

10 January 2025

**Dear Committee Members,**

Thank you for inviting Adult Learning Australia (ALA) to make a submission to the Inquiry into the **Free TAFE Bill 2024** (Ref: CMIN-2-24-25661).

---

## **About Us**

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) is the national not-for-profit peak body dedicated to ensuring that all Australians can access the transformative benefits of lifelong and life-wide learning. For over 65 years, ALA has been a strong advocate for adult learning and community education, representing organisational and individual members across all states and territories of Australia.

ALA's mission is to provide leadership, advocacy, and professional development to enhance high-quality services for all adult learners. Our members include community learning centres, community colleges, neighbourhood houses, Aboriginal cooperatives, TAFEs, universities, and other adult education institutions.

As a trusted and respected leader in adult learning and community education, ALA champions equitable access to learning opportunities for all Australians, supporting social cohesion, economic prosperity, and empowerment for individuals and communities.

---

## **ALA's Position on the Free TAFE Bill 2024**

ALA supports the intent and spirit of the Free TAFE Bill 2024 as a mechanism to enhance access to vocational education and training. However, we wish to highlight a missed opportunity to support learners who may struggle to take up, complete, or fully leverage their TAFE courses effectively by highlighting the points below.

---

## **Pre-Learning Preparation for Disadvantaged Learners**

For many learners, transitioning into formal education can be overwhelming. Individuals who have been long-term unemployed, left school early, or come from disadvantaged backgrounds often require tailored support before they can successfully engage in TAFE programs. Without tailored "learning-to-learn" strategies, these learners are at risk of disengagement and failure.

Many adult learners, particularly those returning to education, can greatly benefit from the comprehensive wrap-around support offered by adult and community education (ACE) providers. Wrap-around support takes a holistic approach to addressing the diverse needs of individuals, especially those facing significant challenges or disadvantages. This approach integrates and coordinates services across various areas, including childcare, social support, health and well-being, financial assistance, and crisis intervention etc.

ACE organisations play a vital role by delivering non-formal, informal, and formal education programs in welcoming, community-based settings in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote locations. These accessible environments help learners develop the skills and confidence needed to succeed in further education, the workforce, and other aspects of life.

The need for learner support is echoed not only by our members but also in the State of TAFE *Survey report*<sup>1</sup> (2023) conducted by the Australian Education Union (AEU) released last year, which identified significant gaps in delivering to priority groups<sup>2</sup> among TAFE students. When TAFE teachers were asked what additional needs were more prevalent among the new Fee-Free cohort of TAFE students they emphasised that there are more students with mental health needs, additional literacy and numeracy needs, additional digital skills needs and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds that have now enrolled in Fee-Free TAFE.

Australian Government's investment of up to \$142 million over five years, including \$77 million for foundation skills training through ACE, is a positive step. However, support should extend beyond foundation skills to encompass a broader range of learner needs such as those outlined as part of wrap around support above. By providing this level of support, ACE ensure students can thrive in TAFE programs and beyond as part of their lifelong learning journey.

---

## Strengthening Pre-Assessment Practices

Introducing learner-centred pre-assessments can help identify learners' aspirations and readiness, ensuring that they are matched with suitable study pathways. By focusing on learner goals and potential, rather than solely addressing skills gaps, we can reduce non-completions, improve learner outcomes and improve system efficiency.

The information gathered from the pre-assessments can be used to design pre-accredited courses to support learner progression to TAFE.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aeufederal.org.au/news-media/news/2024/state-our-tafe>

<sup>2</sup> First Nations Australians, young people (17-24), people who are out of work or receiving income support payments, unpaid carers, women facing economic insecurity, women undertaking study in non-traditional fields, people with disability, certain categories of visa holders

## Broadening Success Measures

ALA welcomes the inclusion of success measures in the Free TAFE Bill 2024 but believes they should go beyond economic outcomes. Success should also encompass:

- **Completion Rates:** Tracking whether students complete courses, find employment, or pursue further education.
- **Social Cohesion and Inclusion:** Monitoring participation from key groups, including:
  - Marginalised populations (e.g., women, people with disabilities, LGBTQI individuals, and disengaged youth).
  - Indigenous communities, particularly in remote areas where local education programs are vital.
  - Individuals in or transitioning out of youth and adult justice facilities.
  - Older adults re-entering the workforce after prolonged unemployment.
  - Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) learners.

---

## The Impact of Free TAFE on ACE Providers

The introduction of Free TAFE has unintentionally affected local ACE providers, reducing the number of not-for-profit organisations offering VET courses. ACE providers that deliver the same VET courses as TAFE cannot compete with free TAFE offerings, leaving students to pay fees for community-based programs.

Beyond providing training, skills, and education, ACE providers play a pivotal role in fostering community resilience and capacity. They serve as hubs for volunteers and community engagement, creating networks that help build stronger, healthier, and more vibrant neighbourhoods. By offering accessible learning opportunities, these organisations contribute to the social fabric of their local areas, ensuring communities remain strong and self-sustaining.

In Australia, community education providers account for approximately 10.9% of student enrolments in nationally recognised VET courses<sup>3</sup>. Their role in delivering accessible education and training in localised community-based settings, is invaluable.

---

## Enhancing the TAFE Funding Model

The current TAFE funding model allocates funds based on enrolments. Greater transparency that is linked to both iterative and final outcomes, including course completion and employment, would encourage TAFEs to maintain a focus on the whole student journey.

---

<sup>3</sup>[https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/Research/Quick\\_Guides/2023-24/VocationalEducationandTraining?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/Research/Quick_Guides/2023-24/VocationalEducationandTraining?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

Having funding linked to more tangible outcomes could incentivise better learner outcomes, help reduce the current incompleteness rate and foster a greater return on investment for the Australian government.

---

## **Flexible Learning Pathways and Micro-Credentials**

Learning pathways must be flexible to allow students to shift focus or pursue micro-credentials without the stigma of non-completion. Current models often lack the adaptability learners need to align their education with personal and career goals.

---

## **The Impact on Educators**

The *State of TAFE Survey* also revealed that Fee-Free TAFE places are increasing workload pressures on TAFE educators. Over 75% of respondents reported having insufficient time to focus on student skill development due to overwhelming responsibilities.

Investing in ACE providers could relieve TAFE staff by providing localised educational pathway options and support services that would foster collaboration between the two sectors to enhance learner outcomes.

---

## **Closing the Gap: Supporting Indigenous Communities**

We support initiatives within the **National Skills Plan**, particularly those focused on partnering with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples under the **Closing the Gap** framework. Expanding investments in the Aboriginal Community-Controlled (ACC) and First Nations Owned (FNO) training sectors is critical.

These initiatives must be implemented through genuine partnerships with the sector, ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities lead the design and delivery of culturally appropriate education, and enable Indigenous communities to foster genuine empowerment and sustainability.

---

## **Researching the Role of ACE in the Free TAFE System**

ALA has a long-standing history of conducting research into the field of adult learning and community-based education, including 65 years of publishing the **Australian Journal of**



**Adult Learning (AJAL)**<sup>4</sup>. We propose dedicated funding be allocated to ALA to examine the current state of ACE nationally, and its potential to add value to the Free TAFE initiative.

This research would provide empirical evidence to government to shed light on the social and economic value ACE provides to the adult education and training sector in Australia through pathways and partnerships to ensure that Free TAFE complements and strengthens Australia's broader education landscape.

---

## **Conclusion**

While TAFE is a crucial pillar of education, it should be viewed as one component within a broader culture that fosters a lifelong learning society. Addressing the gaps evident within Free TAFE through engagement with and funding toward ACE, will create a more inclusive and effective national adult education and training system that equips all learners with the skills and support they need to thrive in learning, life and work.

Thank you for considering our submission. ALA consents to the publication of this document and looks forward to further engagement and discussion with the Committee.

Adult Learning Australia  
45 Moreland Street  
Footscray 3011  
info@ala.asn.au  
03 96898623

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://ajal.net.au/>