

# Vocational Education and Training in NSW:

Report into access and outcomes for young people experiencing disadvantage.

Joint report

Youth Action - Uniting - Mission Australia

February 2018



**Uniting**

**MISSION**  
**AUSTRALIA** | together  
we stand

## Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge and give special thanks to the project reference group including Rebecca Burdick from the NSW Business Chamber, Kelly Tallon from the Advocate for Children and Young People, Kitty te Riele from the University of Tasmania.

We would also like to thank the young people who attended the consultation and the youth and community service workers and secondary and tertiary education members who responded to and distributed the survey.

## About Youth Action

Youth Action is the peak organisation representing young people and youth services in NSW. Our work helps build the capacity of young people, youth workers and youth services, and we advocate for positive change on issues affecting these groups.

## About Uniting

At Uniting, we believe in taking real steps to make the world a better place. We work to inspire people, enliven communities and confront injustice. We provide services for vulnerable children, young people and families, early childhood education and care, aged care, disability services and chaplaincy. We also get involved in social justice and advocacy issues that impact the people we serve.

## About Mission Australia

Mission Australia is a national non-denominational Christian organisation, with more than 155 years' experience in standing together with Australians in need on their journey to independence. We work with families and children, young people and provide specialist services for people with mental health, disability and alcohol and drug issues to reduce homelessness and strengthen communities across Australia.

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# Executive Summary

Too many young people in NSW are confronted with significant barriers when entering the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, and this is especially the case for those experiencing disadvantage. VET plays a vital role for young people in the transition from school to both further education and employment. Difficulties with this transition can result in unemployment, underemployment and social exclusion that may affect young people for the rest of their lives and have long-term undesirable social and economic implications. As a result, it is imperative that young people experiencing disadvantage receive specific and targeted supports to overcome the barriers they face to accessing VET.

Youth Action, Uniting and Mission Australia collaborated with other sector organisations to better understand the challenges faced by young people who want to complete a VET qualification by conducting community consultations and a sector stakeholder survey. This report is based on the evidence gathered through these consultations, research and literature review.

Young people may experience a multitude of intersecting challenges when accessing or completing VET courses, including financial constraints, socio-economic factors, geographical remoteness and limited literacy and numeracy skills. These barriers are often exacerbated by funding rules, lack of information and difficulties with navigating the complex service systems.

Certain cohorts of young people, like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, young people leaving out-of-home care, those experiencing homelessness, young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, or with disabilities, have lower levels of VET take up and completion rates. Therefore, it is important to identify and support these young people through early intervention and proactive support.

Information about scholarships and FEE-HELP is complex and some young people may not qualify for these financial supports. Some young people who are eligible for fee exemptions or scholarships may not be aware of this or need assistance from a third party to advocate on their behalf to access these. There have also been frequent changes to the eligibility criteria for financial support and these changes have sometimes not been well publicised or communicated.

Recent policy changes created an open and competitive VET market, which impacted on how young people access and complete VET courses. These changes have resulted in reduced course options for young people in rural and remote areas and the cost and duration of travel are often prohibitive for this group of young people. There is currently also a strong focus on promoting online learning modes in VET including digital education hubs in regional areas. Although innovative course delivery models are encouraged, some face-to-face contact is vital to help disadvantaged young people build confidence, have a sense of connection with teachers and peers and access information on supports available.

Greater flexibility with VET entry requirements and additional individualised wrap-around supports are needed to ensure young people experiencing disadvantage are able to commence, continue and successfully complete their VET courses. This should include increased access to literacy and numeracy support and other foundation level courses in community-based locations.

The VET sector is vital to create a workforce that meets the growing and unmet demand in different employment sectors. The NSW Government and the community will benefit from efforts to ensure young people are provided with opportunities to successfully pursue careers in their chosen employment pathways through a whole-of-sector approach.

## Commonly Used Acronyms

|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| <b>AMEP</b>   | Adult Migrant Education Program                                |
| <b>ATSI</b>   | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander                          |
| <b>CALD</b>   | Culturally and linguistically diverse                          |
| <b>FYA</b>    | Foundation for Young Australians                               |
| <b>HSC</b>    | Higher School Certificate                                      |
| <b>NCVER</b>  | National Centre for Vocational Education Research              |
| <b>LGBTIQ</b> | Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, intersex and questioning |
| <b>OOHC</b>   | Out-of-home care   |
| <b>ROSA</b>   | Record of School Achievement                                   |
| <b>RTO</b>    | Registered Training Organisation                               |
| <b>SEE</b>    | Skills for Education and Employment                            |
| <b>VET</b>    | Vocational Education and Training                              |

# Summary of Recommendations

## Affordability and Financial Support

**Recommendation 1:** In recognition of the disadvantages faced by many young people accessing VET and the importance of educational pathways to overcoming disadvantage, the NSW Minister for Skills should review and address barriers to young people's entry to VET by:

- Reviewing the eligibility criteria for the VET fee-free scholarships with the goal of creating a simpler, more flexible set of criteria;
- Expanding fee-free scholarships to include all students who are studying a second qualification;
- Improving access to Certificate level courses that are not eligible for VET FEE-HELP;
- Offering fee-free literacy and numeracy introduction courses in accessible community locations such as youth organisations and community centres.

## Access to Information and Supports

**Recommendation 2:** The NSW Department of Industry adopt measures to assist young people to access information, services and other available supports, including:

- Simplifying and streamlining current information about scholarships and other financial supports and making the information available through a diverse range of accessible channels;
- Increased cooperation with NSW secondary schools, Centrelink, community services, language support programs and employment and other youth services to make new and existing information about VET in NSW available to young people where they are most likely to consume it;
- Working with the NSW Department of Education to improve school career advice on vocational education.

**Recommendation 3:** The NSW Minister for Skills should review and improve the supports and services offered to current and prospective students by TAFE NSW and Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) in NSW to ensure that young people are assisted to complete their studies, including young people facing complex challenges.

**Recommendation 4:** The NSW Government work across departments to address barriers to VET by:

- Developing clear and transparent guidelines for the use of TAFE NSW Community Service Obligation funding;
- Ensuring that young people facing disadvantage have access to some face-to-face teaching and personal contact with educators and peers ;
- Ensuring adequate and sustainable funding for outreach programs to provide free or low cost foundation courses in community locations;
- Supporting and monitoring participation in VET of young people who have been in out-of-home care;
- Improving access to high quality VET in regional and rural areas, including through models such as mobile units and TAFE Western Connect;
- Ensuring supports and referral pathways are in place for young people experiencing homelessness, disabilities, mental illness or substance dependency issues;
- Providing access to TAFE and VET for early school leavers where mainstream schooling is not appropriate or possible.

**Recommendation 5:** The NSW Government should hold consultations with VET providers and the community sector to develop strategies to identify young people at risk of dropping out of VET courses and ensure that they are provided with necessary support to resolve issues and prevent them from escalating.



# Section 1: Introduction

Vocational Education and Training (VET) plays a vital role for young people in the transition from school to both further education and employment. Difficulties with this transition can result in unemployment, underemployment and social exclusion that may affect young people for the rest of their lives and have long-term undesirable social and economic implications. The VET sector is the sector of tertiary education most relied upon by young people from disadvantaged groups. VET provides a crucial pathway for them to re-engage with the community, education and the workforce.

Working in partnership, Youth Action, Uniting and Mission Australia decided to investigate the current environment and context for young people considering, currently undertaking, or recently completed a VET course. We wanted to get a clearer picture of the motivations, barriers and supports young people, especially young people who are experiencing disadvantage, encounter when they interact with the VET system. We also wanted to better understand the impact of the 2015 Smart and Skilled reforms, which introduced competition into the VET sector, on these vulnerable young people.

To accomplish this, we held a youth consultation with participants aged 15 – 25 who had considered, participated in or completed a VET course within the last 12 months. We then surveyed a wide variety of organisations that work directly with young people experiencing disadvantage who are accessing or seeking to access VET.

## 1.1 The youth consultations

We started by consulting with young people to gain first-hand knowledge of the experiences of young people as they have interacted with the VET sector. The findings of the consultation were used to inform a broader survey of sector service providers supporting young people, while also ensuring the project is led by the experience of young people.

We consulted 13 young people aged 15 – 25, holding a face-to-face consultation in Sydney and in-depth phone interviews with participants in Armidale and the Central Coast.

Experience of disadvantage is a core focus of the project and participants were sourced through the project partners' network of youth services. Participants had either completed a VET course, were currently undertaking a VET course, had opted out of VET, or were considering a VET course.

The main themes explored were participants' motivations to study and complete a VET course, the barriers they faced to commencing or finishing a course, the supports they identified as helping them to commence or finish a course, and what worked well for them.

## 1.2 The youth sector survey

Drawing on the information gathered from the youth consultation, research, evidence and concerns presented by VET stakeholders and the project partner organisations, we designed an online survey to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the issues.

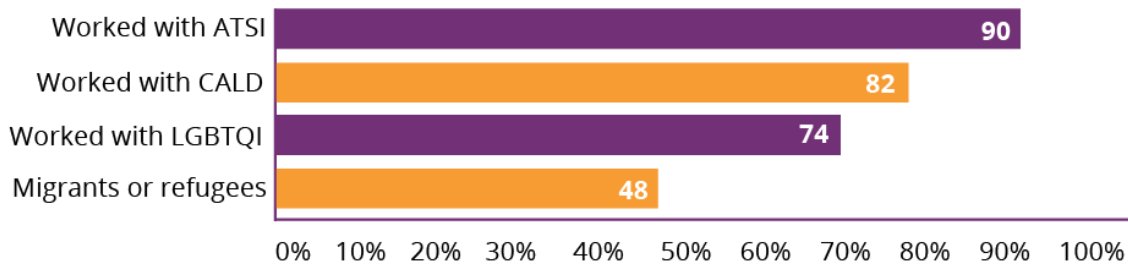
We circulated the survey to organisations that work with young people or are education providers in the VET sector. The respondents included VET providers, government bodies, youth service providers, advocacy bodies and community service providers.

Like the youth consultation, the survey questions asked staff participants to explore the barriers, supports, motivations, and successes the young people they worked with had experienced as they interacted with the VET system in the last 12 months.

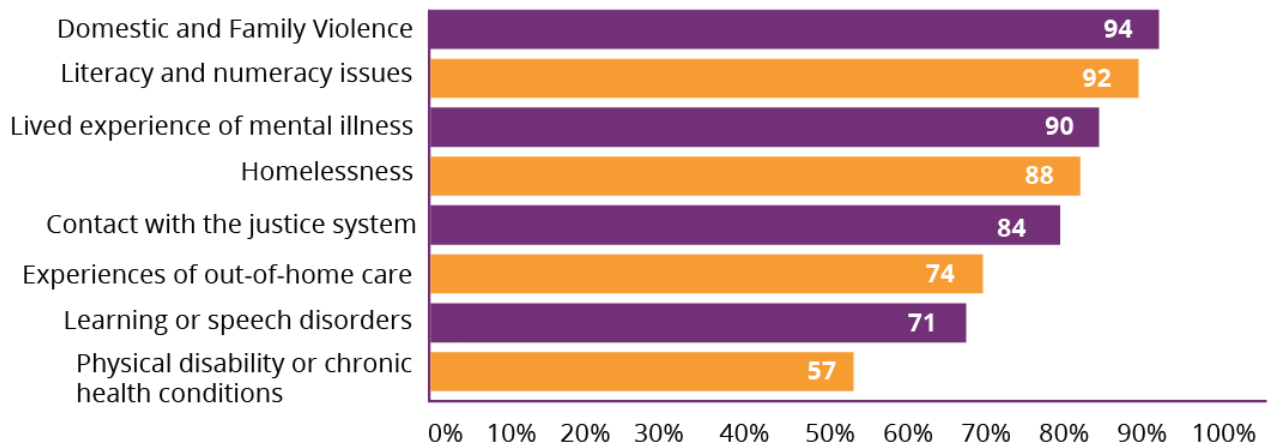
The break-down of responses to the survey includes:

- A total of 50 respondents
- All respondents were from NSW, with more than 20% from regional, remote or rural NSW
- 68% were from non-government organisations, 10% from schools, 14% from VET providers and 8% other.

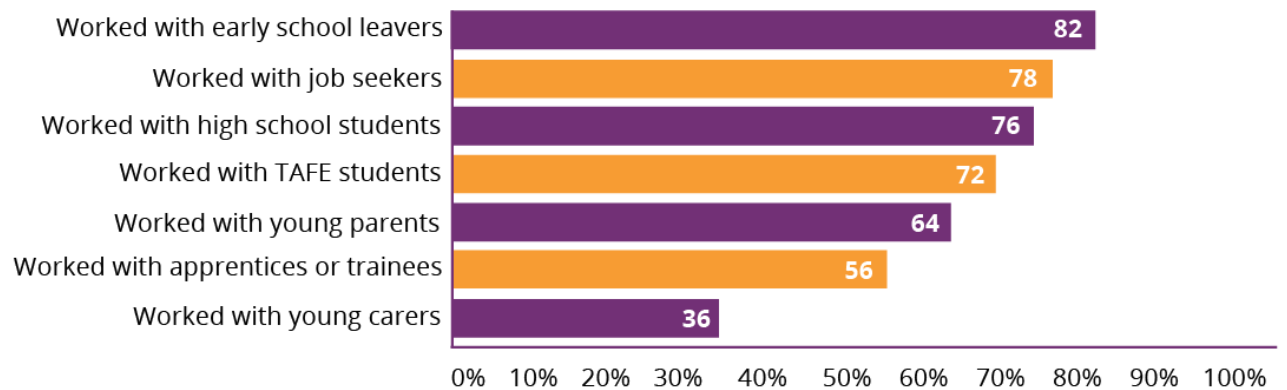
The staff who answered our survey had interactions with a broad diversity of young people including many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds:



Survey respondents indicated that the young people they worked with also experienced high rates of challenges, including:



They also worked with young people at a variety of life stages and circumstances:



## Section 2: Young people and VET

### 2.1 Why is VET important to young people?

VET is critically important in helping young people to navigate the increasingly challenging transition from high school to further education or employment and prepares them for the workplace by equipping them with job-specific skills.

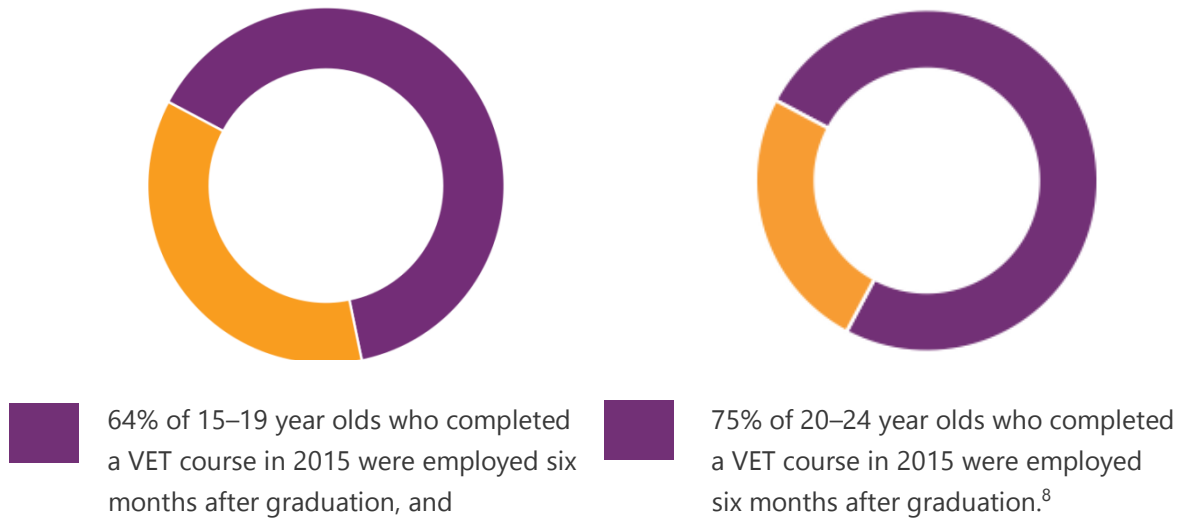
In Australia there were more than 4.2 million students enrolled in VET and nearly 1.2 million of those were in NSW in 2016.<sup>1</sup> Just over 30% of students enrolled in VET in NSW are between the ages of 15 and 24.<sup>2</sup>

Research from the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) suggests the transition from education to work is becoming more and more challenging, with young people taking an average of 4.7 years to find full-time work after they leave education and 2.3 years to find any work at all.<sup>3</sup> In addition, less than 40% of young men who said their first year out of school was difficult had obtained successful employment by the age of 25.<sup>4</sup> More than ever, work today and in the future will revolve around skills rather than jobs or careers. One study estimates that Australians will change employers 17 times across five different career paths over their lifetime.<sup>5</sup> In this environment, it is critical that there is a robust VET sector to provide the skills young people need in the areas they are needed most and areas that interest them.

The Commonwealth Department of Employment's occupational projections forecast that an additional 990,000 jobs are expected to be created by 2020 in Australia, but just 70,000 of those jobs will require only a senior secondary level education.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, almost half of those jobs – 437,000 – will require Certificate, Diploma and Advanced Diploma level qualifications.<sup>7</sup>

When young people do have access to VET and they have the proper supports to complete their education, their employment prospects are much more likely to improve.

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research's Student Outcomes Survey shows that:



This highlights the importance of all young people having access to the VET sector in Australia. Better recruitment and retention in the VET system has the capacity to reduce youth unemployment and increase overall employment participation rates.

## 2.2 The VET system and young people experiencing disadvantage

Education, including further education, is one of the most effective pathways out of poverty and disadvantage. A good education system, which includes a strong focus on access and equity issues, is critical in creating a more inclusive society.

The VET system is particularly important for young people experiencing disadvantage who are not seeking or do not qualify for university entrance. VET provides an opportunity to train for a vocation that would otherwise be unattainable.

The VET sector is especially important for early-school leavers who are often disconnected from school at an early age due to issues such as bullying, discrimination, caring or financial responsibilities, lack of interest in the standard school curriculum, and suspension or exclusion. Historically, TAFE has played an

important role in providing a 'second chance' for early school leavers, providing them with an opportunity to reconnect with education and complete a qualification.<sup>9</sup>

A recent study found that approximately one-quarter of Australia's 19-year-olds do not complete Year 12 or equivalent qualifications. The study also found, however, that just over half of 19-year-old school leavers had found an alternative pathway and completed a Year 12 or equivalent certificate by age 24, largely through VET training and apprenticeships.<sup>10</sup> This demonstrates the importance of VET for young school leavers, many of whom are experiencing disadvantage.

However, it is now more difficult for some young people who have disengaged from education at an early age to complete their secondary studies at TAFE. Under current policy, students under the age of 17 who have not completed their Year 10 Record of School Achievement (ROSA) are not able to study at a TAFE or a private VET provider unless they can obtain an exemption<sup>11</sup>, which is generally very difficult to receive. This means that VET no longer provides an alternative pathway for young people who find it difficult to cope in the school environment. Previously, TAFE provided these young people with the opportunity for a fresh start.

*I wasn't doing very well at school; I just didn't like the teachers there or the environment. It just didn't suit me at all and I just wasn't going. I was having trouble outside of school as well. [I was 16 and] My youth worker worked with me to get me into TAFE [because I had not obtained my Year 10 ROSA. It took a huge amount of effort, there were heaps of meetings and I had to enter into a contract, but eventually the school let me go to TAFE instead of going to school. Since I've been at TAFE it's been great. They give me more freedom and they understand if some days I'm not having a great day. It means I can just get on and do my work. I'm doing tertiary preparation now – Year 11 and Year 12 – and once that's finished I will see what I can move to next.*

- Youth consultation participant

*School just didn't work for me. They don't have enough support there, they just don't have the time for kids from tough backgrounds – if you're not doing okay or great, you just get left behind.*

- Youth consultation participant

*[Allow] early school leavers more access to complete their Year 10 in the TAFE environment. Some students do not fit the school system and the school does not want them and TAFE declines leaving the young person without education when they are willing to attend.*

- Sector survey participant

## 2.3 Young people's motivations to undertake a VET qualification

Several strong themes emerged during the consultation with young people as we explored why they undertake a VET course, and how it fits in with their overall motivations and aspirations in life.

The most prominent theme that emerged was that young people undertook VET studies to achieve financial stability and job stability. Courses that focused on practical skills and outcomes were the most popular choice. Apprenticeships, Certificate qualifications and work experience were valued very highly in this context.

*I'd like to live a life with less stress.*

- Youth consultation participant

*I want to have employment opportunities because so many people don't, or they don't think they do.*

- Youth consultation participant

*I can be looking at anything, from community services through to hairdressing. Anything really. I'd probably be leaning towards something more practical.*

- Youth consultation participant

*A Certificate might give you a better start over someone who doesn't have a Certificate at all.*

- Youth Consultation participant

*I want to do a Certificate course – it's easier to get than a degree and it's a good starting point.*

- Youth Consultation participant

For the group of young people in our consultation – many of whom experience disadvantage – practical motivations like 'having a roof over my head', 'living independently' and 'ending the uncertainty in my life' were the most commonly expressed reasons for undertaking VET. For some participants, it was also important that it was something they were interested in, or enjoyed.

Importantly, young people were optimistic that they could achieve these aspirations, but expressed that they just needed a little support and the right conditions to prosper.

*I want to be happy, it's the most important thing, and if I can get some training and then a job I can't see why I can't get there.*

- Youth consultation participant

The future aspirations of the young people in our consultation were also reflected in the results of the sector survey, with more than half of the respondents (54%) observing that gaining financial stability and entering into more stable employment were primary motivations for the young people they worked with. Almost all (98%) indicated that they undertook VET studies so they could enter employment for the first time. This overwhelming response shows how important the VET sector is to this group of young people as they directly use the skills they can gather to gain entry into the job market.

## 2.4 The VET sector – history and reforms

In 2015, the NSW Government launched 'Smart and Skilled' – the implementation of the national reform that provides funding for government subsidised qualifications for eligible students and providers for qualifications and courses that are on the NSW Skills List. Courses that do not fill skills shortages and directly lead to jobs no longer receive State Government funding.

Funding for VET in NSW is available through two primary pathways:

- Government subsidised training, in which the student or their employer pays for part of their training and the NSW or Commonwealth Government pays part or all of the cost.
- VET FEE-HELP, a Commonwealth Government loan program through which many students paying fee-for-service defer the repayment of their fees until their income is above a certain level.<sup>12</sup>



The complex overlapping responsibilities between the Australian Government and NSW Government make pursuing a coherent VET policy difficult. VET FEE-HELP has created incentives and disincentives to study different levels and types of courses, which are not always to the benefit of students or consistent with the NSW Government's policy objectives.

As the Business Council of Australia argues, there are also differences in the Australian Government's loan schemes for university students (HECS-HELP) and VET, which create distorted incentives. For example, students in VET have to pay a 20% loan fee (i.e. if they borrow \$1,000 they are charged a \$200 loan fee) while students in university pay no loan fee.<sup>13</sup> The fragmented nature of VET funding also increases the complexity for students, service providers and employers trying to understand and navigate the system.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.5 VET providers in NSW

In 2015, there were approximately 27,000 early school leavers aged 15–19 in NSW enrolled in TAFE and 16,000 with private providers.<sup>15</sup> The number of early school leavers enrolled with private providers has greatly increased over the last five years. These students include the most at-risk and disadvantaged young people engaged in tertiary education in Australia. The VET system should ensure that private providers are equipped to provide the additional supports required by young people with complex needs, for example, young people with a disability, mental health issues or who are homeless.

Private providers, driven by a market-oriented profit motive may lean towards offering the most profitable courses or only offering courses that are in high demand. This leaves TAFE NSW, as the public VET provider, to offer courses that are more costly to run (for example, due to lower student numbers) to ensure that young people have choices in the courses they can study. It is challenging for TAFE NSW to compete in a contestable market and still uphold its commitment to providing a range of high-quality, flexible and accessible courses delivered consistently to all students, particularly young people experiencing disadvantage.

The public role of TAFE NSW puts it at a disadvantage relative to private providers who are not required to provide equitable access for young people experiencing disadvantage and consequently can offer more profitable courses. For example, in 2011, 7.2% of students enrolled at TAFE nationally had a disability, compared to 4.4% of students with private providers.<sup>16</sup> In 2014, 9.5% of students in TAFE NSW

had a disability.<sup>17</sup> Courses for vulnerable and disadvantaged people are often highly resource-intensive due to the complex needs of the students and the need to address barriers to their participation.

There is also anecdotal evidence that some private providers pre-screen students so that only those most likely to succeed and complete courses are enrolled, leaving more challenging students for TAFE.<sup>18</sup>

# Section 3: Affordability and financial support

## 3.1 Fee-free scholarships

In 2015, the NSW Government allocated \$48 million over four years to fund 200,000 fee-free scholarships for young people experiencing disadvantage (aged 15–30) to access training under Smart and Skilled. There is a limit of 50,000 scholarships per year, but this limit does not apply to students in social housing (or on the NSW Housing register) or students who meet the OOHC criteria.<sup>19</sup> Eligible students can receive a single fee-free scholarship in a financial year, and a maximum of two fee-free scholarships over four financial years<sup>20</sup>.

However, the fee-free scholarships have not been well-promoted and take up has been limited. As at 30 June 2016, only 24,197 people had received a scholarship.<sup>21</sup>

Notably, the amount of \$48 million budgeted for the scholarships works out at just \$240 per participant, which is clearly far less than what these courses actually cost. Also, as the Legislative Council Inquiry into Vocational Education and Training in NSW observed, the fee-free places only alleviate the effect of student fee increases for those who meet strict eligibility criteria.<sup>22</sup>

*The subsidised fee [for students eligible for Smart and Skilled but not eligible for a fee-free scholarship or fee exemption] has risen dramatically and many students consider even the concession rate unaffordable.*

- Sector survey participant

Many young people are not able to access the scholarships due to restrictive or confusing eligibility criteria. For example, it is difficult for young people to undertake a second qualification, either to build on their first qualification or to change career direction into a different field. Consequently, course fees can be a significant barrier to participation just at the time that these young people are motivated to engage with education.<sup>23</sup>

Young people who need to re-sit a course – for example, if they are unable to complete a Certificate II in one year due to academic or personal difficulties – are also not eligible to receive the scholarship.

Further, to be eligible for the fee-free scholarships, young people must be either an Australian Government welfare recipient or a dependent of an Australian Government welfare recipient, or have previously been or are currently in OOHC.<sup>24</sup> This requirement may exclude young people who have been working to support themselves but who do not earn enough to afford the cost of a VET program.

Several respondents to the sector survey noted that there have sometimes been delays to young people receiving the fee-free scholarships. This results in late enrolment and subsequent drop-outs as students find it difficult to catch up on what they have missed.

Of the sector survey responses, 68% said a lack of access to fee-free courses presented a significant barrier to students enrolling in VET courses and 82% said that offering financial support (fee-free courses or scholarships) would be an effective intervention or support to assist potential VET students. Importantly, the respondents to the survey identified that financial support not only impacts on young people's decision to enrol in a VET program but is also critical as they are completing their VET qualification. 72% said that offering financial support would be an effective intervention or support to ensure VET students can overcome the barriers they face when trying to complete their qualification.

## 3.2 Intersection with Commonwealth requirements

Notably, many of the young participants identified that it is very difficult to juggle Centrelink requirements for receiving Commonwealth benefits with studying. They reported that the mandatory requirements to apply for a certain number of jobs a week (if they are not in full-time education), coupled with the requirements of Job Network agencies, are a barrier to studying as they must spend many hours on finding a job, or meeting other requirements.

*I'm caught in a spiral between Job Networks [agencies], education and Centrelink – [it's] hard to get education to get off that spiral... because the education is not there to get the right job.*

- Youth consultation participant

*Make education a priority over Job Networks and just finding a job [any job].*

- Youth consultation participant

Although some students receive assistance with course fees, financial instability and inadequacy of Commonwealth support payments may force young people to drop out of courses and find employment. Inability to meet day-to-day expenses and unstable housing or homelessness can affect the young person's ability to focus on their education. Financial supports such as scholarships should be coupled with other wrap-around supports provided collaboratively with community sector organisations and health services.

The majority of young people who may be in receipt of social welfare payments are on the Newstart Allowance (aged 22 and over) or Youth Allowance (16–24 years) depending on circumstances. The Newstart Allowance for young people with no dependent children is approximately \$540.00 a fortnight<sup>25</sup> and Youth Allowance is about \$440.00 a fortnight<sup>26</sup> for young people living away from home. Some young people will be on other payments such as ABSTUDY and Austudy with similar fortnightly payments.<sup>27</sup> This amount is inadequate to allow young people to meet day-to-day living costs and the additional costs associated with undertaking higher education and exacerbates the financial stress of course fees.

Survey respondents indicated significant barriers to completing VET qualifications:

- Ongoing financial issues due to debt from VET qualification (51.4%)
- Inability to meet day-to-day expenses (42%).

### 3.3 VET FEE-HELP

VET FEE-HELP is a Commonwealth Government loan to cover the cost of tuition fees. It is only available to students undertaking a diploma, advanced diploma or Certificate IV qualification. However, for many young people, one of their first steps toward a job is completing their HSC or a VET qualification through a Certificate course, which in most cases must be paid for in full upfront as they do not qualify for VET FEE-HELP.<sup>28</sup> Young people experiencing disadvantage tend to choose lower-level qualifications in VET and have poor transitions from lower to higher-level qualifications.<sup>29</sup>

There is value in encouraging early school leavers to engage with accredited training, even when this vocational training occurs at a lower Certificate level, as this prevents these young people from disengaging from education and employment entirely.<sup>30</sup> Further, young people who participate in any form of VET achieve better employment outcomes in the long-term when compared to young people who have not participated in any form of post-school education and training.<sup>31</sup> Investment in improving access and reducing fees for Certificate courses has the potential to have a positive impact on participation and outcomes in VET by young people experiencing disadvantage.<sup>32</sup>

**Recommendation 1:** In recognition of the disadvantages faced by many young people accessing VET and the importance of educational pathways to overcoming disadvantage, the NSW Minister for Skills should review and address barriers to young people's entry to Vocational Education and Training by:

- Reviewing the eligibility criteria for the VET fee-free scholarships with the goal of creating a simpler, more flexible set of criteria;
- Expanding free-free scholarships to include all students who are studying a second qualification;
- Improving access to Certificate level courses that are not eligible for VET FEE-HELP;
- Offering fee-free literacy and numeracy introduction courses in accessible community locations such as youth organisations and community centres.

# Section 4: Access to information and supports

## 4.1 Access to Information

Students need to understand the course content, the fees they will be paying, the requirements of the job market and any other important details before making a commitment to enrol in a course.

A contestable, market-oriented system does not work if information is not freely and easily provided for consumers to make informed choices and is not sustainable as students do not end up completing courses or gaining qualifications.

Existing information about eligibility for Smart and Skilled, enrolment processes, fee structures and scholarships is complex and confusing for students, parents and service providers to navigate. This information needs to be provided in a simpler way which is easier for students to follow and understand. There have also been frequent changes to the eligibility criteria for financial support and these changes have sometimes not been well publicised or communicated to the non-government sector.

*The system is complex and difficult for students to navigate.*

- Sector survey participant

It can also be difficult for students to access information about specific training providers, including previous student outcomes, completion rates, alignment of training to labour market requirements and engagement with industry. As the Smart and Skilled Year One program review suggests, consumers' expectations for more accessible and transparent information on quality and outcomes in selecting their Smart and Skilled training will continue to grow.<sup>33</sup>

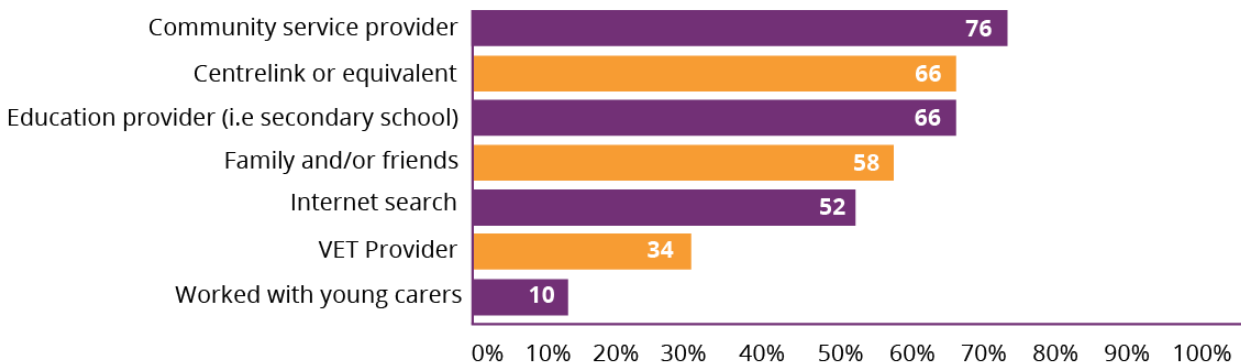
*Understanding of what people are getting into is more important before they start the course. There should be more information about the courses out there.*

- Youth consultation participant

A recent study on student choice in VET found that the primary concerns of prospective students relate to information accessibility and whether the information is straightforward, independent and trusted.<sup>34</sup>

The youth consultation and the data gathered from the sector survey suggests that the most common ways young people hear about VET courses are through community service providers, schools and Centrelink or Employment Service Providers.

The results from our sector survey indicated that young people hear about VET courses through:



As illustrated below, the respondents of the survey emphasised the need for better linkages between VET providers, community services providers and schools, and better promotion across agencies.

*[The best interventions to help retain or recruit students would be] linking with youth inter-agencies for promotion, linking in with school careers counsellors, attending youth events such as Youth Week and localised activities."*

- Sector survey participant

*[It would be helpful to have] VET visits to job network providers to discuss courses, support and fee-free options. Many young people feel overwhelmed and the enrolment / fee-free structure can often be confusing.*

- Sector survey participant

*There need to be better partnerships with external service providers.*

- Sector survey participant

*[Students need] more detailed information online about each of the courses – many course pages are lacking in crucial information which makes it difficult for them to compare courses and see for example, what's the difference in the Cert III and Cert IV for that particular area of study.*

- Sector survey participant



## 4.2 Access to supports

Young people who participated in the consultation felt that in many cases they were treated like a number and not a person by vocational education institutions and other bodies such as Centrelink. They indicated that this was one of the most likely reasons that they or other young people would drop out of a course. They also expressed concern about lack of support services.

*Supports on TAFE campuses are hidden away, they're really hard to find and there's not enough of them to help you out a lot of the time.*

- Youth consultation participant

In contrast, a few participants had received support from a job service provider or other support worker that was tailored to their needs and as a result they found training or employment that they were interested or engaged in.

When asked what they would like to see change, young people emphasised the need for more holistic and tailored support, including greater understanding of individual circumstances and needs.

*Understand me as an individual. More understanding of individual circumstances, like living in a (homelessness) shelter, mental health difficulties, etc.*

- Youth consultation participant

## Case Study 1– Mission Australia client

Annie\* was an 18-year-old Aboriginal young person with a mild intellectual disability. Annie's family was having difficulties and she moved to the city to live with her extended family. She had a falling-out with the relatives and moved into a women's refuge.

As she is unfamiliar with the city, her case workers took her to the TAFE that offered a course in animal services.

The case workers also set up meetings for her to speak to the teachers to ask questions about the course before enrolling. She was also linked to a disability support worker who supported and advocated for Annie to access the course for free. The disability support worker also found avenues for Annie to receive extra time and additional help with her studies.

Annie was invited to engage with the Aboriginal Support Worker at TAFE to help Annie to find other free courses if she had the need. She was also supported to obtain a refurbished laptop and to start volunteering at the RSPCA.

*\*Name has been changed for confidentiality*

## 4.3 Career guidance

Respondents to the survey emphasised the need for better career guidance to help students make informed decisions, including whether the courses they are considering will improve their future employment opportunities. Good career guidance is especially important for young people who are making decisions about their future career, in order to weigh up what they are interested in, what skills they need and whether there are jobs available in this area.

The survey data strongly supported the argument that career guidance is critical for young people:



78% said that guidance with pathways into further education and employment would help VET students overcome the barriers they face when trying to complete their qualifications.



64% said that the provision of tailored supports would help VET students overcome the barriers they face when trying to complete their qualifications.

*Our service works with early school leavers and we get lots of referrals from schools who don't know what to do with young people who aren't on track to complete Year 12. Schools have poor knowledge of the VET sector and are gearing all students towards university, rather than promoting the VET/trades sector.*

- Sector survey participant

Young people, particularly those who are planning to pursue careers in various trades that are physically demanding or have unusual working hours, may need to better understand the role and work demands before they enter into long-term financial commitments. Certain institutions provide 'try a trade' options where young people are provided with opportunities to have hands-on experience over a short period of time.<sup>35</sup> For example, Construction Skills Queensland (CSQ), an independent industry-funded body,

provides young people with work experience opportunities through their 'Try a Trade' initiative. This initiative is run through schools and aimed at raising awareness of construction as a viable career option.<sup>36</sup> Providing more opportunities for young people to try a trade, coupled with case management, employability skills and appropriate career guidance would assist them to make well-informed decisions about their future careers.

## 4.4 Counselling and learning support

Young people and workers both commented that cuts to TAFE funding have impacted adversely on provision of support services such as counselling, specialist supports (for example, for people with disability) and tutorial assistance. These supports play an important role in guiding students with additional needs into courses which are at a suitable level and helping them to navigate their preferred career pathway.

*I've noticed since moving from the Certificate II to the Certificate III, the supports aren't there as much. I have to really go looking for them to get any additional support outside of what is provided in the classroom. I've requested the support – help with literacy and numeracy – but they haven't been able to provide it, or the support has stopped really quickly after starting. I don't have the confidence to go and ask for the help and I don't know where to go sometimes, so they seem to respond better when my support worker asks them.*

- Youth consultation participant (who identifies as Aboriginal and has been in OOHC)

*[The] counselling unit which previously houses multiple counsellors now down to skeleton staff.*

- Sector survey participant

## 4.5 Outreach

Cuts to the level of TAFE funding have also impacted adversely on provision of flexible and responsive pre-vocational options and introductory courses. Historically, TAFE Outreach programs played a critical role in providing a pathway for early school leavers and students experiencing disadvantage to re-engage with education. They were often provided in collaboration with community agencies in accessible locations such as community centres or youth services. This enabled people with limited education to build their confidence and competence in a supportive environment.

Outreach teachers also play an important role in guiding students with limited education into courses which are at a suitable level.

*I found it hard to work or to study for years. There was always something just getting in the way. Not enough time or things just weren't smooth enough to do any study, so I didn't. The Outreach person at the TAFE near me was great. She worked with my support worker and she made it seem more real and more possible. I hadn't really considered it until then. My support worker gave me the confidence to do it, but that outreach person made it seem even more possible again.*

- Youth consultation participant

Despite the positive impacts, the Legislative Council Inquiry into Vocational Education and Training in NSW report notes that Outreach units have been reduced or scrapped completely due to TAFE funding cuts.<sup>37</sup> For example, Outreach has been completely disbanded in South West Sydney and Illawarra TAFE Institutes. The Institutes which do not have an Outreach Unit now tend to offer only a few Adult Basic Education or industry-specific foundation level courses.

*It is harder for us to arrange outreach introductory courses which would be an excellent soft entry for our clients, especially if held at our service where they feel comfortable.*

- Sector survey participant

*The reduction in services has meant less tailored approaches to support individuals, and also there are less pre-vocational courses readily available to slowly encourage and engage these students into post-secondary study.*

- Sector survey participant

In TAFE institutes where Outreach still operates, there was positive feedback from students about the role played by Outreach staff in encouraging and supporting their engagement in VET.

As the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) suggests, '*Outreach strategies which are community-based, which seek out specific target groups and which acknowledge complex patterns of disadvantage, appear to have the best chance of increasing VET access (for students experiencing disadvantage).*'<sup>38</sup>

Feedback from young people and workers indicates there is wide disparity in the level and nature of supports provided to students experiencing disadvantage across different TAFE institutes. As the Business Council of Australia argues, the NSW Government should articulate the specific Community Service Obligations of each TAFE institute and fund this appropriately. This should include, for example, providing 'second-chance' education to early school leavers and provision of community-based courses for disadvantaged students through Outreach.<sup>39</sup>

## 4.6 Young people in out-of-home care

Children and young people growing up in care are at risk of poor educational outcomes, including poor academic performance and early school leaving.<sup>40</sup> They are much less likely to progress to post-secondary education or training than other young people. While Australian data is limited, a CREATE Foundation survey in 2009 found that only 35% of care leavers had completed Year 12, with 11% undertaking a TAFE qualification and 2.8% undertaking a higher education qualification.<sup>41</sup> The survey also confirmed high rates of unemployment for young people who had left care – 28.5% of respondents indicated they were unemployed (compared to an overall youth unemployment rate of 9.7% nationally at that time).

There are multiple factors which contribute to the poor educational outcomes experienced by children and young people in care. They are often contending with multiple issues, including disability and mental health issues, and have complex support needs that require the involvement of a number of agencies.<sup>42</sup> Young people in care have often had a disrupted educational experience with considerable missed time in school due to placement changes, relocation, suspension and exclusion.<sup>43</sup>

*Young people in OOHC [or who have left OOHC] may require additional support – one-to-one meetings and ongoing support and engagement with the student from enrolment to study to assessment, making adjustments as required due to challenging life circumstances that may present.*

- Sector survey participant

For young people who are transitioning from OOHC to independence, being able to continue their education is strongly dependent on having suitable and stable accommodation and adequate financial support.

The extension of the eligibility criteria for the fee-free scholarships to young people who have been in OOHC was a positive step. However, more targeted, whole-of-government strategies are needed to support young people who have grown up in care to access and successfully complete vocational education. In the United Kingdom, care leavers are now recognised as a distinct underrepresented group in higher education and the participation of this group in colleges and universities is monitored by the Office of Fair Access.<sup>44</sup> Considering the similarities of the challenges, a similar approach should be adopted in NSW.

Research shows that rigid education systems which do not permit non-standard pathways are a major barrier to continuing education for young people who are transitioning from OOHC.<sup>45</sup> As discussed in

Section 2, in NSW, young people under the age of 17 cannot attend TAFE or VET unless they have completed a ROSA.

A more flexible policy approach is needed, such as the strategies used in South Australia. Under the *Rapid Response Framework*, additional support is provided to assist young people who are transitioning from care to obtain the South Australian Certificate of Education or vocational equivalent. For young people who have disengaged from education, the relevant education and child protection agencies will explore all avenues for re-entry to school or entry into vocational programs.<sup>46</sup>

Access to ongoing supports, such as counselling and career guidance, are also critical for young people who are transitioning from OOHC.

Collection and tracking of data is critical to improve the post-school education outcomes of care leavers. Currently, in NSW, there is no data collected on participation of care leavers in post-school education. Notably, in South Australia, participation of children and young people in OOHC is recorded and tracked across all stages of education, including post-school education. This approach should be replicated in NSW.

## 4.7 Supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people

In Australia, regional and remote Indigenous students are under-represented in both higher education and VET.<sup>47</sup> There are numerous factors that impact on the participation of this cohort in higher education. These factors include housing issues, engagement with the criminal justice system, and cultural misunderstanding. Conversely, it was reported that living in a household with someone who has had a positive experience with education, and living with someone who has an educational qualification, are a positive influence on educational aspirations.<sup>48</sup>

All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are eligible for a VET fee exemptions and are now exempt from fees for any Smart and Skilled course for which they are eligible to enrol (previously, Aboriginal students were only eligible for one fee-free course).<sup>49</sup>

However, additional supports need to be better targeted and tailored to meet the other needs of these young people.

The Creating Parity report states that a large proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are forced to accumulate low-level, irrelevant VET certificates that are not useful in gaining meaningful employment.<sup>50</sup> This could result from factors such as lack of choices in courses offered, limited understanding about VET courses and the job market, or the high cost and time needed to travel to a TAFE campus that offers more suitable courses.

There was some positive feedback from workers about support provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people on some TAFE campuses. However, this does not seem to be consistent for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students or across all campuses. The feedback indicates that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people have not been provided with adequate information or support.



## Case Study 2 - Uniting client

Gabby\* is a young Aboriginal woman who grew up in OOHC. She was previously enrolled in a Certificate III level course. She did not complete the course in the expected time frame by the end of the year and was advised she would need to re-enrol the next year to complete the assessments and work placement. It was known to teachers that Gabby was struggling to complete tasks but she was not informed that she should apply for an extension or offered tutorial support. Eventually, following concerted advocacy over several months by Uniting's aftercare caseworker, Gabby was granted an extension to complete the Certificate III without re-enrolment being necessary. TAFE also agreed to provide face-to-face tutorial support to help her complete assessments tasks.

*\*Name has been changed for confidentiality*

A more consistent and proactive approach is required to provide tailored support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. For example, in South Australia, TAFE's Aboriginal Access Centre provides support for Aboriginal students to access and participate in TAFE. This includes individual case management and tutorial support. When an Aboriginal student participates in the centre's programs, a Training Support Officer is assigned to them for the duration of their course. The Training Support Officer works with the young person to develop an individual learning plan that maps their education pathway. The Aboriginal Access Centre offers a variety of programs through many TAFE SA sites, including regional and remote locations.<sup>51</sup>

Information on the supports available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students also needs to be better promoted to young people, schools and the community sector to ensure young people receive the benefit of such support. For example, according to the Smart and Skilled website, Training Services NSW Aboriginal Services team can advise on vocational training pathways and apprenticeships and traineeships. However, this avenue of support is not well-promoted and many workers with the community sector, as well as Aboriginal students, would be unaware of this avenue of support.

## 4.8 Students living in rural and remote areas

*Living outside cities can be really hard. For me it was tough because I didn't really like the school I was going to but there weren't many options to change in the area. I had a hard time while I was at that school, and I felt like I got a bit of a mark against my name and that people didn't really give me a full chance there after a while... My youth worker worked with me to get me into TAFE. Since I've been at TAFE it's been great.*

- Youth consultation participant

According to the *National Report on Social Equity in VET 2013*, the participation rate of young people living in rural and remote areas in VET is significantly higher than for other Australian young people.<sup>52</sup> One of the key-reasons is that VET is the main pathway for further education and training for these students because there are few other options such as universities in the local area.

The blanket application of market contestability aligns poorly with the reality of provision of VET in rural and remote areas. These areas have been described as 'thin markets' because it is not economically viable or profitable to provide training in these locations.<sup>53</sup> TAFE NSW plays a critical role in these areas because it is often the only significant VET provider.

The impact of the higher cost of delivery in rural and remote areas means that there are often limited course options available to students living in these areas. While in the past training delivery in regional and rural areas was based on industry and community need, a market-based approach means many courses are not being delivered due to class numbers not meeting financial benchmarks.<sup>54</sup>

Long travel distances and lack of public transport compound the difficulties young people experience in accessing VET courses which meet their needs and career goals. Young people are generally highly reliant on public transport but public transport is often unreliable and inefficient in rural and regional areas (see further discussion of transport issues in Section 4.12 below).

Many young people reluctantly move to metropolitan areas to access courses which suit their needs or opt to enrol in a course which is unsuitable for them simply because it is available. When young people move to metropolitan areas they may lose the benefit of close family support and have additional challenges of adjusting to living in a new environment. The cost of living in metropolitan areas is also significantly higher, while social support payments remain the same. Consequently, they may struggle to successfully complete their VET qualification and have increased risk of rental stress and homelessness.

Under Smart and Skilled there are two key mechanisms designed to take account of the higher costs of providing VET in regional, rural and remote areas:

- training providers receive a 10% loading in regional areas and a 20% loading in rural areas, on top of the base qualification price
- the NSW Government provides additional funding to TAFE NSW for thin markets under the Community Service Obligation funding stream, in recognition of the fact that TAFE NSW is in many cases the only provider capable of providing training in regional, rural and remote areas.<sup>55</sup>

However, the NSW Legislative Council Inquiry on Vocational Education and Training concluded that the mechanisms the Government has introduced to offset the impact of contestability in thin markets have been insufficient.<sup>56</sup> The committee recommended that the Government should modify the funding arrangements under Smart and Skilled by:

- placing a cap on the level of contestable funding in regional, rural and remote areas that are deemed to be thin markets, determined through an annual market testing process
- allocating the relevant TAFE Institutes additional Community Service Obligation funding.<sup>57</sup>

## 4.9 The importance of face-to-face teaching for young people experiencing disadvantage

The NSW Government has a strong focus on promoting online learning modes in VET. This includes, for example, the establishment of new digital education hubs in regional areas. While this model may suit the needs and preferences of some students it is not well-suited to students experiencing disadvantage with lower literacy and confidence levels. Notably, the Smart and Skilled Year One Program Review found that both students and employers consulted were very concerned about reductions in the hours of face-to-

face training. Students generally expressed a preference for face-to-face training because it provides them with more support and better meets their learning needs.<sup>58</sup>

Participants in the sector survey noted that online learning can be isolating for students and emphasised the need for some face-to-face contact, particularly for students experiencing disadvantage. Some face-to-face contact is vital to help young people with lower levels of literacy and education to build their confidence, have a sense of connection with teachers and peers and access information on supports available. This is supported by research evidence, which highlights the importance of face-to-face delivery and personal contact and support for students experiencing disadvantage.<sup>59</sup>

The Legislative Council Inquiry noted and commended an innovative model developed by TAFE Western Institute as part of its Western Connect program.<sup>60</sup> Under this model, the Institute delivers training through:

- Web-conferencing – which allows students not located near a TAFE campus to attend training sessions remotely
- 'Connected classrooms' – which enables students located near a TAFE campus to attend and participate in scheduled video conference classes with teachers and students in other areas
- Mobile delivery units – which allow specialised training equipment to be taken to different locations (at the nearest TAFE or other venue) so that students can access face-to-face training and hands on experience in their own communities on scheduled training days. The mobile units also support workplace training by visiting businesses and organisations that need specialised training.<sup>61</sup>

This strategy also increases student course choices as it enables students from small and remote colleges to join courses being offered from anywhere in the Institute.

## 4.10 Mental health, homelessness, substance dependence

Respondents to the sector survey identified homelessness (62%), mental health concerns (50%) and substance use or abuse (30%) as significant barriers which prevent young people from enrolling in a VET qualification.

Homelessness, family functioning and mental illness have serious implications for many other aspects of a young person's life, including education, alcohol and drug dependencies, general health and wellbeing, employment, and community engagement.<sup>62</sup> A comprehensive response to these intersecting issues requires early identification and intervention, as well as a range of culturally appropriate supports.

*How can I work on getting a job or studying when I don't have somewhere to sleep?*

- Youth consultation participant

Continuity of housing is important to support educational and social development, as it can provide consistent access to education and a stable social network.<sup>63</sup> As discussed earlier, being able to pursue or complete a VET course is dependent on having stable housing. In addition, earning adequate income to afford stable and appropriate accommodation was a significant motivation for young people to pursue VET qualifications.

*I just want to be able to always have a roof over my head.*

- Youth consultation participant

The Geelong Project has modelled a 'community of schools and youth services' approach to early intervention. The model builds in longer-term follow-up and support to reduce homelessness, and achieve sustainable education and lifetime outcomes.<sup>64</sup>

The Geelong Project model, aims to reduce youth homelessness and education disengagement by building capacity and resilience, ensuring safe and supportive environments, maintaining positive engagement with education, and connecting young people and families to their community. This is achieved through the universal screening of young people and the provision of support to schools, young people, and their families through a collaborative network. These projects should be replicated across the state to provide young people from disadvantaged backgrounds the necessary supports to assist them to complete their education and enter the workforce.

Foyer-like approaches are becoming increasingly common, both in Australia and internationally. This model assists young people, usually aged 16–24 years, to engage in education and employment, and to gradually reduce their dependence on social services. Youth Foyers generally have self-contained accommodation, education programs, variable levels of support where a young person can progress to

more independent living, onsite facilities (for example health services) and social enterprises (such as a café). Upon entering Foyer young people commit to engagement in education, employment and training tailored to meet their individual aspirations and learning needs. To live in the Foyer young people must agree to this condition and will meet regularly with a Foyer worker who will support the young person toward their goals. In these ways and because of their focus on independence, Foyers are different from traditional supported accommodation models.<sup>65</sup> Youth Foyer models are yet to be fully evaluated in the Australian context but offer great prospects in helping young people transition to independence. The NSW Government recently announced a new Foyer51 targeting young people leaving OOHHC (or who have left care) in Chippendale under a Social Benefit Bond with support services managed by Uniting.<sup>66</sup>

However, Youth Foyer approaches do not suit every young person experiencing or at risk of homelessness coupled with other complex challenges. Supportive accommodation is also needed for the most marginalised young people, particularly those with alcohol and drug problems, mental health issues and contact with the justice system. Young people who have experienced trauma and hardship need intensive case management supports in addition to safe and affordable housing.

Young people experiencing disadvantage will benefit from increasing access to support models such as Foyer and more intensive support models to successfully complete a VET qualification while receiving other supports to address other issues.

Creative Youth Initiative (CYI), is a unique service that provides free TAFE accredited programs for young people aged 16-25 who are facing many and varied challenges in their lives, such as homelessness, mental health concerns, substance abuse, family breakdown, unemployment or poor educational experiences. Based in Surry Hills at the Mission Australia Centre (MAC), CYI helps young people develop their creativity through the visual arts program, Artworks! and the music program, Sounds of the Street. This in turn builds self-esteem, encourages self-expression and provides positive learning experiences in a safe and supportive environment. In addition, it provides young people with the opportunity to access free training programs run in partnership with TAFE as well as personalised individual support.

Effective youth programs such as CYI that provide young people with the opportunity to pursue higher studies in areas that are of interest to them should be replicated in other parts of the state.

### Case Study 3 – Mission Australia client

Taylor\* was a 19-year-old young person who moved to Sydney from the Central Coast. She has been homeless on numerous occasions, which interrupted her education. She wished to become a nurse but did not know how to register for the courses.

Mission Australia staff members assisted her to get enrolled in a Certificate III course on Health Services and explained to her how to move from the certificate course to higher education to become a qualified nurse. The staff also coordinated with Mission Australia's Transition to Work program to get a laptop and other required documentation to start the course.

Taylor has safe and long-term accommodation and is currently completing the certificate course.

*\*Name has been changed for confidentiality*

Young people who are attempting to manage substance dependence related issues should be provided with appropriate counselling, referrals and interventions to help them overcome such challenges. This can occur by building strong relationships between community organisations and VET providers. Young people may not be aware of the supports available to them or the steps they need to adopt if they have to defer a course until they get treatment to overcome their addiction related issues. This results in young people who have already enrolled in courses being considered as having left or not completed a course while they receive treatment and consequently being ineligible for further scholarships or fee exempt courses.

## 4.11 Supporting young people with disabilities

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are further marginalised in the education system if they face additional barriers such as physical or mental health conditions.

The VET sector caters for the needs of these young people to a certain extent through the provision of fee exemptions for people with disabilities or the dependents of people with disabilities.<sup>67</sup> These young people may need additional supports including locating courses in accessible locations, literacy and numeracy support, coordination of services and flexibility with course structures.

## 4.12 Access to transport

Young people identified transport costs as a significant issue impacting on their participation in VET. As discussed in Section 4.8, transport-related issues are particularly acute for young people living in rural and remote areas.

Travel and distance were selected as significant barriers to completing a VET course by 42% of sector respondents and commented on by some of the youth consultation participants.

*All the costs add up, just taking the bus or the train when you don't have much money even on a concession is hard.*

- Youth consultation participant

*[It would be great to see] transport options for young people to attend TAFE besides public transport. It would be good if TAFE ran a transport option for young people in remote areas and [for example, in places like Dubbo], so they could attend TAFE.*

- Sector survey participant

Additional financial supports for transport would assist young people with their travel expenses.<sup>68</sup>



## 4.13 Literacy and numeracy skills

During the consultation with young people, many of the participants expressed a lack of confidence in their current literacy and numeracy skills, or their ability to attain them.

*It's hard to meet literacy and numeracy standards but we are not told about the support and ways to build them up.*

- Sector survey participant

Additionally, literacy and numeracy related issues were highlighted as a significant barrier by 74% of the survey respondents and only 43% of respondents thought that young people were being provided with enough support with literacy and numeracy skills by VET providers.

Service providers report that there is reduced access to literacy and numeracy support since the establishment of Smart and Skilled. In part, this is a consequence of the cuts to TAFE Outreach discussed previously.

*There needs to be an easier transition and enrolment process from school to VET. More entry level VET courses should be available and encouragement by Centrelink etc., to enrol students in pre-vocational courses such as literacy and numeracy and work preparation skills, before continuing on to vocational pathways.*

- Sector survey respondent

*[We need to offer] targeted courses for disadvantaged [young people], early school leavers and those young people with literacy / numeracy problems.*

- Sector survey respondent

Language barriers can be a major impediment for young people to engage in education, particularly for newly arrived migrants and refugees. Also, new migrants who have previous qualifications gained in their country of origin are excluded from VET-FEE HELP subsidies as this is seen as training completed to a VET equivalent. However, the same qualifications that have hindered their ability to qualify for VET-FEE HELP are not recognised for employment in the labour market.<sup>69</sup>

Newly arrived migrants and refugees are eligible to receive 510 hours of language supports<sup>70</sup> and an additional 490 hours where needed through the Australian Government's Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP).<sup>71</sup> The Commonwealth Department of Education and Training also provides Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) which consists of 800 hours of literacy, numeracy and language supports to young people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander people.<sup>72</sup> However, the limited number of hours might not be adequate for some young people to bring their literacy and numeracy skills to a level that is needed to successfully complete some courses.

Also, young people may not be aware of language support programs such as SEE and AMEP. VET educators and community sector agencies should be informed about these supports to ensure that young people who lack literacy and numeracy skills are supported to bring their skills to the level required to successfully complete VET qualifications. In addition to language supports, these young people may require referral to other agencies that can assist them to address factors such as physical and mental health issues, disability, housing and financial difficulties.

**Recommendation 2:** The NSW Department of Industry adopt measures to assist young people to access information, services and other available supports, including:

- Simplifying and streamlining current information about scholarships and other financial supports and making the information available through a diverse range of accessible channels;
- Increased cooperation with NSW secondary schools, Centrelink, community services, language support programs and employment services to make new and existing information about VET in NSW available to young people where they are most likely to consume it;
- Working with the NSW Department of Education to improve school career advice on vocational education.

**Recommendation 3:** The NSW Minister for Skills should review and improve the supports and services offered to current and prospective students by TAFE NSW and Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) in NSW to ensure that young people are assisted to complete their studies, including young people facing complex challenges.

**Recommendation 4:** The NSW Government work across departments to address barriers to VET by:

- Developing clear and transparent guidelines for the use of TAFE NSW Community Service Obligation funding;
- Ensuring that young people facing disadvantage have access to some face-to-face teaching and personal contact with educators and peers ;
- Ensuring adequate and sustainable funding for Outreach programs to provide free or low cost foundation courses in community locations;
- Supporting and monitoring participation in VET of young people who have been in out-of-home care;
- Improving access to high quality VET in regional and rural areas, including through models such as mobile units and TAFE Western Connect;
- Ensuring supports and referral pathways are in place for young people experiencing homelessness, disabilities, mental illness or substance dependency issues;
- Promoting the development of innovative models to address the needs of students living in rural and regional areas;
- Providing access to TAFE and VET to early school leavers where mainstream schooling is not appropriate or possible.

**Recommendation 5:** The NSW Government should hold consultations with VET providers and the community sector to develop strategies to identify young people at risk of dropping out of VET courses and ensure that they are provided with necessary support to resolve issues and prevent them from escalating.

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