
CCA Submission to The Pathways Committee, Chaired by Ms Gabrielle Upton MP, Parliamentary Secretary for Tertiary Education and Skills

Introduction

The NSW Government is currently preparing a report examining tertiary pathways as a component of increasing participation by young people in post-school education and training. To date the Committee has identified that some of the restrictions to increasing participation include:

- issues around choice for both young people and their parents; and
- young people requiring knowledge and navigation assistance through the educational options to create an aspiration that leads them on to university.

Within the context of identifying models that link schools, VET and Higher Education CCA members are strategically placed to offer an excellent pathway model for some students. Community colleges have developed over the past 25-50 years a learning concept which focuses on student welfare with commitments to either employment outcomes or higher education opportunities. Whilst Members are located in metropolitan, regional and rural locations, their collaboration and shared philosophies ensure that regardless of physical situation the personal development of the individual remains paramount.

In recent years, recognising a need within their communities, CCA members have developed a greater focus on employability outcomes and progress through to higher education opportunities for their students. Colleges' learning models for developing a student's educational capabilities have grown from a history of delivery that is:

- Supportive and nurturing (smaller facilities not overburdened by bureaucratic processes)
- Customised to individual needs (less intimidating than larger learning organisations)
- Focussed on student retention (additional assistance offered early to avoid sense of failure building up)
- Provided by fully qualified trainers and assessors (including LLN expertise)
- Flexible in course scheduling (recognising that not all students can undertake standard hours for their learning needs)
- Highly cost effective

Many NSW students will complete their school studies successfully and have the confidence and self-belief (or family assistance) to navigate effectively into their next learning phase. However, some students who may have limited exposure to educational offerings beyond school, or students who have failed to achieve in school establishments may display some or all of the following traits:

- wary of formal educational institutions and easily put off by complex enrolment procedures and past negative experiences
- anxious about their ability to engage in learning and assessment
- lacking in self-esteem and self-motivation and unable to concentrate for long periods
- Lacking in learning skills generally - they often need to learn 'how' to learn
- Lacking in resilience - not able to overcome situations where they do not initially succeed - such as being deemed not competent in an assessment activity and therefore giving up on their entire program
- Often intense fear of failure
- de-motivated by formal assessment, not very self-directed or self-disciplined in learning
- in need of regular direction and guidance from their trainer and /or mentor (Community Colleges' often have in place staff who act as informal mentors; who recognise and may provide assistance to students who require learning or life related help)

Community College VET courses “build in” the intangible but vital issues of self esteem, empowerment, motivation, aspiration and whole of life support. These are not requirements within training packages, and are disregarded by many RTO’s. However, Community Colleges commitment to making a real difference and achieving employment outcomes or other productive pathways, mean inclusion of these intangible elements is essential.

Community colleges can assist in developing such students - who may be indigenous or from low socio-economic families or have studied only in regional or remote areas - to understand the connection points across education and to lead them into considering the possibilities of other (higher) educational programs and institutions. An important area of learners needs from CCA’s perspective is to create credible and connected learning pathways. This is expressed through the facilitated development, and coaching, to support individual pathway plans for equity students.

Issues around choice

There is some consensus throughout the public domain that many people and most industries have an understanding of university learning and this may in part be due to the emphasis by governments, the media and schools on information regarding the higher education sector over the past decade. There is less understanding of alternate pathways into university learning and also uncertainty about the economic and academic value of vocational education. Often it is assumed that TAFE **is** VET and other learning institutions have historically been viewed with some suspicion and concern as to the value of their courses. It should be possible that VET as a further education option is given credence as an important learning sector with clearly defined pathways into higher education as well as employment opportunities.

In examining Tertiary Pathways, the Committee should remain cognizant of the benefits of VET, as well as university learning. Whilst the range of training and vocations on offer and the style of training provided (full time study attendance, part time with work placement, in-work training etc) may appear complex, without schools, governments and the media highlighting the value of VET, NSW will not be able to engage the numbers into VET from the working population that the state requires to raise both workforce participation and productivity.

Current policy and practice can be fragmented, and confusing, not only for the student, but also providers and employers. There have been and continue to be major shifts in how individuals ‘learn’ and the types of qualifications they achieve. For students, a sometimes confusing myriad of educational offerings are placed before them when attempting to identify post-school options. It is not surprising then, that some will revert to what a family member suggests, regardless of its appropriateness.

Career counselling at schools may need to be expanded with greater support and advice given to staff fulfilling the role. Without individuals realising what is available, VET will remain (incorrectly) as the poor alternative to university education. Too many students receive limited awareness of further education and learning offering that is available and appropriate to their needs. Community colleges can and do play a key role in offering career guidance to individuals who come to them wanting to engage in post-school learning but uncertain of what they should do.

Whilst marketing greater career options to school students could be considered as a cost impost for the Government, CCA believes it would offer an effective Return on Investment, as the educational choice is likely to be better understood and therefore better utilised if quality information has been provided to allow students to make better informed decisions. Additionally, value for money evidence can be found in the Charles Sturt University’s Western Research Institute report; *Cost-Benefit Analysis of Social Inclusion Programs at Western College* (Dubbo’s Community College). The report found that the Government achieves a return significantly greater than zero when investing in these types of programs. The report goes on to identify a benefit cost ratio of 8.92. This is a return of \$8.92 for every \$1.00 spent. Furthermore, the report

focused on programs aimed at disengaged and youth at risk identifying a clear link between this group and crime levels.

Whilst evaluating and determining choice and pathways into and through tertiary education, CCA considers that the work our members undertake in the process of community engagement into learning is also very important and at times overlooked from the aspect of value to the individual as well as the state. That is to say all courses/ learning events and even the production of media that raise the awareness of the possibility of learning are embraced in the Colleges' activities and highlights the special (at times unique) place of colleges in their communities.

One example of this is where some of our members have a staff member involved with the community hubs running out of Primary Schools. CCA commends the Premier's plan of extending the use of these hubs throughout the state. In addition, The Youth After HELP (Helping Early Leavers Program) developed by Nepean Community College was developed on the premise that youth engagement is not always achieved through vocational instruments or outcomes that providers and governments need. Instead the key to young person's engagement in the Early Leavers Program is through exploring things they are interested in which then becomes a first step back into institutional learning.

Within the HELP program LLN was delivered in a unique manner. For example, the young people wrote a script for a play that the group produced and which the group then videoed the performance of. This Creative Writing, Drama and Film Art pre-accredited learning overlapped with Literacy, Communication, Working in Teams and Presentation Skills.

Disengaged Youth

CCA members often fulfil a vital role in working with disengaged youth. The role of equipping individuals with skills may commence with inspiring the student to *want* to learn. A set of interdependent prerequisites essential to coping with work, life and community involvement may include language, literacy, numeracy and employability skills; this education may be the inspiration a young person needs to encourage them back into the education sphere. Without re-engaging and developing self-empowerment through such fundamental skills pathway learning may not occur. Failure to re-engage this cohort inevitably leads to higher level of delinquency. Truancy has been identified by McCluskey, Bynum & Patchin (2004) as the kindergarten of crime and often seen as the gateway to more deviant behaviours. Consequently, Cohen, Piquero & Jennings (2010) identified the cost of dropping out of school for be around US\$300,000 - US\$450,000 per individual.

CCA considers that improving education opportunities for disadvantaged students begins with a need for simplified information to be available for specific groups of learners who need extra assistance to identify not only the consequences of their training choices but also because they may be initially overwhelmed by the complexities of options. These learners include disengaged youth, indigenous, and disadvantaged households. Some of these potential students have a degree of nervousness when requested to attend government agencies or educational facilities and we would suggest that NFP community embedded education providers can play a key role in assisting these persons with appropriate training options and accessing training subsidies. In western Sydney an Ethnic Pride program for Cobham youth delivered by a local community college facilitated respect and bonding with elders of Lebanese, Islander and Indigenous communities. These 'first steps' may ultimately lead to pathway learning at a tertiary level for these youth.

A community development response for improving disadvantaged learners' outcomes and raising the percentage who continue on to higher education is to offer an alternative education opportunity. Disadvantaged students may require longer hours for same outcomes, more 1 on 1 teaching, more wrap around services such as assistance with housing, families, transport, drugs, work ethics. Not all educational facilities are geared to deliver via such methods but those who do gain satisfaction (often NFP community providers) from knowing that the re-engagement of such learners allows them to see the pathways into higher education.

Regional offerings

It is generally acknowledged that VET and higher education delivery in 'thin markets' presents extra challenges. Providers cannot always offer work to trainers on a regular basis because of low class numbers and for learners it is not always possible to undertake skills development at a time that is convenient to them. Whilst distance learning via quality internet connection becomes a possibility in the near future, learning institutes will still need to be able to have some form of personal contact with students to make the learning experience a quality one. Generally speaking, those students who access social inclusion style programs do not have the skills to succeed at online learning.

There is ongoing discussion around funding the public provider as an educator of last resort. However, in this regard to be funded to provide services in 'thin markets' where it is not financially viable for private providers to operate, CCA notes that NFP community embedded RTOs may also provide quality services in more remote areas of the state.

Community based NFP RTOs are well placed to deliver VET in areas challenged either through geographic isolation and/or education isolation. Invariably these entities are able to be flexible with learning programs and course delivery, have surprisingly good distribution channels (through connections with other like-minded organisations) and a strong ethic and philosophy to assist their community; whether that be a business owner or an individual looking to be up-skilled. Importantly, The NSW Ombudsman in the recent report *Addressing Aboriginal Disadvantage: the need to do thing differently - October 2011* outlined the opportunity to extend programs into Community Colleges due to the high enrolment levels by aboriginal people followed by comparatively high completions. The report sites one of the key success of community colleges is that they are NFP community based organisations with high levels of community connectedness and focus on social inclusion programs.

CCA contends that it is not only rural and remote communities that may need alternative learning opportunities maximised. In parts of metropolitan areas and the capital city, there are 'pockets' of potential learners who are proving hard to reach. Some of the highest levels of youth unemployment in the state are in greater Sydney. This requires some form of special intervention as whilst it could be argued that there are no restrictions on travelling to school, or attending TAFE or private sector VET organisations or university, there remains insufficient numbers of youth staying in education in some postcodes. Re-engaging these groups requires entities and tutors with special empathy and time and as a consequence, greater resourcing to ensure learners are encouraged back on their education pathway.

CCA members also encourage pathways between themselves and universities. However, historically universities have sometimes been confused by the Diploma and Advanced Diploma certifications offered by colleges and have not always recognised their education value. One program, currently funded by the Department of Education and Communities is helping break down the barriers between tertiary education sectors. "BOOST" offers students the pathway through VET and then either into the workforce (the option taken up by 80% of participants) or through to University with credit transfers available. However, the challenge of universities accepting the educational value of VET qualifications has made "pathway success" in this program a little challenging at times. A key concept of BOOST is for young persons who have completed their HSC but not gone directly into university to have the opportunity to study two qualifications concurrently (for example, WEA Hunter currently offers Front Line Management and Diploma of Management) which then offers direct credit transfer into various degree programs at a university. Sometimes universities do not fully comprehend the Accredited VET environment in terms of transferability; overcoming this will ensure that (particularly regional) universities build additional income streams via a range of enrolment options for young people.

Young people require strong engagement over and above nearly every other factor. They look for guidance as much as they do educational opportunities, so working with a young person and trying to provide a balance of what will work for them as individuals and what is the peer population doing (peer measurement is still very important until very late teens/ early twenties) is tantamount to a successful program. In addition the capacity to change the entire delivery as required according to the needs of the students is the type of flexibility in learning methods that community colleges are known for. Working with young people more than any other population needs to be student centred as colleges are likely to be dealing with the journey of maturity as much as being on a learning journey.

There are also pathways to higher education in TAFE - especially for those providers that focus their delivery at Cert I & II level, which is too low to provide pathways to university - there usually needs to be a step in between. In some cases, providers have already established articulation into degree programs with advanced standing. In regional areas, gaining confidence at a college following school studies may empower an individual to travel further to attend university. Sectors need to have a better understanding of how they all operate, and how credit transfer and articulation arrangements can be maximised to benefit the student. However, there also needs to be consistency in articulation, so that the State does not continue the current issue with TAFE Diplomas providing a higher level of articulation than those delivered by Community Colleges. This is despite them being identical AQF qualifications!

CCA members have very strong credentials in delivering Cert I and II in regional NSW; completion rates are good. In addition, foundations skills are our colleges' strength because they are empathetic and very conscious of delivering pathway training opportunities. We would note that schools are not the only learning solution available in the regions; collaboration and alternative adult learning environments can assist students who are not fully succeeding in a traditional training environment. A number of community colleges' have independent schools as part of their community offerings. These institutions have been highly successful at working with disengaged young people (that is, those who have 'dropped out' of formal schooling) and helping them to attain their HSC; a critical learning outcome and defined pathway to ongoing educational success and workplace opportunities. In addition, CCA members have strong social inclusion credentials because of their commitment to their local communities that they work in.

In Conclusion

Community education providers have historically been acknowledged as organisations that provide a vital bridging point between social inclusion and workforce development. CCA members undertake life-wide learning as well as working with disengaged youth; both these activities provide a pathway for students to move into further, often higher education. CCA considers that its members provide an increasingly important pathway offering, especially in foundation and lower certificate levels, as TAFE and private providers expand to focus on delivery of Higher Qualifications. The position of CCA members as community owned and managed learning organisations, places them in a unique position as a connection point with in their communities. Developing partnerships between school, employers, JSA providers and other training providers is a pathway function provided by most community colleges.

Whilst recognising that the role of this Committee is to identify pathways in relation to tertiary education, CCA would also reflect that we often miss recognising that the value of learning should be for the individual to determine, not for us as providers, nor necessarily for governments. Community Colleges' see as many life changing situations at the lower qualification levels as those provided by higher education. While CCA understands that the higher the level of education, generally the higher capacity to earn income and contribute to the economy, there are many people in our communities for whom higher education will never be an option, as they simply do not have the capacity to learn at that level. Notwithstanding this, CCA and

its members consider it is also vital to recognise the importance of gaining a Certificate II or III to improving the lives of those individuals.

One of the greatest challenges we face as a society, is engaging those individuals whose families do not understand the potential for education to improve lives, and those families who are fearful of the consequences of having a family member succeed at learning. This may revolve around psychological issues surrounding family behaviour - and to some extent - a fear of education beyond school. For example, situations that arise from the fear of a family member succeeding when one or more other members has low self-esteem issues themselves. This often manifests in behaviours such as sabotaging the person's efforts, working to control them so that they cannot succeed, or consistent put-downs that lead to the person giving up on their goals. Overcoming generational, gender based and cultural attitudes is another area that provides us with challenges. CCA, together with its members, will continue to advocate the need for working within communities to address these issues as well as delivering structural reform in the tertiary education sector.

To be smart and skilled, the NSW Government should recognise that learners deserve choice in their education and the "one size fits all" is not a model that will benefit all potential high school and post-secondary students in the state.