

# Language Literacy & Numeracy Programs UNDER THREAT

Peter Job

For many years the Language Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP) around Australia has provided vital opportunities to adults to improve their reading, writing and numeracy skills, enhancing their prospects in employment, improving their life skills and acting as a strong vehicle for overcoming educational and economic disadvantage. TAFEs around Australia have played a central role in the provision of LLNP, appropriately so as organisations well connected to the community and committed to high standards. However, the provision of these programs through the TAFE sector and with it the standards of provision ensured by the link with TAFE has increasingly fallen victim to the Federal Government's contestability agenda.

Under the Federal Government's competitive tendering policy, NSW TAFEs and Adult Migrant English Services (AMES) have lost \$50 million over three years to private providers who have won contracts to deliver LLNP, a development which is expected to cost some 170 teaching positions. Riverina, Illawarra, South Western Sydney and Sydney Institutes of TAFE have received no tenders. New England, Hunter, North Coast, Western, Western Sydney and North Coast Institutes will continue to deliver some courses, but often in a reduced capacity. This constitutes a loss of about 75% of LLNP provision from TAFE and AMES in NSW.

In Queensland, TAFEs have had their LLNP programs cut by half, from previous contracts of \$30 million to about \$15 million. TAFEs in Redcliff, Sunshine Coast, Cairns and Rockhampton have lost out completely to private providers, while institutes in North Brisbane, South East Brisbane, South West Brisbane, Logan and the Gold Coast were awarded contracts shared with the RTO *Career Employment Australia*. Once again, this situation will inevitably cost jobs.

The Tasmanian contract for LLNP was once again won by Mission Australia, as it has been for a number of years, which successfully undercut the price required by the Tasmanian public provider to make

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the tender viable. In the Northern Territory LLNP has been in non-public provision for a number of years, including tenders once again won by Mission Australia and the private RTO *STEPS Training*. There were also some losses in Victoria, with Holmesglen TAFE losing its contract to a private provider, a development which is expected to impact upon 19 jobs, and Ballarat TAFE and the Gordon Institute of TAFE both losing contracts to a non-government RTO.

Fortunately the news is somewhat better in other jurisdictions. The Canberra Institute of Technology won the ACT LLNP contract back from a private provider in 2009, and has won the contract for another three years in this round of tenders. TAFEs in South Australia had a significant win, with a number of LLNP contracts in Adelaide which were lost to private providers some 10 years ago returning to TAFEs, meaning the majority of provision in the Adelaide metropolitan area will now be by TAFE. On the other hand, TAFEs in regional South Australia which used to have all the LLNP contracts lost tenders in Port Lincoln, Port Augusta and Whyalla to Mission Australia. Western Australia continues in mixed TAFE and private provision, with contracts for LLNP to TAFEs apparently continuing to be renewed.

The loss of LLNP programs to the public sector, where it occurs, will inevitably mean students will be pushed into lower cost, lower quality education. Private training colleges and other non-public providers are often able to win these contracts because they pay lower salaries, run bigger class sizes and are not required to maintain the level of professional qualifications and standards that apply in TAFE. As the New South Wales Teachers

Federation put it in a media release when the NSW contracts were announced, “This approach will take TAFE students down the path to the low standards and poor practice that characterise the on-the-cheap colleges for overseas students. It is a race to the bottom in educational standards”.

Students who are able to study LLNP programs in TAFEs or their public sector equivalents are able to benefit from the high levels of individual support, including counselling and other services that TAFEs are accustomed to providing to their students. When they study in TAFEs they are also in a better position to more seamlessly move into other courses and programs offered in these institutes.

While calling it a ‘price competitive’ policy, the tendering out of LLNP contracts by the Federal Government entails a further privatisation of public education and a ‘race to the bottom’ in quality which undermines the provision of the high quality, post compulsory, ‘second chance’ education that TAFE provides.

These changes have not come without opposition. On Thursday 24 June a Public Forum was held at the NSW Parliament which highlighted the issue. Activists at the forum ensured that the voices of teachers and students were heard. The message was that to build a strong and prosperous nation through a highly qualified, well educated workforce, governments must invest in quality TAFE and AMES instead of profit making or charity based private training providers.

The recent experiences of many private RTOs serving the overseas market is surely a shot across the bow to the Federal Government about the consequences of the kind of ‘race to the bottom’ the contestability agenda so often entails and an indication that such a ‘price competitive’ policy is not in the long term interests of the adult students such programs mean so much to. ❖

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