

NSW VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (VET) REVIEW SUBMISSION

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Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
About Community Industry Group	4
Key Recommendations:	5
Challenges to addressing the current and future skills needs of care and community sector providers in southern NSW	8
Improving student success/Delivering VET in regional NSW	10
Key Recommendations:	11
Preparing VET for the future/Putting TAFE NSW at the Heart of the System	12
Key Recommendations:	14

Acknowledgements

Community Industry Group acknowledges the traditional custodians of this land, and their Elders past, present and future. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture, the world's oldest living culture, and the contribution they make to the life of this region and our country.

We recognise the strength, resilience, and capacity of Aboriginal people. Community Industry Group extends our gratitude and heartfelt thanks to our members and other service providers who openly shared their experiences of homelessness and housing instability with us through surveys, consultations, or other methods. Your perspectives are invaluable in identifying the impact of the ongoing housing and homelessness crisis on individuals, families and communities experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.



About Community Industry Group

Community Industry Group (CI Group) is the peak body working for community services and organisations in southern NSW. We support community organisations, promote expertise and innovation in community development, foster industry development and advocate for social justice.

For 30 years, CI Group has taken a leadership role in the local community services sector. We regularly engage with those organisations, services and individuals who collaborate with individuals, families, and communities experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. We also advocate on behalf of community organisations and vulnerable communities to raise awareness of the issues which are impacting service delivery and affecting the lives and outcomes of individuals, families and communities experiencing disadvantage.

Our members include not for profit service providers who deliver:

- Homelessness Supports
- Women's and Domestic Violence Support Services
- Child and Family Services
- Youth Services
- Aged Care
- Disability Services
- Generalist Community/Neighbourhood Centres

Our Vision

We have an influential place at the table where decisions which impact on community service organisations and communities are made.

Our Mission

- ▶ Support community organisations
- ▶ Promote expertise and innovation
- ▶ Pursue social justice in the region
- ▶ Foster industry development

Key Recommendations:

- Invest in TAFE NSW to adequately deliver truly industry-connected, responsive and flexible training options, that fit with work and family commitments
- Recognise that teaching staff are the beating heart of the TAFE system. Invest to provide job security, convert contract staff to permanent employment, tighten temporary contracts periods, and pay commensurate to experience.
- Fund TAFE NSW adequately to provide more flexible models of learning.
- Rebuild the TAFE NSW enrollment process to make it easier, more accessible and more person-centred.
- Invest in more mobile training units and measures .
- Invest in TAFE NSW business management team to build on and scale up localised programs of learning, through utilizing current relationships or building links into the care and community sector .
- Reduce the size of TAFE NSW regions to relieve pressure on teaching and administrative staff.
- Enable teachers to travel to smaller campuses to deliver more face-to-face training.
- Invest in and enliven the “bricks and mortar” campuses as a matter of urgency, as this is where students in the care sector develop the hands-on skills of client care that cannot be delivered via a virtual learning model alone.
- Resource RTOs to deliver necessary training.



Community Industry Group (CI Group) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the NSW government’s review of the NSW VET sector. We wholeheartedly support the aim of this review to rebuild and strengthen TAFE NSW, in recognition of the vital role it plays in serving our community.

We have consulted extensively with members to identify strategies which can help boost student access, ensure NSW TAFE is at the heart of the system going forward, and better deliver VET in regional areas like ours in the future.

This submission addresses the challenges our regions face in terms of ensuring there is a solid pipeline of workers skilled to meet the demands of a growing workforce, particularly in regional areas. The inability to attract and retain an adequate workforce has been an area of focus for Community Industry Group (CI Group) and our members for well over a decade.

CI Group has been disappointed at the lack of investment needed to maintain a truly robust vocational education and training system, one that helps industry attract, train and retain the necessary workforce.

TAFE NSW remains the training provider of choice for much of our sector and CI Group members advise that funding NSW TAFE adequately and ensuring our local RTOs have the resources they need to scale their operations up is critical to meeting increasing demand.

According to the ABS 2021 Census data there are at least 26,569 workers engaged in the healthcare and social assistance sector in the Illawarra, Shoalhaven, South Coast and Southern NSW. When the number of hospitality, cleaning, transport, administration and other staff working in the sector are factored in it is well over 30,000 workers.

The Community Services and Health Sector is the biggest employer in the region, with the Community Services and Health Sector employing:

- 14% of all employees in Shoalhaven;
- 13.4% in Wollongong; and
- 13.1% in Shellharbour.

These figures exceed the state average of 11.6%. (PWC Illawarra and Shoalhaven Aged

Care Workforce report 2023)

This increased demand has widened the gap between the need for assistance and the available workforce. The demanding nature of community and care work, coupled with comparatively lower wages and limits to career advancement opportunities, further discourages individuals from pursuing or staying in the field.

The Black Summer bushfires of 2019 and the 2020 storm and floods, followed closely by the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these challenges in our regions by placing additional strain on existing healthcare, community and care staff, and further increasing the demand for skilled professionals.

In addition, many skilled workers have left the industry, and the pipeline for recruiting people into the sector, training them and retaining them is struggling to keep up with this demand.

Community Industry Group members recognise that NSW TAFE must be at the heart of the NSW VET system - and it must be funded and managed properly to deliver on its core purpose and values, namely to:

- Meet the evolving needs of industry and learners in communities across NSW
- Provide education services to meet the skills needs of individuals and the workforce
- Consult with industry and the community to ensure that our services remain relevant
- Provide disadvantaged groups with access to education and other specialised services

To truly realise these values and purpose, the NSW Government must invest in TAFE NSW and resources RTOs to deliver necessary training. Furthermore TAFE NSW has an established network of wraparound support services that assist students who have challenges to ensure they can attend, study and successfully complete their studies, and these services must be nurtured and maintained.

Challenges to addressing the current and future skills needs of care and community sector providers in southern NSW

Members in the care sector identify challenges to attracting, skilling up and retaining staff in the regions.

Some of these are external challenges:

- The geographic dispersion of regional NSW often makes it harder to attract workers into the community and care sectors, exacerbated by a lack of housing options, childcare, affordable schooling and education opportunities.
- Maintaining a workforce during stressful events like natural disasters and the COVID pandemic, with the training and experience to deliver for our communities, but who also have the capacity to train and supervise new learners including individuals on practical work experience.
- An aging workforce in regions, which results in experienced workers retiring from the care and community sectors and taking their skills, expertise and staff capacity with them.
- The increasingly individualised nature of the provision of care in the disability and aged care sectors also makes competition for staff between providers in regions more difficult, as this educator sums up:

“Our providers are struggling in every sector to find workers. The fact we have these quite different systems with aged care and disability and that they are becoming so individualised means we need so many people to provide that work. I spoke to an employer just yesterday who had people apply for jobs, get an interview, and then not turn up to those interviews”.

- **South Coast educator**

Some provider report internal challenges within the NSW TAFE system:

- The convoluted enrollment process (discussed below)
- The cuts to NSW TAFE teaching places which has resulted in lower enrollments and a drop in community confidence.
- Increased complexity to providing input into the courses and training needed.
- Staff loss or turnover impacting development of partnerships in regional areas which help attract and retain students to the sector and to support them to complete their studies

- Rolling restructures by successive executive management which have disrupted the ability for TAFE NSW staff to work effectively and innovatively with industry and ensure training meets the needs of these employers
- TAFE NSW administrative regions are generally considered to be too large and dispersed to be able to deliver the depth of connection and engagement our members would like to see.

Improving student success/Delivering VET in regional NSW

CI Group members recommend several key changes to improve student success and ensure the delivery of VET is equitable and accessible to students living outside metropolitan areas. These include:

- Adequately fund TAFE NSW to provide more flexible models of learning and to invest in greater in-person on campus engagement.
- Improve the convoluted and onerous enrollment process, which has become a barrier for many as NSW TAFE has moved away from in-person or over-the-phone enrollment to a difficult to access and use online portal.
- User and employer experience with this portal is poor and it has been identified by employers, TAFE staff and potential learners trying to access courses as one of key reasons enrollment numbers have gone down.
- Reduce the size of TAFE NSW regions to relieve pressure on teaching and administrative staff.
- More investment in regional and rural campuses, particularly in in-demand skill areas like the community and care sectors.

The loss of a robust person-centred enrollment process is particularly hard for regional students, who have more questions about access, online study, virtual learning and course choice and are often unable to access a campus nearby to talk to someone, have difficulty with the language barrier or limited access to the internet. The inability to speak to a real person to gain answers will often be the difference between them enrolling or not.

The TAFE NSW administrative regions are generally considered to be too large and dispersed to be able to deliver the depth of connection and engagement our members would like to see. The TAFE NSW South region extends from Wollongong down to the border, and goes out as far as Deniliquin. The headquarters are located in Albury. This does not allow for the close regional relationships needed to ensure workers and educators understand the landscape of the demand and makes it difficult for industry and TAFE to work together to come up with localised solutions and options.

In regional areas, travel distances are large, and balancing physical attendance with travel time, family and work commitments can be an impediment to course completion. CI Group members want to see more investment back into regional and rural campuses, particularly in in-demand skill areas like the community and care sectors.

While the move to the “virtual classroom” arrangement during COVID has theoretically opened up access to more regional, rural and remote learners to study with TAFE NSW, it is not for everyone. This style of learning is more interactive and participatory than a self-directed online learning module series completed at an individual’s own pace, however it does not always work for those requiring higher levels of support (study assistance, language assistance, help navigating library resources etc) to complete their studies.

Further, in a hands-on space like the care sector it is widely recognised that opportunities for in-person skills acquisition must be provided.

Students in the care sector need to be able to hit the ground running. We therefore recommend investment in physical campuses, and more time for TAFE NSW staff to develop and foster relationships with local care providers and community service organisations to provide opportunities for on-the-job and practical experience. This investment is essential to ensure we will meet the demand for new staff in our regions

For instance, the TAFE NSW campus at Nowra has a mobile coffee van it uses to give students real-world in field experience in hospitality. Investing in mobile training infrastructure for the care sector, and funding the travel of TAFE staff with these resources would be hugely beneficial.

This is exactly the kind of investment and innovation that only TAFE NSW can deliver at scale. Currently, there is neither the business case, nor will for the private sector to make these kinds of investments. In addition few private VET providers have the kind of long-standing and wide-ranging connections into the care and community services sector that TAFE NSW has to connect students with care providers for practical on-the-job training.

Key Recommendations:

- Fund TAFE NSW adequately to provide more flexible models of learning
- Rebuild the TAFE NSW enrollment process to make it easier, more accessible and more person-centred
- Invest in “bricks and mortar” campuses to provide hands-on skills acquisition
- Invest in more mobile training units and measures
- Increase staff travel budgets to allow more face-to-face teaching time for rural and remote and to allow greater collaboration between sector employers and providers and TAFE NSW teaching staff

Preparing VET for the future/Putting TAFE NSW at the Heart of the System

“In our very large area, we’ve been delivering a virtual classroom, which is different from digital self-directed learning but we will need to look at more flexible models, because one issue with training people is they will come to TAFE NSW for a particular qualification to get a job or to change careers. Then they go and get a job in the sector to support themselves and then don’t have the time to come to class (during the day)

So we are looking at how we can roll those students into much more flexible models of delivery and try to keep them. We find that happens a lot in the disability space – at the moment you don’t have to have Certificate 3 (to start working) and once you get your foot in the door, it becomes harder to continue their studies as they get smashed with work! So limited flexibility in learning options becomes a barrier to completing training in that space”.

- **TAFE NSW senior teacher**

Gone are the days of one-size fits all training. CI Group members are telling us they need training providers to be as flexible in the delivery of learning as possible - and include options for people working in the sector already that caters for their work and family commitments.

Furthermore, as employers have encountered increasing difficulty attracting workers into the care and community sectors at the scale needed, they have created a multitude of different streams of entry to work to capture as many potential workers as possible. This has in turn made it harder for VET providers and TAFE NSW to deliver the necessary training and skills for such different cohorts.

“What I have noticed working as a senior leader in the disability sector, is the decline in students attending our organisation for student placements as well as the lack of TAFE qualified students applying for positions that we advertise. This shift has been nothing short of dramatic and is counter intuitive considering that our sector, as well as Age Care, are the fastest growing, particularly with the start of the NDIS. It is not uncommon for our organisation to employ people with limited experience and then require them to develop the necessary core skills that TAFE used to be the leader in providing. I can only ask myself why this is happening and can only think that the move to more online training is seeing less people going down this pathway for various reasons. Some of these reasons may be the lack of support that is offered to students that are online based as people that are attracted to this sector that I mainly came across had varying backgrounds such as coming from a low socioeconomic environment, being a refugee or having English as a second language,

having a disability themselves or they struggled academically in their previous contact with school or adult education. Quite often we provided the bridge for them to move from the many barriers they faced”.

- **Senior Executive Disability Organisation**

For example, many employers in our regions are targeting school-aged people through school-based programs. TAFE NSW and VET providers are being asked to formulate courses and training for the 15-24 year old cohort who might be accessing their VET component via a school-based traineeship, or a post-school traineeship. Other employers may be targeting older workers with families. There must be greater flexibility in delivery to suit the availability of those cohorts.

The disability sector is a clear example of where workers often need to combine work and study. As one disability service recruiter summed up, the current VET and TAFE NSW system does not fully meet their needs:

“Finding skilled workers in geographically dispersed areas is hard and despite the breadth of scope that a career in the disability sector can offer, it’s presently not seen as an attractive sector to work in long-term. Current proposed solutions to address some of these barriers include portable training, use of micro credentials and access to traineeship opportunities. I would like to see the NSW VET sector invest in partial qualifications and provide easier access to pathways for RPL. I think greater attention to flexible learning and support for remote learners is essential in ensuring a consistent learner experience and quality of skills and knowledge being developed”.

- **Disability service recruiter**

There is a recognition in the sector that TAFE NSW is still the training provider of choice, and our sector are keen to see the quality of training, skills and work experience that TAFE provides. Employers are keen to ensure the quality of courses and breadth of what is available in the care and community sector is as broad as possible and funded to deliver the specifics that the sector needs.

“I went to TAFE 3 nights a week for several years and I know through that scheme I was getting a lot of information on weekly basis. But now there is more of a push to get people through it quickly. One concern we have is the pace of the courses being run - I have seen instances where training providers brought people in, paid them as they did their on-the-job training and got them up and running faster. But that doesn’t mean they are all suited to work in aged care. These are our older community members who deserve the best level of care possible, and I’m not sure doing it this way works best. There needs to be greater access to more of a traineeship relationship where TAFE NSW organises work placement and standards are maintained”.

- **Aged care recruiter**

There remains a significant portion of the care sector who do not have formal qualifications. As regulations continue to tighten in this sector, there must be a focus on ensuring those already performing vital work are not caught out with a certification gap. The sector requires greater flexibility and recognition of prior learning and experience on the job, and opportunities to access training for certification that fits in with work and family commitments.

The community services sector recognises that TAFE NSW staff have always been a key ingredient for student success. These key educators must be supported, provided with job security and improved working conditions if we are to encourage more quality educators to enter the industry to train the next generation of care workers.

Key Recommendations:

- Greater flexibility and recognition of experience on the job through RPL, and more opportunities to recognise experience on the job when accessing training for certification
- Learning opportunities which fit with work and family commitments
- Convert contract staff to permanent employment, tighten temporary contracts periods, and provide salaries that are on par with or better than industry standards to attract quality candidate