

I am a volunteer teacher and administrative officer in the community sector working with refugees and asylum seekers. The work done by NGOs in the refugee resettlement sector is very specific work. The aim is always to familiarise refugees from many different backgrounds with Australian society and Australian institutions in order to successfully negotiate their way through life in Australia. The skills have been developed over the last thirty years and incorporate a huge amount of knowledge and cultural capital.

I have been teaching as a volunteer in the sector for six years. In that time the structure of English as a Second Language learning has changed dramatically. Classes were provided in the TAFE sector exclusively initially, along with the supplementary classes offered free in the community sector which were provided for people, such as asylum seekers, who were not eligible for TAFE courses. With the advent of the rapid expansion of private vocational education, this situation has become much more complex.

There are many problems with these private providers. They use high pressure sales techniques to recruit students and promise them 'free courses' which are funded by the government 'HECS' scheme. Students are not aware that they are incurring a debt or that they are often not eligible for the HECS scheme. There is no guarantee either that teaching will be performed by qualified teachers or that classes will actually be held. It is common practice for these schools to employ teachers who have done a six week literacy course, and are without any formal education qualification. The criteria for maintaining government funding appears to rely on enrolment figures which explains the dubious practices which occur regularly in the private vocational sector. Any private provider who may be operating ethically has to compete against all of these dubious practices. I have never heard any company spoken about positively.

The only place where the quality of education can be assured is at a government funded TAFE college. This is also the only place where students can be guaranteed to be taught in class daily or weekly by qualified people and where there will be a reliably recognisable certificate at the end of the course. The only advice we can give our students in good conscience is to only undertake courses at TAFE.

However vocational education has been subject to the very contestability to which the community sector is now subject. In fact it is that very contestability which has created this situation. In the community sector the aim is always to help clients to adapt to the reality of their lives and to cope by using all of the services which are available to them. Ultimately the aim is that clients will no longer need the service. In the not for profit sector everything is geared towards clients as quickly as possible living successful lives without our services. There is no profit to be gained from keeping clients dependent on our services. If government funding were to change like the vocational education sector, where profits depend on keeping numbers of clients high then the whole basis of our work would be utterly corrupted.

The concept of profit which relies solely on government funding seems to be creating a false market which cannot exist outside that government funding. The community sector is overwhelmingly reliant on government funding and already is subject to competition in the provision of services. NGOs in effect compete with each other for the available pool of funds which does not increase according to the number of organisations which exist in any given sector. Funds are allocated according to submissions made and to the guidelines about service provision drawn up by government. The nature of NGOs as 'not for profit' ensures that the focus is always on service provision and **not** on increasing client numbers, promoting sales to the target clientele, and paying little regard to the actual provision of services.

In fact it is absurd to apply market principles to a sector of the economy where the aim is to help people to integrate better into our society and to leave the disadvantaged groups to which they belong. Services for the homeless, for the unemployed, for refugees, for people suffering torture and trauma, for the chronically poor and disadvantaged all fall into this category. The aim of all the sector is to decrease the number of clients not to institute a business model which seeks to increase the number of clients.

Often people in NGOs are not well acquainted with any form of business practice and because their focus is on the provision of services they are very unfamiliar with 'making business cases' or even with the concept of running an organisation for profit at all. They often fail to understand that they need to make a case to government to maintain the funding they currently receive. They are so focussed on providing services to help people, (and they are funded completely on the basis that they do that exclusively) that they simply do not have the skills to compete within a business focussed environment. Social workers are not trained to do that and nor should they be. Clearly these factors would put them at a profound disadvantage when supposedly competing for government funding with people whose focus is on profiting from government services. The result would be that a great deal of money would be wasted on employing people whose job it is to compete for funding. That money would then not go to servicing clients.

If the amount of funding which government provides is a set amount then it seems completely inefficient to encourage organisations and companies to waste money on that competitive process, which takes funds away from service provision. It also seems inefficient to make a profit from those services, again taking funds away from service provision. The end result is that fewer services are provided to fewer people to be helped out of homelessness, poverty, mental illness, alienation and juvenile crime.

This enquiry is examining various aspects of user choice. In the refugee and asylum seeker service sector this is not a very useful concept. The services which operate currently on some level of government funding are settlement services, and psychological support services. People who use our services are new to Australia and most often do not have a very high level of English language competency. They are not in any position to make an informed choice about services since they are completely unfamiliar with Australian institutions and systems of government and often cannot understand or participate in everyday practices such as shopping, housing, schooling or medical services. The point of settlement services is to help clients become familiar with and to negotiate these aspects of Australian life. They cannot decide which service they prefer *a priori*.

We do not want to see our sector end up in the parlous situation that vocational education now finds itself - solely reliant on an unregulated business model which has profoundly undermined the high quality services offered by the TAFE sector. Improvements can always be made in service provision however creating profit out of service provision will have the opposite effect. Additionally, asking people to make a decision about service providers on the basis of complete ignorance of the context is also a completely false and unrealistic choice. In my experience, the practice of service provision in the community sector is one of placing clients at the centre of practice and it's success should be measured by the number of people who no longer need its services.