

# The Deaf Society of New South Wales

## Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into the VET Workforce

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into the VET Workforce.

### **Background**

The Deaf Society of NSW is a registered training organisation and a community college. We deliver the Diploma of Auslan qualifications, the Certificates in General Education, Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, and a range of non-accredited courses.

Auslan (Australian sign Language) is the language of the Deaf Community in Australia. Most of our trainers and teachers are deaf, and use Auslan as the language of instruction in their teaching. This is ideal, as our programs are either for people learning Auslan or for deaf people learning computer skills, literacy, or training skills. This does, however, lead to some unique challenges in the development of our workforce.

### **Scope of this submission**

As our staffing needs are quite specific, this submission is restricted to a small number of comments aimed to assist the Commission in making recommendations that will take into account the need for trained and experienced trainers with disability, specifically the need for deaf trainers who communicate using Auslan (Australian Sign Language).

### ***Are there particular difficulties related to the recruitment or development of practitioners who are able to deliver training in new technologies?***

New technology is opening up huge potential for training in Auslan and training for deaf people in remote areas. Taken by itself, this does mean that our trainers need to be up-skilled, as this simply forms part of normal staff development.

### ***Do you anticipate that demand for VET from learners from disadvantaged backgrounds will increase in the next five to ten years? If so, what implications do you think this will have for the VET workforce?***

We would anticipate a rise in the number of deaf people seeking training as the push from welfare to work continues. The VET sector needs to be equipped to provide for these students. For those who use Auslan, interpreters need to be available for training. They are available in the workplace through the Employee Assistance Fund, and at TAFEs, but it is unlikely that small private providers will be able to provide interpreters to deaf students. This means that:

- The VET workforce needs to include sufficient Auslan interpreters, and funding for their employment in institutions which cannot afford to pay them
- training and information should be made available to VET trainers so that they can learn how to work effectively with interpreters

Programs that encourage young people with disability – including deaf people – to gain qualifications to enter the VET workforce would be ideal.

### ***What do stronger commercial pressures in the VET sector imply for the future size, skills and knowledge requirement, of the workforce?***

Stronger commercial pressures imply that providing access via Auslan interpreters is likely to be resisted even more strenuously by private providers than it already is, given the cost of such provision. Where interpreters are provided, they may be asked to work unsafe hours, or alone without co-interpreters, which would put them at risk of Occupational Overuse Syndrome (OOS). Again, our recommendations would be that:

- The VET workforce should include sufficient Auslan interpreters, and funding for their employment in institutions which cannot afford to pay them
- Training and information should be made available to VET trainers so that they can learn how to work effectively with interpreters

***Are training packages still appropriate as a basis for designing vocational training arrangements? Is a shift away from competency based training at higher qualification levels desirable? Might it happen in the next five to ten years? If so, what implications, if any, might this have for demand for the VET workforce?***

A shift away from competency based training is likely to be desirable for higher-level qualifications, and may also be desirable for language-based training courses such as CGEA and the Diploma of Auslan certificates. However, this may lead to increased demand for higher level of tertiary qualifications for teachers. This would present a barrier for recruiting and training deaf trainers. Deaf people are more likely than the general population to hold a certificate or diploma, but less likely to hold a bachelor degree or higher (Louisa Willoughby, *Education and Employment of Deaf People in NSW*, 2010). Again, programs that encourage young people with disability to gain qualifications to enter the VET workforce would be ideal.

***Would increasing qualification standards make entry into the VET workforce more appealing and/or more difficult? Would these changes produce better student outcomes?***

A unique feature of the VET workforce is that it relies on its members having excellent current industry skills as well as teaching skills. Continuing to work in industry is the ideal way for trainers to remain knowledgeable in their field, so having casual work for trainers available, and making sure it is attractive, is a good way to draw current industry practitioners into the VET workforce. By increasing the teaching qualifications required, casual work would become less attractive, and we could be creating an environment where the most knowledgeable practitioners were unable or unwilling to become trainers. Ironically, student outcomes could worsen.

The qualification requirements should also be commensurate with the type of work that is available once the requirement has been met. Like many specialist areas of VET training, Auslan is mostly taught in part-time programs, so only part-time sessional work is usually available. Introducing a requirement for specialist trainers to have a university degree when only part-time casual work is available will spell the end of Auslan programs and other smaller, new or emerging training programs. Our concern is that it will have the net effect of reducing the VET system's ability to respond to needs in niche or specialist areas.

On a purely pragmatic level, degree qualification requirements could also constitute a greater barrier for deaf people wishing to enter the VET workforce as deaf people are less likely to hold bachelor or higher degrees even though they are more likely than the general population to hold a certificate or diploma qualifications (Louisa Willoughby, *Education and Employment of Deaf People in NSW*, 2010).

***Might registration of VET practitioners and/or other professionals have benefits for their professional standing and practice? Would these benefits outweigh potential costs from higher barriers to entry into the VET workforce?***

From a quality point of view, registration would simply be duplicating the work that is already done by the AQTF requirements for teacher qualifications, and would indeed be an undesirable barrier to entry into the workforce. Although registration could potentially have the benefit of improving professional standing, it will not improve professional practice unless changes are made to qualifications as well. An increase in standing is not of much value *per se* without an increase in the standard of professional practice, so we would not advocate the introduction of registration.

Not only would registration simply be duplicating the quality assurance role of the AQTF, but the cost of registration could potentially eliminate casuals from the pool of workers. Most of the VET workforce has better or other work available elsewhere, because of their industry skills, so it is likely that further requirements would make it harder for training providers to recruit and keep staff than is already the case.