

June 2008

Students *and* TAFE

In 2006, there were 1.68 million students enrolled in the publicly funded VET system in Australia, about 1.33 million of whom attended TAFE. This is one in nine, or 11.5% of all Australians aged from 15 – 64 years. Of those students who attended TAFE, 79.1% were funded by governments. The number of overseas full fee paying students increased by 15% in 2006.

- 89% studied part-time
- 52.4% of TAFE students were male.
- There were 67,800 Indigenous students, 4% of the total VET population.
- 102,400, or 6.1% students reported a disability
- 397,400 students were apprentices and trainees, with 320,000 of them, or 19.1% of the total VET population doing off-the-job training
- 10% of TAFE students studied at Diploma level or above, but
- The majority of full-time students were studying at Diploma or higher

Since 1997, student enrolments have increased from 1,449,100 to 1,676,00 an increase of 15.75%

The TAFE Futures Inquiry found that:

- Students have positive attitudes towards TAFE, and high expectations of their learning outcomes
- Students are attracted to TAFE to learn ‘hands on’ practical skills, because they are “treated like an adult” and there are “teachers who are willing to help you”.
- Student services had been cut because of lack of funds – the pressure of competition has led to the axing of students services as TAFE institutes have sought efficiencies
- Student poverty means many students have difficulties in meeting the costs of education and associated expenses of transport, food accommodation and child care
- Fees are a major deterrent to people accessing TAFE courses
- Apprentices and trainees were living well below the poverty line, attempting to survive on extremely low wages

The Skilling Australia’s Workforce 2005-08 Mid-Term Review – Boston Consulting Group, (22 October 2007) (the BCG Report) recommended the introduction of income contingent loans in the VET sector. The Victorian government’s Discussion Paper on Skills Reform (April 2008) canvasses the introduction of an income contingent loans scheme in Victoria. Both papers are set in the context of governments either proposing, or being advised to reduce their funding for vocational education and training. In each case, the rhetoric refers to a need to “better reflect the balance between public and private benefit.”

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What does competition mean for TAFE Students?

Income contingent loans are being proposed as part of a cost shifting strategy to allow governments to reduce their contribution to the funding of vocational education and training, and shift the costs of training back onto individual students. The push to shift costs of training back onto individuals is an integral part of the strategy to create a completely open competitive market in VET. What will this mean for TAFE students?

The group of students who are being targeted in the current climate of skills shortages and almost full employment are those who are under or unemployed. These students require customised and targeted delivery, in order to build the necessary foundation skills for entry into training and the workforce. This attention requires the ability to offer a wide range of specialised supportive further education embedded in a diversity of vocational education and industry experiences. This breadth of experience is best found in TAFE institutions. TAFE's capacity to offer a supportive breadth of programs for students is under attack.

Competition and marketisation have the capacity to damage the critical relationship between TAFE teachers and their students. Competition undermines and is in conflict with the essential conditions for teaching and learning. It inverts the basic social relationship of teacher to student so that instead of teaching being for the learning of the student, students become mere sources of profit for the organisation. The extraordinary diversity of TAFE students and the quite reasonable expectation that they undertake high level qualifications, means that a huge effort needs to go into the development of suitable pedagogy. In turn, this requires the development and sustainability of communities of teaching practice both within and across educational institutions.

In the current environment, the emphasis is on short term outcomes, made imperative by market survival and the inevitable transformation of students into mere sources of profit. The complex communities of expertise essential for real educational outcomes become impossible and senseless expenses - with the consequence of an inevitable race to the educational bottom. No amount of 'quality' auditing will substitute for this deterioration of educational substance, even if it may provide cover for it.

An educational revolution in TAFE must give pre-eminence to teaching and learning and this is founded on care for the student, for the knowledge and skill students need, and collaborative continuous improvement in pedagogical practices. All these bedrock conditions are undermined by a contestable market.