

Liz Penfold

Member for Flinders

PO Box 1798
PORT LINCOLN SA 5606

Phone: 08 8683 0722
Fax: 08 8682 5912

Submission to TAFE Governance in South Australia – 2004 and Beyond

25 February 2004

Preamble

No matter what we do, periodical reviews are appropriate to both to clear away dead wood and to consider new initiatives.

However, too many reviews and restructures are counter productive. The TAFE restructure that was undertaken in 2003 caused considerable dislocation of lecturers, a problem that has not been addressed adequately.

The proposed one-TAFE Institute for regional South Australia will further exacerbate that situation.

Barriers to education and training

Better delivery of education and training, coupled with efficiencies in administration, are commendable goals.

However the barriers that rural people encounter in pursuing post secondary education and training have not been identified and have certainly not been considered by those who developed the recommendations in this report.

Per capita, rural populations have a lower proportion of tertiary graduates and professionals than metropolitan residents. The reasons for this must be addressed to fulfil the statements in the Preamble:

“The South Australian Government is committed to the... **full participation of all South Australians in economic and social life.**

“It is essential that the TAFE system ... **provide an optimal service to all South Australians ...**”

While the Schofield Report “identified four parts of the skills supply chain where improvement is needed”, I can find no specific reference to the barriers that rural people must overcome to gain tertiary education.

Distance, cost and time are the three major deterrents for rural and regional residents in seeking tertiary qualifications, including TAFE courses. It is paramount that these three criteria be considered at all levels of any restructure.

A major report by the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) in 2000 stated:

“We could do better for young rural Australians. In 2001, as we celebrated our achievements of 100 years of nationhood, few of us knew that more than 800,000 of our young citizens – those who lived in rural and remote Australia – suffered educational disadvantage that verged on discrimination.”

The report identified that the cost burden to educate children is generally higher the more remote your home is, and if you are poor or cash strapped because of drought and years of little or no income, then the cost pressures to educate children are severe. ***The number of country children going on to tertiary education is much lower than in cities and is declining.***

Effects on TAFE staff and management

Distance, cost and time are also three major criteria in relation to TAFE staff and administration that must be taken into account. When these three criteria are applied, it may become obvious that a change which, on paper, reduces overheads may, in fact, increase overheads. On paper the change may appear desirable but in fact may defeat the aims of the exercise.

The introduction of one regional TAFE for South Australia will not fulfil the statements made in the preamble, nor will it deliver the necessary improvements identified in the Schofield Report.

Regional South Australia covers such an extensive geographical area with a wide diversity of communities that one TAFE governance for the whole area will weaken “the voice” of regional South Australia, not strengthen it as claimed in the explanatory reasons for this model.

It was extremely disappointing to note that Spencer Institute of TAFE, which already covers a large proportion of the State, was not included in the focus groups that “explored” optimum models for Regional TAFE. This omission highlights the lack of understanding of the three barriers of distance, time and cost.

The collegial management of the TAFE Network will further weaken TAFE in rural and regional South Australia. Representation from across rural South Australia will, of necessity, be limited. Knowledge of individual needs and circumstances will also

be sketchy at various times. Added to this will be the considerable cost of bringing the members of the college together for meetings. Technology such as teleconferencing can be used to cut costs but this is not always available or desirable.

Comparative size

One of the reasons given for the adoption of one Regional Institute is that of comparative size with two Metropolitan Institutes. It is a fallacious argument. Economies of size are valid but do not automatically apply in all circumstances.

This was one of the surprise findings of the University of Adelaide professor who was paid to research the rural crisis of the 1980s on Eyre Peninsula with particular reference to farms. It was found that smaller operations were less likely to get into financial trouble than the large farming concerns. Business finance is the same whether it is a farm or a TAFE Institute.

One of the arguments that was presented against adopting one Institute covering the whole of the state was that it would produce “added complexity and operational diseconomies of large scale”. These are precisely the arguments against adopting one Regional Institute covering the whole of rural and regional South Australia.

Sharing of resources

The “better sharing of expertise and resources” by one Regional Institute would be an impossibility in many instances and would present extreme difficulty in most cases.

From Ceduna in the west to Coober Pedy in the north to Mount Gambier in the south is only a slightly shorter distance than from Adelaide to Brisbane. This comparison immediately brings out the impossibility of sharing expertise and resources in any practical and effective sense over one Regional Institute in South Australia.

Eyre Peninsula has fared badly in arrangements of this kind. We have one of the largest indigenous populations in the state, possibly even the largest when centres such as Koonibba, Yalata and Oak Valley are included. These three centres use Ceduna as their base for services, including the delivery of post secondary education.

Ceduna campus of the Spencer Institute of TAFE accesses services from the Port Lincoln campus of the same Institute. It takes four hours to drive from Port Lincoln to Ceduna, therefore a return trip takes a full working day without even one student contact or teaching time. There is no direct flight between Port Lincoln and Ceduna and the cost would be prohibitive on the budget anyway. There is no direct bus service which, in any case, would be more time consuming than a private car. So both lecturers and students are disadvantaged.

It seems, on the surface, that the common use of lecturers by a number of campuses is a good thing. That may be so in the city. In the country it is a recipe for disaster.

The sharing of lecturers by several campuses would mean that most of the lecturer's time is spent travelling, with the consequent stress and use of energy that that entails. The outcome is usually the resignation of the lecturer, thus further disadvantaging and depriving clients in regional South Australia. It is already difficult to get suitably qualified people without making it impossible for them to have some quality of life.

The reasoning for one Regional Institute states that it would develop "critical mass in staff expertise". This would be impossible with one Regional TAFE Institute. Staff at Mount Gambier would be virtually inaccessible to clients on Eyre Peninsula. The proposal shows a lamentable ignorance of the "tyranny of distance". There is also the problem of interchangeable relevance of courses between completely different regions.

Fallacies in supporting arguments

The explanation for the preferred option dwells mostly on the comparative size of two metropolitan and one regional institute, yet gives no information on how this will benefit the country. The comments made refer to metropolitan Adelaide only.

The report states that "each organisation will be of the size, strategic significance and capacity to handle the appointment of sufficiently senior management". Covering the whole of rural and regional South Australia, where would the senior management staff be located? One would assume they had responsibility for the whole of the Regional Institute, stretching (as mentioned before) over a distance little short of from Adelaide to Brisbane.

And what of the cost of travelling to the various campuses? That is not a cost that the metropolitan institutes would incur to any extent. It would be a severe disadvantage in cost terms alone for one Regional Institute.

Advancing the state's revenue base

Eyre Peninsula contributes nearly \$1 billion of the state's export income, producing 33% of the state's grain, 65% of the seafood harvest, 12% of the livestock, 75% of and Australia's gypsum. This is probably a greater contribution than any other electorate in the state. Premier Rann and the Economic Development Board's Chairman Robert Champion de Crespigny propose tripling this State's exports in the next 10 years and much of this will come from regional areas.

Accessible TAFE training and education are an essential component in lifting production from this region and thus benefiting the state even more.

Quote from the nationally distributed *Frontier News* February 2004:

"Matriculation and tertiary education is increasingly essential to most rural occupations.

John Halsey, Executive Officer of Rural Education Forum Australia, ... in his outback travel in central South Australia over recent years, has seen saltbush

growing where saltbush never grew before – part of a program to address the crisis of salinity and water management. Now a new industry of saltbush fed beef and mutton is kicking off.

It would be good, he thinks, if the system was able to move decisively and quickly, to link this with local schools and TAFEs – to bring scientists, agricultural authorities, local businesses and farmers together with the teaching program, and help rural young people become rurally employable.

It is, he notes, a connection to the way Agricultural Colleges and Area Schools have long provided relevant courses.”

Conclusion

Responsibility without authority is a recipe for failure. The proposed option of one TAFE Institute covering the whole of regional South Australia is putting the responsibility on TAFE campuses while denying them the authority to operate and manage their affairs. It stultifies innovation, adaptability, extension and change.

The effective delivery of education and training should be the prime aim of all TAFEs. This is especially so in regional South Australia where tertiary options are limited and, in most areas, non existent.

TAFE has the opportunity to make its campuses the leading deliverer of relevant tertiary education and training in rural and regional South Australia in a “world’s best practice” set-up that would attract the attention of international education authorities. It provides exciting prospects **but only if** the campuses have sufficient room to move, to make their own decisions quickly, and to be given both responsibility and authority.

The HREOC Report made 73 recommendations based on five “A’s” – the assertion that country education should be available, accessible, affordable, acceptable and adaptable.

It is not too strong a statement to say that the proposal for one TAFE Institute for the whole of rural and regional South Australia fails on all five counts and I suggest that even the Spencer Institute of TAFE is more than big enough and certainly must not be enlarged further.