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The Committee Secretary

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment Parliament House

CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary,

I would like to take this opportunity to contribute to the ***Inquiry into the role of Technical and Further Education system and its operation***. TAFE and the other public VET providers across Australia are an essential component for up skilling the Australian workforce so that our country and its industries remain competitive in the market place. TAFE is the training provider of choice for the majority of the general public seeking to gain vocational education and training to launch their careers to find meaningful and fulfilling work in the community. TAFE and other public providers also provide valuable opportunities for many equity groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people with disabilities, migrants with English as a second language, those requiring literacy and numeracy to name just a few.

I am an Aboriginal VET (Vocational Education & Training) Officer in the Aboriginal Training Programs team with the Tasmanian Polytechnic (at the Burnie campus)and our team have seen significant changes in the last few years both to our team and how we operate as well as the organisation. Please note that when the word 'Aboriginal' is used in this submission it also represents Torres Strait Islanders peoples.

A. the **development of skills** in the Australian economy;

The Tasmanian Polytechnic is the only public provider of VET for unemployed Tasmanians and therefore Aboriginal Tasmanians seeking vocational skills to gain jobs. As in other Aboriginal communities across Australia, Tasmanian Aborigines are over represented in unemployment statistics often coupled with significant literacy and numeracy issues, low confidence and poor schooling experiences, all of which still continues today. Many of these factors can be mitigated to a small or larger degree, depending on each individual's circumstances, through the provision of dedicated culturally appropriate support services as we have at the Tasmanian Polytechnic.

Three years ago the Aboriginal Training Programs (ATP) statewide team consisted of five full-time staff (2–Hobart, 1-Launceston, 1-Devonport & 1-Burnie). Two years ago hours were cut from two full-time positions and they were reduced down to 0.6 FTE's (full-time equivalent). One year ago one of these positions was made surplus to requirements for the Polytechnic and that person was redeployed to another agency and the ATP team dropped to 3.6 FTE's. Our very real fear is that in the next budget round of cuts the remaining part-time position will be slashed as we no longer have

any fat in our budget and for the last three years our team, along with every other Polytechnic teaching and non-teaching team, has had to reduce its operating budget.

ATP provides dedicated services and programs to approximately 1200 Aboriginal students across the state and with the merging of the Tasmanian Polytechnic and the Tasmanian Skills Institute on the 1 July 2013 we will be required to support an even greater number of students through the addition of apprentices and trainees.

Both the reduction of staff and the annually reducing budgets has placed great strain on our team's ability to provide a full service to the Aboriginal community who rely on us to a great extent to assist them to get a foot in the door on a pathway to training and ultimately employment.

- B. the **development of opportunities** for Australians to improve themselves and increase their life and employment prospects;

As an example of the value of providing equity training programs for Aboriginal students one of Aboriginal Training Programs former students was working in a casual unskilled labour role as a tree planter working in mud and the cold in winter and the hot sun in the summer with periods of no work at all and a family to support. Poor pay levels and the uncertainty of this employment led this person to seek change through enrolling in a Certificate III in Community Services Work through an Aboriginal program. With some support and the determination of this student he gained his qualification. He then gained work experience with some casual employment tutoring lower level Aboriginal students. Over the next few months this student won a position at a local Job Search Agency as an employment consultant and has turned his life around.

This is just one of the many positive life changing stories for our students that shines a bright light on the value and support provided by our public VET system. Cut services and staffing levels and success for our students also suffers.

- C. 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;

The importance of the Tasmanian Polytechnic as the public VET provider in this state cannot be overstated. Tasmania is primarily a rural community with extremely limited public transport (other than in Hobart) which restricts many Tasmanians' training opportunities. At the end of 2012 The Burnie campus' Creative Arts program, other than Fashion, was removed from the Burnie campus and is now only available at the Devonport campus (50 minute drive by car but 1 ½ hours by public transport). These programs have always been attractive to our Aboriginal students but none of last year's students have continued with their studies in this area as they are on Centrelink benefits and cannot afford the cost of petrol, do not have a driver's licence or own a vehicle. There is only one bus to and from the Devonport campus to attend classes.

Aboriginal VET Officers are an essential part of the Polytechnic. We are in identified Aboriginal positions and maintain our continuing involvement and relationships in the Aboriginal community. More importantly – we are accountable to our community and any actions taken by governments, whether state or federal, which cut staffing levels or services and programs to our disadvantaged Aboriginal people does not 'Close the Gap' between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Tasmanians literacy, numeracy, achievement of qualifications and increase employment but exactly the opposite.

There have been an increasing number of students who have recently been released from prison seeking training and assistance. One person has been living in a tent while waiting for public housing or even emergency housing to become available. He is determined to not go back to prison and has

enrolled in a Foundation program (the Aboriginal literacy course has been cut) to build both his skills and his confidence levels before moving into a vocational course. There have been problems lately with his attendance that I have only recently been informed of as he isn't in one of our Aboriginal programs. He is at risk of not having a successful outcome in this course.

Another Aboriginal student who is a young single parent with one child enrolled in the Aboriginal class Certificate I in Preparation for Work & Study in 2011 to build her confidence. In 2012 she then enrolled in another two Aboriginal classes the Certificate II in Community Services and the Certificate I in Active Volunteering. After gaining both these qualifications she has in 2013 enrolled in a mainstream dual Certificate III in Community Services Work and Certificate III in Disability. Her aim is to enrol in a Nursing degree at the University of Tasmania in 2014. This student has only progressed down this pathway by starting out in a culturally sensitive program that builds both confidence and skills enabling our Aboriginal students to move confidently into mainstream.

A service that has been cut from our program just this year due to reducing team budgets has been the tutorial support for Aboriginal students struggling with their studies. Students in need previously may have been eligible for 2 hrs per week of tutorial support. This was often only required for short periods of time to work through a particular study issue and occasionally for longer periods for students with higher learning needs. The budget for this service has been eroded over the last 3 years until in 2013 when it has been stripped from our budget altogether. In the last two weeks there have been two Certificate III students and a Diploma student request tutorial support. The Diploma student is seriously considering pulling out of her studies.

D. the **operation of a competitive training market**; and

For Aboriginal Training Programs the operation of the competitive training market has changed the way we do business and provide training opportunities to the Aboriginal community across Tasmania. For years our very small team has had to competitively tender for nearly all of the VET courses we offer specifically for Aboriginal students. This places a large drain on the limited time each Aboriginal VET Officer had to provide our other support services. The only exception to this has been our Aboriginal literacy and numeracy classes which have been funded through the Polytechnic's MOU with Skills Tasmania using ASCH (Actual Student Contact Hours). Cuts to 50% of the literacy classes mentioned previously.

On reviewing the competitive process several years ago, we were able to provide feedback to Skills Tasmania who administered the equity funding we competed for annually. While ATP was reasonably successful in winning funding each year there were negative consequences to our program delivery and student recruitment due to the drawn out application and approval process starting with tenders opening early September and approvals or otherwise not being known until December. This would then delay the program planning for our Aboriginal courses as we would need to fit around the Polytechnic's mainstream programs that had been planned in October/November and we were often required to run courses in the remaining time available in workshops and specialised classrooms. Often the delays would also mean that teachers in our programs were sessional staff with limited or indeed no teaching experience or no teaching qualifications who needed to be mentored by other staff.

Since 2012 Aboriginal Training Programs has been in a two year Preferred Provider pilot where by ATP is guaranteed an agreed amount of funding each year, with clear and timely approval times for training and other equity projects to be endorsed. While there have been some kinks to iron out the

pilot has seen a marked improvement on Aboriginal community engagement and retention in programs ATP have delivered. As we strongly desire this pilot to continue beyond the two years we have been very committed and, indeed, motivated to deliver strong outcomes under the new arrangements. In the first 12 months the numbers of completions and retention has increased. Reporting requirements have also changed to include a broader range of data on students in these programs prior VET experience and further pathways after completion of their training.

This temporary pilot has meant Aboriginal Training Programs has been able to work on improving training outcome for Aboriginal students. Budget cuts to the Foundations teaching team who deliver our Aboriginal literacy and numeracy classes has seen these classes abolished in the North West region of the state as at the end of 2012. Some of the students dependant on the Aboriginal literacy classes have been able to transition into Certificate I Foundation pre-vocational courses but many have since withdrawn from VET altogether as they either did not meet the suitability requirements or had insufficient literacy skills to gain entry into the programs. Another important reason why certain Aboriginal students have not enrolled at the Polytechnic in 2013 has been that for some of our students they only feel confident when first entering the VET environment through joining an Aboriginal class which is culturally inclusive and supportive. In the past these Aboriginal literacy classes have been the door to a brighter and fulfilling future where success in training and gaining skills and qualifications has meant employment. These people then become role models in the community who demonstrate the value of training and employment.

In conclusion we have continued to move forward towards continuous improvements both as an organisation and a team. We can bring about improved outcomes for students given the chance but that does not mean that it takes a big stick to achieve that through significant budget and staff cuts. TAFE and public VET staff are motivated to do our best but that willingness can be ground down to dust if we are continually asked to achieve more with dwindling teaching staff, dwindling support staff and indeed dwindling funding.

Yours sincerely,

Michelle Purdy

12 April 2013