

Queensland Teachers' Union
Submission to the Senate Select Committee on
Certain Aspects of Queensland Government
Administration related to Commonwealth
Government Affairs

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1. Introduction

The QTU welcomes the opportunity to submit to this inquiry into Queensland Government Administration. The federal government makes significant recurrent funding contributions to the Queensland education system each year and so the decisions made by the state government regarding education may be of interest to this committee. Our submission links to terms of reference (1) (g) “any other matter the committee considers relevant”.

There are three parts to this submission, each representing an area related to education which may be of interest to the committee:

- TAFE and the possible conflict of interest of members appointed by the LNP government to the Queensland Skills and Training Taskforce given their links with private providers in competition with TAFE.
- The closure of Nyanda State High School and subsequent sale to a private school.
- The closure of the Barrett Adolescent Centre, a residential health and education facility, without a tier 3 replacement service and [REDACTED]

We have identified these three issues as examples of the way in which the government has operated. Of key concern are the lack of transparent processes, inconsistency in decision making and potential conflicts of interest.

The QTU has witnesses ready to appear at the Brisbane hearings should the Committee wish to hear further detail on the matters dealt with in this submission, and we have sought an invitation to appear.

2. TAFE Queensland

Background

For more than 130 years as the public provider, TAFE Queensland has been the largest registered training organisation (RTO) in the vocational education and training (VET) sector in Queensland. Over this time, with strong government commitment to funding, TAFE Queensland has been able to provide the people of Queensland with high quality, low cost, accessible education and training. Approximately 60 per cent of the working population in Queensland have received some or all of their education through TAFE Queensland.

TAFE Queensland's involvement in the VET sector is wide ranging, encompassing VET in schools programs, trade related training, business, nursing, child care and the arts. In addition, TAFE Queensland has also provided alternate pathways to help large numbers of Queenslanders to gain the education and skills required to re-enter the workforce, change careers, gain entrance to university or provide second chance education.

This community responsibility to the people of Queensland as the state's public provider has been lost under the control of the current LNP state government. This is largely due to questionable decisions that have been made since this government was elected. These decisions range from setting up a one-sided review into the VET sector, large cuts to funding, the removal of large numbers of staff, privatisation by stealth, dubious property deals and the introduction of the Queensland Training Assets Management Authority (QTAMA). This has all been undertaken with little or no information being passed on to the community in Queensland.

Queensland Skills and Training Taskforce

In June 2012, the then recently elected LNP Queensland government enlisted the Queensland Skills and Training Taskforce (QSTT) to provide independent advice and recommendations to reform and revamp the operations and outcomes of Queensland's VET sector. Section 3 (pg 52-68) of its report focused exclusively on TAFE Queensland and what changes the QSTT could suggest (<http://training.qld.gov.au/resources/industry/pdf/final-report.pdf>).

While the QTU recognises that the government appointed a number of members to the review that were independent of TAFE, at least four of the appointed members are or had formerly been directors or executive officers of companies in direct competition with TAFE Queensland in the VET sector. TAFE Queensland had no representatives among the appointed members. This is a telling omission as TAFE is Queensland's largest and most experienced provider in the VET sector. It also raises potential issues regarding conflict of interest that might arise in making recommendations about the Queensland VET sector.

Given the omission of TAFE Queensland and the significant number of members of the QSTT with ties to private training providers, it is difficult to reconcile that the QSTT decisions and recommendations in the VET sector in Queensland would not be biased against TAFE. Most of the recommendations were implemented by the Queensland LNP government under the advisement of the Premier, Campbell Newman and the Minister for Education, John-Paul Langbroek by 1 July 2014, to the detriment of TAFE Queensland, its students, staff and the community as a whole (<http://training.qld.gov.au/resources/industry/pdf/government-response.pdf>).

Since the implementations of the QSTT recommendations, TAFE Queensland has suffered. Examples of this include the closure of training centres such as the Ithaca TAFE campus and the further proposed closures of Mt Gravatt, Grovely, Alexander Hills and Bracken Ridge campuses in the Brisbane Metro area alone. The QTU is also concerned about potential closures in regional areas, such as Noosa and Maryborough.

These closures are partly a result of the impacts of a wide range of funding cuts to courses, which have increased the financial outlay required of students. This passing on of the financial burden to students has seen a significant decrease in student numbers attending a variety of courses at TAFE Queensland. Some examples of this include the cost of VET in school based courses increasing from \$280.00 to \$2880.00 and Diploma level courses in engineering increasing from \$1200.00 to \$8000.00. No longer are TAFE courses accessible and affordable to all.

Another implementation which is having a major impact on the financial position and viability of TAFE Queensland is the transfer of all of its buildings, facilities, infrastructure and assets to the Queensland Training Assets Management Authority (<http://www.hpw.qld.gov.au/FacilitiesManagement/QTAMA/Pages/default.aspx>). This has resulted in TAFE now paying rent on assets it previously owned.

Queensland Training Assets Management Authority

The Queensland Training Assets Management Authority (QTAMA) was formed on 1 July 2014 as a separate entity which now controls and owns all of TAFE Queensland's buildings, facilities, infrastructure and assets. To expand, this includes tools, equipment, desks, pens and even pieces of equipment donated to specific teaching teams prior to 1 July 2014. On first inspection this may seem to have advantages relating to the management of all assets in a central location. What it does, however, is further burden TAFE Queensland with an additional cost which had not been incurred previously.

Under the QTAMA, TAFE Queensland will now have to rent/lease back buildings and assets it previously owned. These are buildings and assets that have been paid for over many years by the tax payers of Queensland for the benefit and specific use of TAFE Queensland as the public provider. In addition, under the QTAMA any private RTO may now lease the entire facilities at a fraction of the cost that would have been incurred to operate in competition with TAFE Queensland.

This was acknowledged by the Minister for Education, Training and Employment, the Hon. John-Paul Langbroek, in the government response to the QSTT report, where it states “...open up public training facilities to other providers” (pg 3). (<http://training.qld.gov.au/resources/industry/pdf/government-response.pdf>).

Furthermore, on 31 March 2014, Ms Claire Field, an appointed member of QSTT and at the time an executive officer of the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) released an article encouraging ACPET members to undertake leases of TAFE facilities. This would allow TAFE’s competitors to go into direct competition with TAFE using TAFE’s own assets.

To quote Claire Field (<http://www.acpet.edu.au/article/7712/congratulations-queensland>):

It will not only provide a boost for Queensland’s private providers (making it easier for them to expand their operations into courses which traditionally have high infrastructure costs), it will also make it easier for interstate providers to establish a foot-hold in Queensland by reducing the costs of setting up a new ‘shop front’.

Conclusion

The propriety of the decisions made by the LNP government in Queensland needs to be examined. These decisions have resulted in large numbers of funding cuts in a number of areas which have greatly reduced access to TAFE for a wide variety of the community. The LNP government and its representatives have stated in a number of open forums since 1 July 2014 that TAFE Queensland (a public education institute for over 130 years) no longer has a community responsibility and is a profit driven organisation only. These decisions have also seen an attack on wages and conditions, the loss more of than 550 highly qualified teachers, almost 1300 staff in TAFE altogether and a reduction of a number of campuses. At the same time these decisions have provided a benefit to those private RTOs that are in direct competition with TAFE. This may have put TAFE on the path to extinction in Queensland, allowing the complete privatisation of the Queensland VET sector.

3. Closure of Nyanda State High School

Background

Before the LNP government was elected in March 2012, its candidates, including now Premier Campbell Newman, assured voters that there would be no asset sales without a mandate for such sales. Since then the government has changed its claim, stating that it meant only “major assets” sales would require a voter mandate.

In May 2013 the Minister for Education, Training and Employment, the Hon. John-Paul Langbroek, announced that eight Queensland state schools had been identified for community consultation regarding proposed closure as part of the 2013 *School Viability Assessment*. In September of 2013 it was announced that six of these eight would close, and Charlton State School, Fortitude Valley State School, Nyanda State High School, Old Yarranlea State School, Stuart State School and Toowoomba South State School all closed at the end of the 2013 school year. Two identified schools, Everton Park State High School and Wyreema State School, have remained open. Additionally, schools such as Balmoral State High School, Whites Hill State College and Earnshaw State College have lost significant areas of open land which had mostly been used for sporting activities.

Concerns

The QTU wishes to draw attention to the following concerns:

- Nyanda SHS should not have been closed and methods of improving the school’s viability should have been trialled first.
- At the very least Nyanda SHS should have remained open until the end of the 2014 school year, to enable students who had begun their senior years of study to complete their schooling without disruption.
- Consultation was deficient.
- Selling the site to Brisbane Christian College acknowledges that there was community need for a secondary school in the area.
- Selling to Brisbane Christian College erodes the public education system.

While the QTU does not rule out school renewal programs per se, it does reject making decisions based on purely economic reasons such as the realisable value of the land. The QTU asserts that the value a school provides to its community is difficult to measure and that access to free, local, secular, well-resourced state education is a vital ingredient if the government is to achieve its stated aim of economic growth.

The closure of Nyanda SHS and the sale of the site to Brisbane Christian College erodes the public education system and is an example of this government privileging a select few at the expense of many.

Decision making processes

The Education Minister stated at the time that decisions on the fate of schools would be made on the basis of the independent consultants' reports, informed by community submissions and on the "school viability assessment procedure" criteria of enrolments, accessibility, curriculum and resourcing equity, which refers to a cost per student at each school.

The Minister stated that the two schools which remained open, Everton Park SHS and Wyreema SS, were saved by "new" information that emerged through the consultation process; the optional partial land sale and opening access to "third parties" in the case of Everton Park SHS. Interestingly, these same suggestions are contained in the reports on schools which closed. Both Nyanda SHS and Fortitude Valley SS suggested partial land sales to save their schools. All eight schools suggested ways to increase the utilisation of their facilities, often including offering access to community and non-government groups.

All of the schools which closed identified ways they could improve their "viability" through actions available to the department, such as ensuring school leadership stability, more actively managing catchments, working with other government departments to provide safe physical access and helping schools actively promote their value as schools of choice. Every report included suggestions from the school communities on how they could increase enrolments, yet these suggestions were not supported by DETE and the schools were not given the opportunity to try them.

Just as for Wyreema SS, which remained open, evidence of predicted population growth is provided in the reports for Nyanda SHS, Charlton SS, Stuart SS and Toowoomba South SS. This evidence was based on council planning documents and the Queensland Government's own Schools Planning Commission data.

It should also be considered that the schools surrounding Nyanda SHS demonstrated limited capacity to accommodate the displaced students. Neighbouring schools Corinda SHS, Holland Park SHS, Macgregor SHS and Calamvale Community College are already at more than 70 per cent utilisation, with Corinda SHS at 104 per cent. Further, Corinda SHS, Calamvale Community College and Macgregor SHS have enrolment plans in place.

Consultants' reports provided economic information on the cost per student that suggested closing any of the schools showed that the Queensland Government was indulging in false economy, and preferring short term economic gain at the expense of long term economic and social pain. The Queensland Government erred with this decision and Nyanda SHS should not have been closed.

Impact of the sale on Nyanda SHS students

One of the most significant concerns the QTU has regarding the closure of Nyanda SHS is the additional travel times former Nyanda students must now contend with in order to attend alternate schools. This is exacerbated by deficiencies in the public transport system. Students who once walked or rode to school now rely on public transport, with significantly increased travel time.

For example, Google maps gives the travel distance between Macgregor SHS and the Nyanda site as 6.7km and estimates a travel time of 11 minutes when using the most direct route and a private vehicle. According to Translink the same journey would take 50 minutes. Similarly Nyanda SHS to Corinda SHS is 6.8 kms and 11 minutes away; it would take an hour on public transport.

Timing of closure

One issue which exacerbated the closure of Nyanda SHS, the only secondary school that closed at the end of 2013, was that the Minister had given assurances that if Nyanda SHS closed, it would be after students who were then in Year 11 had graduated. According to the School Viability Assessment webpage: “Any closure of a secondary school under the School Viability Assessment procedure will take place over an extended period, ie. up to two years. This will minimise disruption to senior students in their final years of schooling”.

This gave some certainty and relief to students during arguably the most critical years of their education and somewhat ameliorated the distress felt by the school community. Sadly, this promise was also broken. Nyanda SHS closed less than three months after the Minister’s September 17 school closure announcement.

Consultation and submissions

The QTU believes that the consultation process regarding the potential school closures was deficient. Submission deadlines were brought forward and there was no formal engagement with the QTU in the consultation process. Under the previous government, when school closures were being considered under the State Schools of Tomorrow process, community reference groups included principals, parents and citizens representatives, community and QTU representatives.

On June 21 2013 it was announced that the deadline for submissions had been shortened and submissions were required by 26 July, instead of the originally stated deadline of 9 August. This is significant because it reduced the effectiveness of community consultation, and for no apparent benefit; school closures were not announced until 17 September, even though the Minister had promised he would “give schools certainty” by announcing his decisions in “early August”. The QTU, along with other stakeholders, suspects that these unpopular announcements were delayed until after the federal election.

This suspicion is supported by the fact that the realigned catchment area maps that accompanied the eventual public announcements on 17 September are dated 22 July 2013. This time could have been used by school communities to better prepare for the transition.

Sale of Nyanda SHS site

It has recently been reported that the site of Nyanda SHS has been sold to Brisbane Christian College, which will continue to use the site as a school and worship centre. It seems illogical that the site was deemed not viable for a school when run by DETE, yet is viable for the private sector.

According to the Queensland Government's Policy and Procedure Register, the School Viability Assessment requires consideration of the four "approved viability criteria: enrolments, accessibility, curriculum and resourcing equity". Enrolments were discussed in the government commissioned JTA consultant's report on the proposed closure of Nyanda SHS, and it states at p7:

While it is acknowledged that NSHS is currently suffering a lull in enrolment figures, the school community believes that the next five years will see it bounce back on the basis of projected population growth; within the next five years there will be 500 plus students at the school as young families move into the area and within approximately ten years the statistics and infrastructure plans indicate the school may be at (or over) capacity.

The decision to close Nyanda SHS has meant that facilities funded from the public purse for the benefit of all will now be enjoyed by a few. The substantial amounts of maintenance funds spent in the recent past on the soon-to-close school and significant, ongoing funds raised by the parents and citizens association to improve school facilities will not now benefit the public school students they were intended for. The facilities were quite impressive, if we consider how Nyanda SHS was described on Education Queensland's The Learning Place online resource.

It stated that "an entire rebuilding program has provided the school with quality facilities in an attractive environment" and "the school has an impressive array of new or refurbished facilities.

"New buildings include a resource centre, art, manual arts, two general classroom areas, two staff blocks and the canteen. Refurbished and upgraded buildings include the administration, science, home economics, assembly hall and the music, performing arts and humanities blocks".

<http://www.learningplace.com.au/deliver/content.asp?pid=10870>

It is hardly surprising then that Brisbane Christian College's website states "*this new site, with its purpose-built school buildings, ovals and educational design is ideally suited to create a secondary campus for Brisbane Christian College*".
(<http://brisbanechristiancollege.com.au/secondary-campus/>)

In the Minister's press release of September 17, 2013 he states, "...I am confident this [school closure] will help our students receive the best education in the best facilities". What a shame it will be private school students, and not those studying under the public education system he is responsible for, who indeed will benefit.

4. Closure of Barrett Adolescent Centre

Background

Before its controversial closure in January 2014, the Barrett Adolescent Centre (BAC) at Wacol was the only tier 3 mental health service for adolescents in Queensland. It was an extended treatment and rehabilitation residential service; BAC provided both education and health care services and it was jointly run by two Queensland Government departments, the Department of Health and the Department of Education, Training and Employment. BAC provided care for children and adolescents with severe and complex mental health problems and/or those at high risk of harm. As a tier 3 service, BAC catered for [REDACTED] for whom tier 1 sessional community health services, tier 2a day program services and tier 2b community residential services were insufficient.

Following the closure of BAC, and with no tier 3 service available, patients were moved back into community care. Here many suffered detrimental effects due to the lack of 24/7 support required. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] are currently being investigated by the Queensland Coroner.

Report: Barrett Adolescent Strategy (<https://savebarrett.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/wm-rti-15-r053-ecrg-report-applicant-copy.pdf>)

This report is by Queensland Health's Expert Clinical Reference Group and is quite damning. It was only released following the ABC's right to information request and it demonstrates that the government knew the risks when it decided to close BAC. It recognises that the alternate care provided (called tier 1 and 2a/b) will be insufficient, stating "it is emphasised that this is not a clinically preferred or optimal solution, and significant risks are associated with this interim measure" and that it was "strongly articulated that these other service types are not as effective". It states re tier 3 services that "this type of care and rehabilitation program is considered life-saving for young people". The report recognises that the diagnostic profile of BAC patients is one where they [REDACTED]

The report also expresses concern regarding "the dissipation and loss of specialist staff skills and expertise in the area of adolescent extended care in Queensland if BAC closes and a tier 3 is not established in a timely manner. This includes both clinical and education staff". It recommends that a Band 7 Specific Purpose School (provided by DETE) is required, given that "education is often a core part of the intervention required". No such school has been established.

Report: Transitional Care for Adolescent Patients of the Barrett Adolescent Centre (<https://savebarrett.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/barrett-final-report-12-pages-redacted.pdf>)

Following the closure of BAC the Queensland Government commissioned the independent report *Transitional Care for Adolescent Patients of the Barrett Adolescent Centre*. It should be noted that the terms of reference were very narrow, and as the title of the report would suggest, it was limited to an analysis of the transition process. According to the report's author, Associate Professor Beth Kotze, the "care post-transition was very definitely not part of the terms of reference for the review" and as such the quality of care post BAC closure and [REDACTED] were not investigated in the report.

The report did not consider evidence from former patients or their families, and on that point the savebarrett.org website provides the following commentary:

Those affected by the closure of the Barrett Centre have expressed deep concerns about their lack of inclusion in investigations as well as the extremely limited parameters of the report. If such a evaluation (sic) did not look at the post-transition care or the effects of that care or the transition process on patients and families, its validity and usefulness have been called into question.

Further, the report itself lists as a limitation that Education Department staff associated with BAC were not interviewed.

This report finds that "the process of transitional planning occurred in an atmosphere of crisis consequent to the announcement of the closure". There is then a part sentence redacted so as to make meaning unclear, and it goes on to state there was "escalation of distress in a number of the adolescents and staff of BAC. There appears to have been a contagion effect of distress and anxiety among the adolescents and an increase in incidents on the unit". It goes on to state that "whilst the general atmosphere of the crisis contributed to the complexity of the situation, it does not appear to have detrimentally affected the process of transitional care planning for the patients".

A second finding was that the closure date set an artificial/administrative deadline for transition. The report states that "Whilst on the one hand there was a relatively long period of approximately 5 months to develop and enact the transition plans, on the other hand there was a sense of time-pressure for the BAC clinical staff because of the complexity of the planning process".

It was also found that the transitional care planning was an enormous task conducted by a team "dedicated to the tasks"; who undertook "an exhaustive and meticulous process of clinical review" and that the communication and negotiation between the clinical team and the young person and their family/carers was "careful, respectful, timely and maintained". The investigators "commend the work of the transition team".

The report notes "adolescent's resistance to transfer from a service where they felt safe and 'connected' in a relatively closed environment to a community system of care".

Further the report states that “whilst there was some drop-out from some aspects of the care organised, the investigators did not identify any examples where a young person was completely lost to care, nor where a core component of care was completely missing”.

The final finding of the report states that while the deadline “was achieved albeit with a sense of pressure and urgency”, investigators “did not identify, however, an individual case in which more time might have resulted in BAC staff providing a better transition plan or process”.

ABC investigation

The 7.30 Report on Friday 7 November 2014 reported on the closure of BAC, [REDACTED] and the Barrett Adolescent Strategy report. It was also made public that a number of health practitioners had written to the Health Minister before the closure urging him to keep the centre open with one staff member warning of [REDACTED] if they are not cared for in a unit like Barrett”. While not heeded, this warning was, sadly, correct.

Coronial inquest

The Queensland Coroner is now investigating the [REDACTED]

ALP position

Opposition Leader Anastacia Palaszczuk announced on Sunday 9 November 2014 that a future Labor government, if elected, will establish a commission of inquiry into the decisions and circumstances surrounding the closure of the Barrett Adolescent Centre. The QTU commends this suggestion and urges the government to again provide vital tier 3 care to our most vulnerable youth.

5. Submission conclusion

As stated above, the QTU is concerned about the way this government has handled education. We are concerned at the lack of transparent processes, inconsistent decision making and potential conflicts of interest.

The three parts of this submission which illustrate these concerns are:

- TAFE and the possible conflict of interest of members appointed by the LNP government to the Queensland Skills and Training Taskforce given their links with private providers in competition with TAFE.
- The closure of Nyanda State High School and subsequent sale to a private school.
- The closure of the Barrett Adolescent Centre, without a tier 3 replacement service and [REDACTED]

The QTU hopes that the government will remedy these issues and provide, with the assistance of federal funding, an education system that is well resourced and accessible to all.