and training will be a determinant in their competitiveness.

A number of the research reports (Kemmis, et al, 2006; Considine et al, 2005; Beddie et al, 2005;
Wickert and McGuirk, 2005; Foster and Beddie, 2005) highlight the importance of community-based and local educational pathway programs for many adults who would otherwise be disengaged from education and training, and consequently also have low labour market attachment or face a precarious employment experience. For many adults access to non-formal non-credentialled educational programs in local communities often engender the confidence they need to re-engage with learning and provides a learning that helps to engage them in the workforce. Traditionally, public education sectors like ACE and TAFE have provided these pathway programs, including through literacy and numeracy support that enable learners to participate effectively in learning.

Although private registered training organisations are able to offer current and focussed training to meet the short term skills needs of organisations and individuals, they do not have the expertise or the infrastructure to provide the learning support that is needed to increase participation in VET for a number of equity groups. Several reports have revealed the growing importance of generic skills, including the Myer competencies to ensure employability (Clayton et al 2003; Ryan and Watson, 2003). These skills are not developed through short training courses. Rather, they must be integrated into a broader training and education program that contextualises these skills in the learners’ employment contexts.

2. The implications of any expansion in VET participation for the education and training of VET teachers

Public adult education sectors including TAFE and ACE are about to face a major staffing crises. In NSW TAFE, only 26% of the teachers are aged 39 or under and 78% of the teachers are non-permanent teachers (NCVER, 2004,18). Over the next 5 to 10 years, there will be a major exodus of experienced teachers from TAFE. Succession planning and renewal is a priority for TAFE. This is also critical for the ACE sector which has a similar profile. This is particularly urgent if VET participation is to be increased.

Increased participation in VET, given the current staff profile of TAFE and ACE, means that there is also an urgent need to train more qualified VET teachers and those teachers which will provide the enabling and pathway programs. This is acknowledged by TAFE managers (Clayton et al 2005). Research of VET practitioners themselves indicate that they have been working in a rapidly changing environment, and that in organisations such as TAFE, they do not feel they have a grasp of the drivers of these changes. This suggests the need to examine the training and education of VET teachers themselves, and whether they are well equipped to negotiate their way around an increasingly complex environment (Harris, et al, 2005b). NCVER research shows that most VET practitioners do not have qualifications in education and training (2005). Although NSW TAFE and many RTOs are now viewing the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training as the defacto minimum qualification, this qualification is clearly inadequate in developing a professional VET teaching workforce with knowledge, expertise and vision that can take leadership roles in educating and training the future Australian labour force.

VET and other adult education practitioners must be provided with professional university qualifications in order to deliver quality education and training. This will be crucial to effecting lifelong learning in Australia; the school sector has clearly taken this on board, and the adult education sector cannot be left behind.

The changes to higher education policies and funding, coupled with the lack of career path for professional trained adult educators, have meant that education faculties (like many others) have been struggling to remain viable. There is an urgent need to examine issues of renewal in the university education faculties as well in order that new adult educators have access to quality training.
3. Pathways from VET to higher education

Research on student traffic between VET and higher education show that there is traffic both ways, and that students generally are seeking distinct experiences and outcomes from the two sectors (Watson, 2003; Harris, et al 2005a). In particular, students who come to university expect and gain a more academic (broader, theory-based) experience than in the VET sector. The NTEU recognises the importance of facilitating pathways between sectors, and retaining the distinct purposes of each sector.

A final point that the NTEU wishes to comment on is the introduction in 2004 of a new level of qualification of Associate Degree that can be offered by universities and other self-accrediting higher education providers, and other providers including TAFEs and private VET providers (http://www.aqf.edu.au/ad.htm). While endorsing the value of multiple pathways to fully accredited Bachelor’s degree and recognizing that there are some quality measures surrounding this qualification, the NTEU expresses its serious concerns about expanding provision of this qualification outside the University sector, particularly since this qualification has been designed to articulate to a Bachelor’s degree with up to two years advanced standing. Firstly, universities have placed increasing emphasis on articulating pedagogical approaches and content focus that give their courses distinctiveness, coherence and relevance to students’ academic and professional development. From the perspective of a student’s educational experience, starting an Associate Degree course in one institution and transferring mid way into a full Bachelor’s degree in another institution can be unnecessarily disruptive and lead to transition difficulties. Secondly, university level courses are distinct from VET courses because of their more conceptual treatment of subjects. The conceptual approach relies on research-led teaching, with staff keeping abreast of current scholarly knowledge of and involvement in the field. This engagement is typically gained from completion of a higher degree and ongoing research activities in the field. Currently very few TAFE staff and RTO employees would have higher degree qualifications or are actively engaged in research. Nor would there be the institutional support in TAFE for the type of scholarly research that university academics undertake. Setting up a second rate foundational university qualification is not in the long-term interest of Australia’s higher education system. Finally, from an economic perspective, expansion of Associate Degree provision outside the university sector can lead to further financial uncertainties for universities. This will create new financial pressures that will impact on the quality of education that can be provided in the university sector.

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