Human rights, remote Australia, and the VET sector

ROBIN RYAN writes about a major inquiry into rural and remote education.

The last, and in some ways most challenging, task undertaken by Chris Sidoti as Federal Commissioner for Human Rights was a major inquiry into rural and remote education.

The right to education, he argues, is a fundamental human right to which Australia is committed by international treaties. It is fundamental because the exercise of so many other human rights, like those to health, employment, participation in civic life and enjoyment of freedom of expression and religion, depend on it.

Chris Sidoti spoke about his inquiry’s findings in the 2001 A W Jones Lecture sponsored by the South Australian Chapter of the Australian College of Education in March 2001. It is a topic he returned to in addressing TAFE Directors Australia because TAFE has a central role in his vision for a national strategy to overcome Australia’s shortcomings in the right to education.

The A W Jones Lecture was a suitable venue because Dr Alby Jones was appointed a special commissioner to assist the inquiry in regional South Australia, drawing on Alby’s 50 years’ experience as an educator, beginning as a teacher in the Eyre Peninsula and continuing to State Director General and beyond.

Education as a right

Two major treaties to which Australia is a signatory—the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989—embody five major commitments, stating that education must be:

- accessible
- affordable
- acceptable culturally to children and their parents
- adaptable to different student needs and circumstances
- acceptable to different student needs and circumstances

The inquiry looked into the availability and accessibility of primary and secondary schooling, its quality and the extent to which it included, in an acceptable way, indigenous children, children with disabilities and children from minority language, religious and cultural backgrounds.

Findings

The inquiry’s central finding was that the right to education of many Australian children was violated on the basis of one or more of the five criteria. Rural and remote children are disadvantaged compared to urban, with indigenous the most disadvantaged of all. Many thousands of children have no effective access to secondary education and tens of thousands receive inadequate secondary opportunities. Hundreds of students have difficulty accessing even basic primary education. Literacy and numeracy problems are real and perhaps growing.

Year 12 retention for boys in these areas is 54%, compared to 63% in State capitals. For girls, it is 66% compared to 74%. In rural Northern Territory, where the population is predominantly Aboriginal, it is down to 23% for boys and 25% for girls. While rural and remote areas constitute 30% of the population, they provide only 19% of tertiary students.

Sidoti concluded that: “The consequences are stark. It divides the nation. It harms all Australians when some Australians are denied the opportunities and resources they need to achieve their full potential.”
A national strategy for rural and remote education

The inquiry determined that the only way to overcome these inequalities was to develop a co-ordinated strategic approach, because at every level they found gaps in services, overlaps in others, policies and programs pulling in different directions, resources wasted even when scarce.

Many of these problems arose because of boundaries: State and Territory boundaries in some cases, more often boundaries between government and non-government schools, and between pre-schools, schools, TAFE campuses and universities.

What was needed within the national strategy was an emphasis on local partnerships. School–TAFE partnerships in vocational education programs had been very well received in rural communities and very beneficial to their students. But even here problems were perceived in difficulties experienced by students under 15 in accessing TAFE programs. And often school transport was not available to students in TAFE programs.

Sidoti quoted several examples of successful local partnerships, and in most of these the TAFE presence was a crucial element. In Walgett, for example, the Community of Schools project is managed by a group including all schools and TAFE as well as indigenous and other communities and government services such as police and the community services department. Increased opportunity for vocational education has improved school attendance and the project assists young teachers to make contact with the Walgett community and its needs.

In Bourke, the Joint Schools Council involves the pre-school, government and Catholic primary schools, the TAFE campus and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. The aim is to provide some sort of work placement or training within the region for every school leaver who wants it. Local employers have shown support by providing work experience places, casual jobs, holiday jobs and full-time traineeships.

Implementation

The inquiry made a total of 73 recommendations which could provide a blueprint for eliminating discrimination in rural education. Whether they are implemented depends on strong leadership. Sidoti points out that people in the regions are very much aware that nothing will happen without a strong infusion of federal leadership and federal resources. Clearly, from his account, some of this leadership and these resources will have to come from the vocational education and training sector.

Here is one of the problems of the inquiry’s strategy. Sidoti and his fellow commissioners still see Australian VET as primarily TAFE, and they still see it as primarily a public and community service. Few, even well-informed, Australians are aware of a policy framework in which TAFE is merely one player in a competitive market. People in remote Australia would probably find it unconvincing to be told that their needs can’t be met, even from publicly funded sources, if the result is too few curriculum hours to meet performance targets. They would probably be surprised to learn that the collaboration they seek might be ruled out on competition principles.

The issues which the inquiry raised are real and the role that TAFE could play in their resolution could be substantial. It’s not one, though, that is easily compatible with current policies and requirements.

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