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A submission by Batchelor Institute of
Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) to the
Senate Education and Employment
Legislation Committee, Inquiry into Free TAFE
Bill 2024 [Provisions].

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Batchelor Campus
C/O Post Office, Batchelor NT 0845
Central Australian Campus
PO Box 9170, Alice Springs NT 0871

ABN 32 039 179 166
Freecall 1800 677 095
Email

batchelor.edu.au



Batchelor
Institute

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Purpose:

This document is a submission by Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee, Inquiry into Free TAFE Bill 2024 [Provisions].

Background:

“Batchelor Institute, as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation puts our peoples and knowledges at the very centre of all we are and do. We deliver something unique that no other educational organisation in the nation does. And we do this because we are determined to contribute to changing the lives and futures of our children, our families and our communities.”¹

Batchelor Institute began in the late 1960s as a small annexe of Kormilda College (Darwin), providing programs for Aboriginal teacher aides and assistants in community schools.

In 1974 Batchelor Institute moved to the Batchelor township. In 1982 the Institute commenced as a dual sector tertiary provider and since the 1980s has continuously built a focus on learning that is supportive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. A second campus was established in 1990 in Alice Springs. Between 1988 and 1999 the Institute was known as Batchelor College. In 1999 the current Batchelor Institute was established with an emphasis on Indigenous Australian ownership and governance of the Batchelor Institute Council. Since the Australian government higher education reforms of 2003 Batchelor Institute has been recognised and funded as a ‘National Institute’.

The Institute offers a range of courses aligned to employment opportunities in remote communities – from preparatory courses to VET certificates and diploma level courses, to higher education degrees, to postgraduate course work and research programs across three academic faculties and divisions. Our work has been recognised externally with the Institute winning the NT VET Large Provider of the year award three times.

Importantly the education and training we provide is developed and conducted through our educational philosophy of “Both-Ways learning”. Our students come to the Institute as part of their life’s learning journey.

They bring with them their own knowledge, language/s and culture and come as adults with previous life and education experience. They journey with Batchelor and continue to journey with their home community and family, at the same time.

While they are learning at Batchelor, they are building on their knowledge and skills. Students have these in both Indigenous knowledges and ways of learning, and in Western knowledges and ways of learning. Students, lecturers and support staff all journey together. Through this

¹ Dr Pat Anderson AO, Chair. Batchelor Institute Strategic Plan 2025-2027, Chair’s Forward.

pathway a rich and supportive teaching and learning environment is created. This learning is situated sometimes on campus, and sometimes on the community, sometimes at work. Some students do workshops at their home community; some students travel to campus for workshops; for many it is a combination of both. The learning at Batchelor builds on learning from home and also contributes to the knowledge that students share in their home communities. For many students, this means validating their new knowledge and learning with their elders. Batchelor graduates are highly skilled, bicultural leaders with a strong identity and skills in learning and problem-solving.²

Figure 1. "Both-Ways learning".



The Both-Ways philosophy is the cornerstone of what we do and the way we do it. Its impact is to create opportunities for our students to graduate from the Institute with the following attributes:

They are able to:

- Embrace a both-ways philosophy in lifelong learning and professional practice
- Be self-confident with a strong sense of identity
- Value learning, critical analysis, creativity and First Nations scholarship
- Think strategically and make and implement decisions informed by this thinking.
- Appreciate, value and operate in culturally and intellectually diverse environments
- Work professionally and ethically, independently or with others
- Accept individual and community responsibility and obligations.

Our observation is that these attributes are those sought by our industry partners and individual employers. They are attributes that support a highly productive, agile and constantly improving workforce.

They are also the attributes sought and highly valued by community members and organisations, for application in the complex environments that are remote and regional

² Ober, R & Bat, M 2007, 'Paper 1: Both-ways: the philosophy', *Ngoonjook: a journal of Australian Indigenous issues*, no.31, pgs.64-86)

communities. Most students undertake courses on a part time basis – reflecting the multiple responsibilities most BIITE students have (i.e. community, family, carer, and cultural responsibilities).

Our strategic purpose is to provide transformative education centred on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s knowledges, imagination and voice and where teaching, learning and research is built upon and accountable to Country and community.

Our values, the things that are important to us centre on:

- **World class education** – we show the way and lead the way through excellence to deliver equity and justice.
- **Students and communities first** – we are responsive to aspirations of students and communities and walk together on the journey with learners.
- **Culture is strength** – we recognise and respect old ways as the foundation to uphold our cultural values, obligations and responsibilities.
- **Both ways approach**-we position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as knowledge holders and privilege our ways of teaching and learning. Our strength is understanding and appreciating local context and value and demonstrating reciprocity.
- **Innovation and opportunity** – we centre our ways in collaborations and partnerships that deliver positive impact for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.³

Fee Free TAFE is an opportunity we have taken up to support our strategic intent and look forward to continuing to utilise the initiative to support our students and communities in partnership with our stakeholders.

Submission points:

We have been providing what is effectively fee free vocational education and training in some form for fifty years. Reflecting on our experience over these years we offer the following observations that may assist the committee in their deliberations.

Our understandings of what the legislation seeks to achieve.

Our perspective is that Fee Free TAFE is about supporting a prosperous and equitable Australia through removing financial barriers to education and training and ensuring a coordinated national response to workforce shortages in industries and occupations of local and national priority.

It is about supporting priority groups to (including First Nations Australians) to access education and training in areas of skills in demand, to support an agile and vibrant labour market, which in turn supports the development of a sound society and economy.

³ Batchelor Institute Strategic Plan 2025-2027, Pg 6.

Importantly it commits the Commonwealth to ongoing support to states and territories through implementation agreements between the parties, recognising the importance of a collaborative approach to effectively managing the national VET system. This provides a level of certainty as to how the sector operates and will be funded.

What we have achieved with the Fee Free TAFE Initiative and fee relief more broadly.

BIITE has a long history of fee support for First Nations students, supported through particular government programs available at the time and through contracted arrangements with employers and agencies. Most recently, since 2021, BIITE has provided fee relief to 12,220 students outside of the Fee Free TAFE initiative. See below.

Table 1.

Sum of Total Fee-Type	Year				Grand Total
	2021	2022	2023	2024	
Fee Exemption - Administrative Error - non FFT			193	38	231
Fee Exemption - AIDP (Defence)	201	184	142		527
Fee Exemption - AQF Level I or II	1253	796	934	869	3852
Fee Exemption - Centrelink Benefit	160	86	12	8	266
Fee Exemption - Contract	389	528	389	171	1477
Fee Exemption - Dept of Justice	930	583	181		1694
Fee Exemption - Professional Development	80	55	25	89	249
Fee Exemption - School Student	121	87	77	133	418
Fee Exemption - Short Course	112	122	62	249	545
Fee Exemption - Unemployment or Financial Hardship	4	11	1		16
VET Fee for Service	129	131	17	61	338
VET Flat Fees	390	279	177	193	1039
VET Tuition Fees	579	367	31	124	1101
Fee Exemption - Approved Fee Waiver - Director VET_DCEO_CEO	3	4	357	103	467
Grand Total	4351	3233	2598	2038	12220

Relate to students that studied under a Fee for Service contract between the Institute and a relevant third party where students are not to be charged directly. Each contract indicates if students are to be charged or not.

Fees are charged or exempted in accordance with the relevant VET Fee Policy current in that year

Fees are exempted based on, fee waivers granted internally, financial hardship or Professional Development for Staff undertaking training (not funded by the Government - fee for service) and administrative errors.

Fee exemption arrangements are a function of a number of factors including the BIITE VET Student Fees policy in a particular year, fee for service contracts with organisations such as the Department of Justice and the Australian Defence Force, BIITE staff undertaking professional development, and students suffering financial hardship or in receipt of Centrelink benefit.

Fee exemptions 2021- 2024 indicate a high proportion of the BIITE student body has received fee support. The table below describes this.

Table 2.

Percentage of non FFT Fee Exemptions by Year	
2021	74.76%
2022	75.97%
2023	91.34%
2024	81.45%

We have a solid record of actively working with communities, stakeholders, partners and students to minimise financial barriers to First Nations people to gain a viable, useful education, an education of value to them, their families and communities. Most of this has been done fee free (through exemptions) outside of the Fee Free TAFE initiative.

In 2023 the Fee Free TAFE initiative commenced with BIITE offering 400 places. Of the places taken up 85% of students were primarily from communities classified as “remote and very remote”. Of these 400 places 70.75% were at the Cert III level, 25.75% at the Cert IV level and 3.5% at the Diploma level.

BIITE was then allocated 220 places per annum for 3 years. (2023 places included commencing and continuing students in a course in 2023.)

There was a change to selection criteria for Fee Free TAFE from 2024 and beyond, notified in February 2024. The change was that continuing students were no longer eligible for Fee Free TAFE. This created a great deal of angst amongst the student population, particularly those seeking to continue their 2023 studies, having entered their course on an understanding that fees would not be payable. It also created significant financial management challenges for BIITE. At this point a decision was taken by the Senior Executive Team of BIITE to grant fee exemptions to continuing students from 2023 and new students who may have missed out on one of the annual 220 places.

219 TFF places were taken up in 2024 with 85% of students drawn from communities classified as “remote and very remote”. Of these 219 places, 67.58% were at the Cert III level, 27.85% at the Cert IV level and 4.57% at the Diploma level. As noted above BIITE has a history of solid fee support for First Nations people. In 2024 it supported 537 individuals through fee relief to study (outside of the Fee Free TAFE initiative). 77.47% enrolled for a Cert III course, 18.25% for a Cert IV course and 4.28% for a Diploma.

Overall BIITE provided forms of fee relief to 1156 individuals over the 2023 – 24 period. (See Table below.) These are individuals who were not likely to access vocational education opportunities if fees were charged.

Table 3.

Students / fee relief / course level / location & year											
	2023				2023 Total	2024				2024 Total	Grand Total
Row Labels	Major Cities of Australia	Outer Regional Australia	Remote Australia	Very Remote Australia		Outer Regional Australia	Remote Australia	Very Remote Australia			
16-NOFEE						78	113	346	537	537	
Certificate III						56	81	279	416	416	
Certificate IV						15	28	55	98	98	
Diploma						7	4	12	23	23	
TFF	1	59	203	137	400	32	64	123	219	619	
Certificate III		37	131	115	283	14	36	98	148	431	
Certificate IV	1	19	61	22	103	16	23	22	61	164	
Diploma		3	11		14	2	5	3	10	24	
Grand Total	1	59	203	137	400	110	177	469	756	1156	

The 2023 TFF initiative produced 42 completions (with eligibility allowing for commencing and continuing students). In 2024 TFF 24 completions (commencing students only) were achieved. 36 non-fee completions were also reported in 2024, representing continuing students from 2023 and commencing students in excess of the 220 TFF places. Over 2023–24 102 students completed their courses without having to pay fees. See below.

Table 4.

	2023			2023 Total	2024			2024 Total	Grand Total
	Outer Regional Australia	Remote Australia	Very Remote Australia		Outer Regional Australia	Remote Australia	Very Remote Australia		
COMPLETED	11	16	15	42	24	22	14	60	102
16-NOFEE					17	10	9	36	36
Fee Free TAFE	11	16	15	42	7	12	5	24	66
Grand Total	11	16	15	42	24	22	14	60	102

Through a combination of funding sources, including Fee Free TAFE, we have provided learning opportunities for 1156 students over two years, students who would be unlikely to have taken up education and training without fee support.

While this in itself is a positive thing, contributing to the skilling of local labour markets, BIITE’s educational approach and philosophy supports a “multiplier effect”. As noted in this submission, BIITE is an institution that is well known and regarded by First Nations people. Many current students have parents, uncles and aunts and grandparents who have attended Batchelor. We know from our engagement at a community level that Batchelor graduates command a degree of respect in their communities, with many seen as role models for the benefits of ongoing learning. We know of no other institution that has the level of generational impact that ours does. Fee Free TAFE means that each year, and extra 220 or so individuals will become students, they will work through their studies, work in their communities and become the role models we have spoken about. It is the nature of community life that highly regarded and respected individuals’ positively impact the next

generation. For many a Batchelor education contributes significantly to this regard. Ultimately this contributes to the cultural, social and economic wellbeing of communities. This is a good return on investment.

Given our experience as a First Nations institute, with fifty years of service provision and much of that through fee free arrangements for the majority of our students, we believe that we can provide a unique and informed view on the Fee Free TAFE initiative.

Our perspective on Fee Free TAFE.

At a strategic level Batchelor Institute supports both the intent and application of the Bill. We are a unique and independent institution renown for excellence in teaching and learning, culturally safe student experiences, graduate employment outcomes and positive contributions to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The Fee Free TAFE initiative supports us in this strategic endeavour, allowing us to engage with a greater number of students, work with those students to develop industry sought capabilities and link them to employment and further education opportunities in skill areas in demand in their local labour markets. The Fee Free TAFE initiative has the administrative rigour to support quality education, with the flexibility required by our “Both Ways” education and training approach.

The initiative supports us in continuing to respond to student, families, communities and industry partners aspirations and needs. We listen and work closely with students, their families and communities, as well as education, research, policy and industry partners. We provide training, education, and research for students, their families and communities to be empowered to achieve their aspirations and priorities. We provide skilled and experienced employees for our industry partners. Fee Free TAFE has increased our capacity to do this.

The removal of financial barriers to education and training is something we have been working with over our fifty years of operation. The communities we draw the majority of students from are places of significance to those who live there, in many cases being lively communities with an increasing young population. They are also, generally, considerably socially and economically disadvantaged. The regions we draw most of our students from have an average Socio Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) score of 1.27, with 98.73% of other regions in Australia having a higher socio economic status than our catchment regions. Most households have low incomes, many individuals have low education levels, skill levels are not well developed and there is limited access to material and social resources.

While levels of socio economic disadvantage can be a barrier to participation in education and training generally, the nature of remote and very remote communities is such that the cost of day to day living is central to the experience of many of our students. Paying fees for education and training would be well down the hierarchy of needs for many First Nations people in regional and remote Australia.

As an example, ABS Census data from a sample of six communities ⁴ identifies an individual's average annual income as \$12,915.

The fee cost of a Cert IV in School based education support, a popular and highly valued course, is in the vicinity of \$2250 for an individual. ⁵ This represents 17.4% of an individual's average income, a sizeable amount for those located in remote communities where the average family food bill has been estimated to be between 34% and 50% of income, ⁶ with fuel/transport costs estimated to be 17% of income.⁷ The point here is that 17% of a person's income, to buy a VET course, competes with the necessities of life, and in particular food and transport. Without some form of fee relief education and training will lose out to what are daily necessities.

In developing our submission one of the things we did was to conjecture a future with no Fee Free TAFE. (An analysis of policy/program absence helps ensure that new initiatives are only implemented when truly necessary and beneficial. ⁸) We concluded the following:

1. The viability of BIITE as an entity to support vocational education and training, particularly for First Nations people, would be severely compromised. The current level of Fee Free TAFE support goes some way to meeting the demand employers and industry have for skilled employees, particularly in remote regions and communities. This skills demand is increasing as are the populations in most remote communities. If there was no Fee Free TAFE, we would be in a position where we would not be able to service increasing industry demand, which in the longer term would undermine our ability to operate as an educational centre of excellence.
2. On the student side of the equation not having Fee Free TAFE would further challenge the ability of individuals in remote communities to access pathways to education and employment. The Community Development Program is being phased out and current Commonwealth employment program providers do not have a strong track record in remote communities.
3. Without options for development, younger people in particular, often become trapped in a spiral of disengagement, from education, employment, their families and in many cases from their communities. It is very difficult (and costly) to work to break this cycle, which has significant community impacts socially and economically.

⁴ Maningrida, Galiwinku, Wadeye, Wurrumiyanga, Santa Teresa (Ltyentye Purte) and Hermannsburg.

⁵ Approximately 920 nominal hours at \$2.20 per hour.

⁶ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, Parliament of Australia, Report on Food Pricing and Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities (December 2020)

⁷ Markham, Francis, (2024), The Poor Pay More: Why the Remote Area Allowance Needs Urgent Reform, Austaxpolicy: Tax and Transfer Policy Blog, 12 February 2024, Available from: <https://www.austaxpolicy.com/the-poor-pay-more-why-the-remote-area-allowance-needs-urgent-reform/> .

⁸ Australian Government Guide to Policy Impact Analysis, March 2023. Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. <https://oia.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-02/oia-impact-analysis-guide-nov-22.pdf>

Regions and communities experiencing high levels of social and economic disadvantage traditionally do not generate a natural pathway from school to vocational and / or higher education. Environments in which households have low incomes, where education and skill levels overall are low, and where there is limited access to financial, material and social resources often are not incubators for a commitment to and engagement with education and training. Our work over the last fifty years however has shown that students from marginalised backgrounds can and do engage in education and training, and this experience contributes to their employability and skilling across communities. They provide a positive and ongoing contribution to local and regional labour markets and economies. This is not simply a result however of the provision of financial support in the form of fee relief. What we have learned over the years is that fee relief, without a range of supporting practices, in itself will not engage individual to the extent that they are successful in their learning journeys and future employment.

Our learnings through our achievement:

What we offer is important.

Irrespective of fee arrangements, effective, sustained provision of vocational education and training to First Nations people requires quality courses, solid links with industry and employers and sound, collaborative relationships with governments.

Community connection. The nature of the courses offered; how they are researched, designed, developed, delivered and evaluated needs to be genuinely student centric. We can confirm, based on our experience, that courses need to be tailored to the context within which our students live. For BIITE this means we put an emphasis on ongoing engagement with the communities from which our students are drawn. This is active and generally face to face engagement with community organisations, businesses and families. We invest significant time in this. It is only through knowing and respecting the context within which our students live that we can develop and deliver learning and skilling solutions that will make a difference at both individual and community levels; responding to not just the need but also the nature of those offered a fee free opportunity and the environment in which they live and work.

Industry and employer engagement. Over 50 years we have developed strong links with industries and employers across the Northern Territory. This supports our ability to develop and deliver courses that align with industry needs and facilitates the application of skills and knowledge learned back in communities. Without these strong links with industry and employers, we would not be able to offer courses that make a difference. The point we would like to make is that even though a course may be funded to the extent that it is “free” to the student, unless there is a solid link to skills and knowledge application outcomes in communities and the broader labour market, the course is merely activity, signifying nothing.

Working with government. The Vocational Education and Training system is by its nature and necessity, complex. Over the years we have worked with government to

navigate this system to ensure the best possible outcomes for our students. Generally, this all works. In the case of the Fee Free TAFE initiative, it is clear that it has delivered benefits to our students and their communities. A higher degree of clarity around the initial operation of the initiative, would have been helpful. Examples include:

1. Initial mandatory reporting in 2023 took some time to sort through, requiring an amount of rework on our part.
2. Our initial allocation of 400 was followed by an allocation of 220 places per annum. The thinking behind this 220 place allocation is still not clear to us.
3. The change in guidelines disallowing ongoing students Fee Free TAFE places in 2024, advised in February 2024 caused angst among many of our students and imposed an administrative burden on our staff.

Given the nature of the cohorts identified as a priority for the initiative, providing certainty to students and institutions as to eligibility and operation must be paramount in any planning for future program delivery.

Support – outside of fees.

Batchelor provides students with a range of supports designed to maximise learning opportunities for students.

It all starts with relationships. We have an active presence in our constituent communities that enables us to research and develop learning opportunities that support our “Both-Ways” approach. We know what is needed and what works “on the ground”. Allied to this (as noted previously) we actively maintain a relationship with industry stakeholders at both community and regional levels. We work in partnership with these stakeholders to ensure that the educational experience we provide meets the current and emerging needs of employers and industry. Labour markets in the Northern Territory are informed by sustainable business relationships, we know this and actively work to develop and sustain industry relationships.

We have been working with Territory based industry and employers for decades and as such are in a position to ensure that the education and training, we provide effectively meets labour market needs. This is what sits behind the Fee Free courses we provide. Without the relationships, with communities, industry and employers it is unlikely that the provision of fee support in itself would establish an effective, sustainable, long-term funding model, that addresses skills shortages in communities and regions, in line with national priorities.

Accommodation and care. Most of our students are from regional and remote areas. A significant number of our students complete at least part of their education through attendance at workshops in the major centres of Batchelor and Alice Springs. In the case of the Batchelor campus, we have a significant residential facility. In the case of Alice Springs, we arrange accommodation for students locally, with the establishment of a residential facility in the Desert Peoples Centre planned for the future. We provide more than accommodation in both cases. We ensure that accommodation and surrounding arrangements are culturally

appropriate and safe. We invest significant time in ensuring that students supported to the extent that they can maximise their learning when attending residential components of their courses.

Similarly, we work hard to ensure that the non-accommodation element of the student experience underpins individual quality learning. Our Student Services area works with students to ensure that they are:

1. Appropriately welcomed, inducted and oriented to Batchelor.
2. Appropriately linked to external supports such as ABSTUDY and the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS).
3. Provided with social and emotional support throughout their studies.

Importantly, all of this is provided in a culturally sensitive and safe manner.

This is one of the things that sets BIITE apart in the minds of many First Nations people. Recently the Institute assessed the Vocational Education and Training function, including listening to student experiences of Batchelor. Many spoke of the way Batchelor recognised and responded to who they are. One student stated, *“Batchelor is an important part of who we are.”*

Another noted that Batchelor has a First Nations focus and importantly *“...a focus on people from the bush”*. Other comments included:

- *“Batchelor is attentive to our needs as First Nations people, it is a welcoming and safe space.”*
- *“Will Batchelor be offering diploma courses? I want to do a diploma here; I don’t want to go to a mainstream university. They do not understand me”.*
- *“We highly value the Batchelor approach of ‘learning together’ with students actively supporting each other.”*
- *“We want Batchelor to continue for another 50 years and for our kids to come here.”*

Our success in providing quality, valued vocational education and training to our constituent communities and individual students makes a difference in communities with perhaps the strongest evidence of this being the generational nature of student attendance at the Institute. Many of our current intake of students have parents, grandparents and other family members who have attended the Institute. The culturally informed understanding and supports we provide contribute much to the success of our students. Importantly having individuals in families and communities who are Batchelor graduates does much to encourage individuals to take up study; they can see someone they relate to and can identify with as achieving educational success and are more likely to start down the education and training path.

On graduation, the majority of our students remain in / or return to their home communities. It is in their communities that they are able to apply the skills, knowledge and experience gained through their Batchelor experience. While important to individual graduates, it is the community that also gains from the application of vocational skills. It is unlikely that these positive outcomes would be achieved without the support services we provide. Again, we would like to make the point that fee relief alone is unlikely to support the development of skills and experience needed in local labour markets and communities.

Our communities. Remote communities are well known for four things:

1. There is always work to be done.
2. Individual and community resources are often stretched.
3. There are generally not enough skilled and qualified people to do the work needed.
4. The cost of importing labour is exorbitant.

The provision of culturally appropriate, high standard, experientially focused vocational education and training to people living in remote communities goes some way to addressing the skills shortages that plague the bush. It also goes some way to people having their own agency in managing the challenges of community life.

It facilitates active participation in local labour markets (where they exist) by local people, bringing social and economic benefits to families and communities. Given the low level of socio-economic status for the communities from which our students are drawn it is highly unlikely that many individuals would be unable to access the valuable vocational education we offer if full fees were charged. If this were the case their home communities would be even more disadvantaged than they are, in turn placing greater demands on governments to support them. This is why, as mentioned previously, BIITE, took a decision, to wherever possible and appropriate, waive students' fees.

The implementation of the Fee Free TAFE initiative has allowed us to further build our student base, with resultant positive impacts on their home communities. The initiative as applied to those from remote communities can be seen as part of a longer-term economic development approach, building capacity and capability locally, for work to be done and for incomes to be earned locally.

Challenges. Providing fee free courses will not ensure skills and employment outcomes without understanding and responding to the needs of students. Our students are drawn from some of the most socially economically challenged regions of the country. Their lives are complex and at times challenging, balancing family, community, cultural and work responsibilities. Many have not had access to sound foundational education, particularly in the areas of numeracy and literacy (including digital). Most do not come from a position of privilege. Over the years we have come to recognise that this requires us as a provider of high-quality vocational education and training, to approach our students from a particular perspective. One of our most experienced senior managers put it this way

“Most educational institutions, when faced with working with potential students from low socio economic backgrounds and limited numeracy and literacy skills, ask the question ‘Are these students ready for us?’. Our approach at Batchelor is to ask, ‘Are we ready for these students?’ Answering this question guides us in what we do.”

While our previously developed approach and the implementation of Fee Free TAFE has benefited our students and operation there are three areas that continue to challenge us broadly and in relation to our application of Fee Free TAFE opportunities.

1. As mentioned previously levels of numeracy and literacy (including digital) are relatively low in many remote communities. In the case of the Fee Free TAFE initiative, it may be useful to consider, in remote Australia, to focus on “Taster” type courses at the Cert I and Cert II level, with a focus on practical and applied numeracy and literacy to support further effective vocational educational study. This focus could be reflected in funding agreements.
2. Linked to this we have engaged in developing and delivering courses with levels of local language content which have proved to be very successful, particularly with Indigenous Ranger groups. Our difficulty here is that the interpreting and translation of materials is costly and not something contemplated in the current funding model. Linked to this there are only a few language speakers amongst our educators at this stage. (This is likely to change as more First Nations language speakers qualify as educators.)

The fact that we are able to undertake, what has proven to be very useful work in skills development in remote communities, utilising local languages, is down to a few dedicated individuals, rather than an embedded systematic approach. It may be useful to consider a model for example that accommodates two educators, one a language speaker and the other the technical expert and fund this arrangement appropriate. Current funding arrangements make this difficult, however the return on this investment of such an approach will be higher levels of course uptake, solid contextualised learning and quicker competence achievement. People on the ground, undertaking important work will be able to do so more quickly, efficiently and effectively.

3. Engagement of young men from those communities strong in tradition and culture can be difficult. It is clear to us that in a number of our constituent community’s language, culture and lore remain strong. In the case of young men, the transition from boyhood to manhood, in line with traditional cultural practices, can put them at odds with vocational education deliver methods.

In developing this submission one of our most experienced managers noted that in a number of communities boys attend school and can do well. They then go through ceremony and return to the community as men, not boys. Men do not go to school, so they disengage from the school system. They re-emerge at around 18-19

years of age and want to work, to do something with their lives. There are two barriers here to going down the traditional VET path. The first is that it is likely they have not completed their schooling, with compromised numeracy and literacy abilities. The second is that many perceive classroom type learning as “school”, something for children. The Fee Free TAFE initiative may want to consider an approach that deals with these two perceived barriers through piloting a program that integrates numeracy and literacy “catch up” with hands on in community delivery of an appropriately identified course of study, specifically targeting these young men. The benefits of such an approach will accrue not only to the individual, but benefits are also likely to be spread across families and communities. Re engagement of these young men is also likely to increase the number of positive role models in communities, something in itself that will assist in the future engagement of young people. It is also likely to provide a positive pathway for many young men as opposed to the hopelessness and disconnection that long term unemployment and disengagement, common in many communities, fosters.

Specific matters.

This section summarises our observations relating to the Terms of Reference of the Senate Inquiry into the Free TAFE Bill 2024 [Provisions].

Potential impact on the vocational education sector, funding mechanisms, and implementation strategies.

BIITE knows the opportunity structured fee relief can provide individuals living in challenging circumstances. We are also familiar with complexities of the sector, including funding mechanisms. Our observation is that the initiative is likely to have a positive effect on the sector, in that it provides ongoing commitment to a sector that needs sustained support if vocational skills development is to keep pace with industry and community needs. From our perspective the detail of the funding mechanism needs refinement to accommodate the needs of First Nations Australians living in remote and very remote Australia. Put simply, the provision of effective vocational education and training in remote Australia is costly if it is to be done well, something that is not fully considered in the current funding regimen. As noted earlier, there is likely to be a significant return on investment, over the long term, through ongoing upskilling, in turn supporting more effective local labour markets, all positively impacting local economies.

Linked to the previous paragraph, it may be useful to further refine the targeting of Fee Free TAFE to cohorts to facilitate tailored education and training responses to particular needs, such as the disengaged young men mentioned earlier in this submission. We understand that undertaking such programs will involve significant development and preparatory work, probably well beyond what is contemplated by the current funding regime, however we believe that this is an opportunity for an organisation such as BIITE to work with governments and communities to address what has been a significant issue in the Northern Territory for at least the last forty years. Fee Free TAFE could be a catalyst for such an approach, with potential benefits well beyond vocational education and training.

Finally, certainty around implementation is crucial to successful student engagement. Criteria and guidelines relating to the ongoing program need to be clear, concise and implemented in a timely manner.

The provisions of the bill.

Our observation is that provisions contained within the bill are clear and likely to support the intent of the legislation, with appropriate underpinning regulations and guidelines.

Potential economic and social implications of implementing free TAFE education in Australia.

Our view, as applied to our students and their communities, is that Fee Free TAFE is a positive initiative that supports our way of delivering high quality vocational education and training. As noted previously in our submission our students are drawn from the most socio economically depressed regions and communities in Australia. Fee Free TAFE is one vehicle for engaging individuals in making a positive future for themselves, their families and communities. Fee Free TAFE and fee exemptions generally are, for many of our students, the first step on the ladder of learning, skilling, employment and economic self-sufficiency. Anything that supports the development of individual and community agency in remote Australia, ultimately will socially and economically benefit the bush (and the nation). This is what Batchelor has been about for many years and Fee Free TAFE is another means by which our aspirations, those of our students and communities can be supported.

Alignment with existing education policies and its potential interaction with other vocational education initiatives.

Our focus is on First Nations students. Our observations are that:

1. Fee Free TAFE supports equity of access to post-secondary educational participation, allows for the incorporation of cultural recognition and respect in education, and supports students to attain the same skill levels as other Australians which aligns with the intent of the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education policy.
2. The Fee Free TAFE initiative aligns with those policies and programs that are important to us including the provision of ABSTUDY and ATAS supports.

Timeline and feasibility of implementing the Free TAFE program.

Our understanding is that Fee Free TAFE implementation will be carried out over a number of years with permanent implementation established in 2027. It is likely that this time frame will be met as long as governments increase their engagement with the sector to ensure that the necessary administrative infrastructure is in place, is efficient and works. There is time to do this, however the work needs to be constructive, collaborative and start now. It may be useful to adopt a co-design/co-production approach to developing requisite guidelines and administrative structures. There are many people in the VET sector, outside of Canberra who know how things actually work on the ground and, as in our case, are happy to share these understandings.

The bill's impact on TAFE institutions, private vocational education providers, and the broader education sector.

As indicated throughout this submission, our focus is our students and their communities.

We have indicated previously in this submission that the intent of the

legislation, to support a prosperous and equitable Australia, through the removal of financial barriers to education and training is something we fully support. It clearly aligns with our purpose as an Institute. Our perspective is one of a specialist, not for profit provider. It is also the perspective of an organisation that works with students who, socio economically, are the most marginalised in the country. The success we have had with the provision of fee free education and training is based on our core commitment to the student, providing education on their terms in a way they can engage with.

We invest a lot in supporting our students, well beyond simple academic assistance. We also invest heavily in long term relationships with our partners and stakeholders to ensure that we can provide the best education and training courses possible to meet their needs. All of this takes time and money, investments we choose to make even though there may not be an immediate financial return, and certainly not a profit. The return is in the quality of the courses provided, the matching of skill sets with skill needs and ultimately support for vibrant and agile local labour markets. Our success with fee exemptions, including fee free TAFE is to do with knowing that not paying fees is only the starting point for a person to effectively engage with the education and training system. It is the “wrap around” approach to course management and delivery that results in positive outcomes.

It is difficult for us to conceive how a profit focused provider would be able to effectively engage with students, stakeholders and partners to the extent needed to ensure the best possible outcomes for all.

Benefits and challenges associated with the Free TAFE initiative, including its impact on student enrolment, course quality, and industry partnerships.

As noted previously we see Fee Free TAFE as a support for the work that we have been doing over the past fifty years and the work we will continue to do into the future. It has allowed us to increase enrolments to a degree, however the demand for quality, culturally attuned vocational education and training in communities continues to grow and ideally Fee Free TAFE places will grow in line with this demand. For us this is why it so important to ensure in the development and delivery of any vocational education and training is done in genuine and ongoing partnership with industry. Without a solid articulation between industry and employer skill needs and course development and delivery, providing fee relief would be a pointless and wasteful exercise. We have observed, in a few instances, that some current providers, not well connected to industry in the Northern Territory, provide courses with few if any skilling and employment outcomes. Filling courses seems to be the priority, not positive outcomes for students. Our way of doing business, putting students and community needs first, in partnership with industry and employers, ensures that what we deliver is needed, relevant and valued. Without strong guidelines around meeting industry skill demands (as opposed to simply running courses for profit), any fee relief initiative will be compromised.

Provisions for ensuring the sustainability and long-term viability of the Free TAFE program.

Ensuring long term viability and sustainability of the initiative will be a function of the initiative delivering on an intention to support a prosperous and equitable Australia through

the removal of financial barriers to education and training; to support workforce shortages in industries and occupations of local and national priority.

To judge viability and support sustainability it is imperative to monitor and confirm what the program is achieving what it sets out to do. To this end it will be useful to have a detailed monitoring & evaluation strategy, and practice put in place as soon as possible. While data on enrolments and completions is currently collected and useful at a basic level, we suggest that research be undertaken to establish individual progression, through Fee Free TAFE, and into further study and / or employment. Such longitudinal studies have proven to be useful in establishing the impact of government initiatives in the past and could prove useful in the future. Similarly, it will be useful to conduct program outcome and impact evaluations (as opposed to activity and output measures), to see what sort of difference fee exemptions make at community and industry levels. What we would hope for is that the increased enrolments that result from fee exemptions will eventually translate into more people in communities receiving relevant skills training entering jobs and progressing through those jobs to build a robust economic future for themselves, their families and communities. The forms of research suggested are likely to be a sound way to confirm that the impact of the initiative has been to provide equitable access to education and training that results in jobs and ultimately increases incomes in communities, contributing to a skilled and prosperous nation.

Conclusion

Thank you for the invitation to provide this submission. It has offered us an opportunity to take time out to reflect on what has been achieved in recent years, including the assistance provided by the Fee Free TAFE initiative. This reflection has been heartening as much has been achieved by our students. It has also alerted us to a few areas that we want to focus on in 2025 to make the Batchelor student experience even better; for us to continually improve.

Finally, I would like to invite Senators to our Institute, if they wish to explore the Fee Free TAFE initiative more, or simply want to learn more about what we do and are planning to do.

Again, thank you for the opportunity.

Joe Martin-Jard
Chief Executive Officer

10 January 2025