

AUSTRALIAN GREENS ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Introduction and summary

1.1 The Australian Greens are deeply committed to a strong, well-funded, public vocational education and training sector.

1.2 It is clear from the evidence presented to the committee the TAFE sector has been under enormous pressure following policy decisions to open up government funding to competition from private providers.

1.3 Clear themes of serious concern have emerged from the evidence provided, which are startlingly consistent across sectors, industries and interests.

1.4 Major and continuing cuts in government funding to the TAFE sector around Australia under both Labor and Coalition governments, coupled with the diversion of substantial public funding from TAFE to private for-profit RTOs under the contestability model, has resulted in a funding crisis for TAFE institutes across the country, with major losses of staff, resources and infrastructure.

1.5 This has diminished and in many cases removed the TAFE sector's capacity to provide supported affordable quality vocational training and further education to individuals, communities and industries across Australia. Given TAFE is the "bedrock" of Australia's VET system, serious concerns were raised across all sectors about the future of accessible pathways into education or quality skills training in this country.

1.6 The increasing of student fees; introduction of limited and completely inadequate learning support funding; and imposition of a limited once-only publically funded 'training entitlement' for each student has rendered VET qualifications out of reach for many students, and especially those students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

1.7 The substantial amounts of public funding now available to private providers as contestable funding has resulted in a 'explosion' of private providers delivering cheap-to-run qualifications that are not meeting skills needs of employers or students.

1.8 Evidence presented to the committee described the commercialisation of VET as resulting in a system not led by the broader needs of industry but by private, for-profit education providers, with potential students being ruthlessly marketed cheap-to-run products for the prime purpose of maximising those providers' profits.

1.9 A lack of regulatory oversight has resulted in a substantial proportion of low-quality high-risk private for-profit businesses being registered as RTOs and delivering substandard qualifications that are of no use to either employers or the student. This has resulted in students 'wasting' their once-only training entitlement; the skills needs of employers and industry are not being met; wasting of considerable public funding that is urgently needed in our TAFE systems; and a diminished confidence in the VET system as a whole.

1.10 The unequivocal underlying cause for these urgent and serious problems is the contestability model of funding for VET provision. The treatment of skills training and further education, and more specifically of TAFE, as a cost to be minimised in an open marketplace is antithesis to a thoughtful and meaningful approach to investment in Australia's learning and training.

1.11 While the Committee's majority report notes evidence from the Australian Education Union, TAFE teachers, students and business regarding the negative impact of funding cuts and contestability, the Australian Greens believe its recommendations do not go far enough in addressing these underlying factors. Therefore we have provided the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1

1.12 An end to the current model of competitive tendering of government vocational education and training and a comprehensive public examination and review of the consequences of full competition on TAFE, including the impact on the quality of vocational education, levels of student support and teaching infrastructure, and a reassessment of the case and justification for a competitive training market.

Recommendation 2

1.13 A complete and rigorous examination of the real costs of the provision of high quality vocational and further education, including:

- (a) technical skills for work,**
- (b) adult literacy and numeracy,**
- (c) crucial supporting knowledge and theory,**
- (d) student support and counselling services,**
- (e) support for the development of relationships with industry and employers,**
- (f) support for the development of relationships and partnerships with universities and schools,**
- (g) support for research and innovation,**
- (h) support for initial qualifications and ongoing professional development for teachers and staff.**

Recommendation 3

1.14 Guaranteed funding for the public TAFE system based on the actual costs of providing education, and on a funding model that supports a strong and increased base for capital works, maintenance, infrastructure, and equipment, and which properly recognises the important role of TAFE in providing vocational and technical education in areas of high and low demand, in rural and remote areas and improved access and participation for disadvantaged learners.

Recommendation 4

1.15 The national entitlement to a guaranteed training place should only be offered at TAFE, it should not be restricted to selected qualifications or industry areas, and it should be available as many times as a student requires.

Recommendation 5

1.16 The development of improved standards for registration of training organisations, and the provision of vocational education. The now defunct National Skills Standards Council made a start on the development of improved standards, but this work was set in the context of a rapid opening up of the market under the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development. This work now needs to be revisited and the standards strengthened and improved. The current regulatory environment provides no guarantee of quality for students, nor any mechanism for them to get their money back, or their once only entitlement back if the provider they attended provided no training, or was of poor quality. Every provider seeking registration to deliver vocational education in Australia should have the provision of vocational education as its primary purpose.

Recommendation 6

1.17 As part of the development of improved standards, there must be a mandated minimum funded duration of learning in all vocational education qualifications. It is the lack of a mandated minimum which, for example, allows providers to deliver qualifications over weekends, and then be paid as if they had delivered the full qualification.

Senator Lee Rhiannon

Australian Greens