

Ending discrimination in Australia's tertiary education system

Key points

1. The distinctive role of TAFE HEPs as public non-university providers is not recognised in national higher education policy vis-à-vis universities under federal policy.
2. TAFEs now deliver more than 140 degree and higher education courses, yet unlike university students, TAFE students are hit with extra fees, and do not receive Commonwealth Supported Place higher education course subsidies.
3. TAFE degrees are part of Australia's TEQSA-accredited higher education qualifications and are in high industry demand. These are highly specialised degree courses, deliberately aligned with industry for higher technology-based skills.
4. TAFE higher education providers (HEPs) bring diversity and choice to the higher education sector by opening new pathways to higher qualifications for many students.
5. Higher education students studying at TAFE are not on an equal footing with university students. Current policy discriminates against these students by:
 - Denying most students access to Commonwealth Supported Place (CSP) funding which means most higher education students in TAFE pay full fees;
 - Adding a 25% fee for TAFE and other non-university provider students on loans provided under the FEE-HELP scheme. These fees are not applicable to university students;
 - Limiting access to TAFE HEPs to Commonwealth funding for applied research and scholarship.

Applied learning, applied teaching, work-ready graduates

Today, 11 TAFE Institutes offer over 140 higher education qualifications including diplomas and associate, bachelor and masters degrees across metropolitan and regional campuses in Australia. Many qualifications are accessed via pathways from VET and lead to higher qualifications in TAFE or universities.

TAFE higher education qualifications directly address demand by industry for ‘work-ready’ graduates with higher vocational skills and knowledge, and demand by students for alternative pathways to higher education. TAFE has long championed tertiary education pathways. Access matters.

TAFE’s applied and student-centred approach to higher education attracts a diverse range of students – it’s how they prefer to learn.

School leavers, students articulating from VET, young and mature aged workers, students from equity groups, and those who are first in family to try higher education find TAFE a supportive and non-threatening learning environment. Most do not follow a conventional higher education pathway straight from Year 12.

Most importantly, students are satisfied with the learning experience in TAFE. In 2014, TDA commissioned a survey reaching 22% of TAFE higher education students. Student satisfaction was between 80–88% on four items – communication with teachers, teaching quality, academic support, and skills and knowledge for work.¹ This finding tallies with the *2015 Student Experience Survey National Report* which found non-university providers matched or exceeded university providers on four of five focus areas² (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Overall satisfaction with the student experience: Non-University and university students³

	Focus areas					Questionnaire item
	Skills development	Learner engagement	Teacher quality	Student support	Learning resources	Quality of entire educational experience
NUHEIs	83	61	83	76	74	78
Universities	81	60	82	72	86	80
All institutions	81	60	82	72	86	80

The emergence of TAFE as public ‘integrated tertiary providers’ mirrors similar developments in North America, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Indonesia, Singapore, China, Hong Kong and many EU countries. TAFE has proven higher education capability. It is time to formally recognise TAFE as a public provider of higher education with its own distinctive applied learning and teaching approach, industry-led characteristics and diverse student cohorts.

TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) calls for:

A compact between the Commonwealth and TAFE that articulates this role in an integrated national tertiary education sector.

A specific higher education provider category that recognises TAFE’s social charter and public ownership and the distinctive roles TAFE fulfils as non-university public providers.

A level playing field for TAFE high education students

TAFE higher education programs, like those offered in public universities, specify rigorous learning outcomes and demanding assessment regimes. Both are subject to the same scrutiny by the national regulator, the Tertiary Education Standards Agency (TEQSA) to meet the same higher education standards. The only difference lies in the applied nature of teaching and learning in TAFE, the small class sizes and the 'practice to theory' approach to professional learning.

Yet, TAFE higher education students are ineligible for CSP funding. This inequitable exclusion means they have no option but to pay full fees even though a significant portion of students come from low socio-economic and other disadvantaged backgrounds.

TAFE higher education students are also charged fees (up to 25%) on student loans under the FEE-HELP scheme. These fees add to the total loan amount and extend repayment times for borrowers. They apply to vocational education and some undergraduate students, but not to loans for university students; the vast majority of HELP borrowers. Despite much debate in the sector, and calls by TDA to remove the inequity for TAFE students, they remain in place and may not be addressed until funding reforms are introduced in 2018. As Andrew Norton writes, '*A consistent loan fee would be fairer, encourage students to pay their fees upfront, and reduce costs.*'⁴

TAFE Directors Australia recommends that:

Non-university higher education providers, including TAFE Institutes, are granted access to CSPs, with immediate access in skills shortage areas.

A more consistent and equitable approach to loans fees for all FEE-HELP students is applied immediately.

1 TAFE Directors Australia, 2014, *Higher Education Student Survey Report: 'Smaller classes. Great Teachers. Hands on learning'*, Sydney, page 8.

2 Department of Education and Training, 2016, *2015 Student Experience Survey National Report*, Canberra, page 18.

3 Ibid.

4 Norton, A. (2016). Universities can be reformed, but one piece at a time. *Australian Financial Review*, 18 May, 2016.