



# NSW Adult Literacy & Numeracy Council

## ***Submission to the TAFE Inquiry***

The NSW Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the important role that TAFE in NSW has played as a public education and training provider, and the potential for an even greater role in the emerging VET landscape.

The Council is a membership based organisation representing a range of stakeholders involved in the provision of literacy and numeracy education and training to adults, including practitioners, teacher educators, researchers, education and training managers and policy makers.

The terms of reference of the Inquiry are stated as inquiring and reporting on TAFE's role in:

1. the development of skills in the Australian economy;
2. the development of opportunities for Australians to improve themselves and increase their life and employment prospects;
3. the delivery of services and programs to support regions, communities and disadvantaged individuals to access training and skills and through them a pathway to employment;
4. the operation of a competitive training market; and
5. those jurisdictions in which State Governments have announced funding decisions which may impact on their operation and viability.

As the Council is NSW based our comments will focus on our knowledge of TAFE in NSW.

The Council agrees that TAFE has a role to play in both 1) the development of skills in the Australian economy; and 2) the development of opportunities for Australians to improve themselves, increase their life and employment prospects and contribute productively to their communities. However, a concern that has been growing over recent years among our members is the privileging in policy of the first over the second. Our members have experienced a narrowing policy discourse around adult literacy and numeracy, and vocational education and training more generally to a largely and exclusively human capital discourse: skills for the economic growth and productivity. In particular, the *education* from *Vocational Education and Training*, and *Technical and Further Education*, have become de-emphasised, as if TAFE (and other RTOs) exist only to serve the needs and aspirations of industry and employers.

TAFE has played a distinctive role as a public education provider that serves the needs and aspirations of adults and their communities from creating pathways for second chance education through programs such as Community Outreach through to Adult Basic Education to nationally accredited VET courses up to and now beyond the Advanced Diploma level. TAFE has had the unique advantage of having the critical infrastructure and support services such as libraries, canteens, Aboriginal education staff, disability support teams and multicultural education staff. It also has provided curriculum and online learning support units and a policy and research presence. These services have highly qualified and experienced staff and add value to students' educational experiences. Very few private VET providers can offer this full educational experience to the broad range of VET students.

It is therefore bewildering and distressing to see erosions in so many aspects of TAFE operations that appear to undermine the unique advantage that TAFE has had. , The support

that TAFE can provide to their learners and their communities is diminished. Some examples are the downgrading of the qualification standards of permanent TAFE teachers to the minimum level (Cert IV in TAE), and the reduction in the breadth of educational programs offered by TAFE NSW in recent years. We recognize that all education providers, whether public or private should be responsive to changing demographic and needs of the learners and communities, and further, that as a public provider TAFE needs to be transparent and accountable to the public in its use of resources. However, there is no evidence that the public are demanding course closures or the lowering of TAFE teachers' qualification standards: there is a lack of transparency and public accountability in the way TAFE has been making operational decisions, and these decisions in turn may be detrimental to learners' and potential learners' educational experiences.

The Council believes that this is a critical policy moment for TAFE. While the pros and cons of a competitive market can be debated, this Inquiry cannot change the Governments' (both Federal and NSW) commitment to market reform. . However, there is a choice that has to be made about whether TAFE will drop its 'E' for *education*, or retains and builds on its strengths to integrate education and training to achieve human capital, social capital and identify capital for the economy, community and the individuals. There needs to be discrete funding to public providers such as TAFE organisations under the market design model being implemented by jurisdictions, so that full service provision, especially for students from equity groups can continue.

The Council believes that TAFE should build on its existing strengths to pursue the tradition of combining *education* and training. A number of recent policy documents from the Federal Government<sup>1</sup>, Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (AWPA)<sup>2</sup>, National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC)<sup>3</sup>, Productivity Commission<sup>4</sup>, Industry Skills Councils (ISCs)<sup>5</sup>, Australian Industry Group (AIG)<sup>6</sup> among others, have identified literacy and numeracy (also now referred under the umbrella term of foundation skills) as requiring significant attention in VET. While much investment has been put into creating VET products, such as the Australian Core Skills Framework, the Foundation Skills Training Package, and electives and qualifications in the Training and Education (TAE) training package, little attention appears to have been given to using and building on the experience and expertise within TAFE in literacy and numeracy pedagogies throughout the different levels of VET.

In 2011, a research project funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) made recommendations about how literacy and numeracy could

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<sup>1</sup> Foundation Skills Working Group Secretariat 2011. *National Foundation Skills Strategy for adults: Consultation paper*. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

National Centre for Vocational Education Research [NCVER]. *Building the foundations: outcomes from the adult language, literacy and numeracy search conference*. Adelaide: NCVER.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency [AWPA]. 2013. *Future focus: 2013 national workforce development strategy*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

<sup>3</sup> National VET Equity Advisory Council [NVEAC]. 2011. *Equity Blueprint 2011-2016 – Creating Futures: Achieving potentials through VET*. Melbourne: NVEAC.

<sup>4</sup> Productivity Commission. 2011. *Vocational Education and Training Workforce: Research Report*. Melbourne: Productivity Commission.

<sup>5</sup> Industry Skills Councils. 2011. *No more excuses: An industry response to the language, literacy and numeracy challenge*. Canberra: Australian Government.

<sup>6</sup> Australian Industry Group [AiG]. 2010. *National workforce literacy project: Report on employers' views on workplace literacy and numeracy skills*. North Sydney: Australian Industry Group.

Australian Industry Group [AiG]. 2012. *When words fail: National workforce literacy project – final report*. North Sydney: Australian Industry Group.

be better integrated into VET courses by teachers ‘working together’<sup>7</sup>. The research made recommendations – not for more VET ‘products’ but on pedagogies, professional development and policy to enable literacy and numeracy specialists and vocational teachers to use their collective expertise to enable learners to succeed in their VET courses. In particular, the report identified the competition for scarce resources in colleges (most of which were TAFE colleges) and the pressure to deliver VET courses in shorter time to be economically competitive with other providers as major deterrents for teachers to jointly plan, deliver and assess an integrated program.

At the moment, TAFE NSW has a critical mass of well qualified teachers who not only have the minimum skill sets from the Cert IV in TAE but also theoretical underpinnings that enable them to make professional judgments about appropriate pedagogical methods. As mentioned earlier, TAFE has the breadth of expertise (eg language, literacy and numeracy, community outreach, disability support and vocational specialisation) as well as the infrastructure that together constitute a strong foundation of a quality *education* and training provider. We believe the teaching qualification standards for TAFE teachers should be restored, and the links between the different areas of expertise in TAFE strengthened to ensure TAFE’s standing as quality public education and training provider in Australia.

The breadth of expertise in TAFE can be utilised further to build on its capacity as an innovator in VET. For example, TAFE has capacity in its languages sections, to integrate not only English language and literacy, but the learning of other languages into its VET courses so that their students have capacity to work confidently and competently as a member of global workforce. This aligns with the Commonwealth’s Asian Century policy.

The Gonski report has provided a clear direction of strengthening public school education in Australia. The Federal Government and State and Territory Governments must now seek to strengthen TAFE as a public provider of VET so that the students coming out of school, existing workers and unemployed people can be confident of having access to affordable, accessible and quality post-secondary *education* and training options.

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<sup>7</sup> Black, S. & Yasukawa, K. 2011. *Working Together: Integrated Language, Literacy and Numeracy Support in Vocational Education and Training*. Centre for Research in Learning and Change, University of Technology Sydney.