

TAFE libraries

From a 'few books in the teacher's cupboard' to a national resource



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SA General Councillor

Vocational education and training courses in Australia are provided by over 1600 organisations of which 93 are publicly funded Institutes of TAFE. Spread over 300 separate campus locations, TAFE is the largest provider of vocational education and training courses; in fact the largest provider of post-secondary education. In 1995, over 1.3 million students enrolled in TAFE courses which ranged from basic education and preparatory courses, apprenticeships to certificate and advanced diploma and (recently) undergraduate courses. With over 19 000 full-time teaching staff and a total budget of more than three billion dollars, the TAFE sector represents a resource valued at billions of dollars built up over a number of years. Since 1992, a national system of vocational education and training recognizing a wider variety of providers has been instituted with the sector now also including training provided through enterprises, private colleges, community providers, professional associations and schools.

The history of TAFE is located, like some universities and public libraries, in the Mechanics' Institutes movement of the 19th century and the development of technical education in the second half of the century. The Bialarat School of Mines and Industries was the first technical institution established in 1870. Through periods of rapid change followed by much longer periods of neglect, the responsibility for technical education largely resided with the State Education Departments and was perceived by 1973 as 'the etcetera' part of education.

The Kangan inquiry into technical and further education was initiated by Kim Beazley (snr) in 1973 and the report was a milestone in the development of technical and further education and heralded a sustained period of growth, consolidation and recognition as an integral part of the education sector. The *Kangan report* of 1974 provides frightening reading with regard to the quality of TAFE libraries (low priority in the total scheme, obsolete books donated by schools, 'apprentices don't read', mediocre to appalling, worse than in 1966, students have no access, 2.4 per cent of total budget) and recommendations included the development of standards for staffing, levels of resourcing and facilities 'as a priority task'. The States dabbled at the edges of TAFE library development until the 1980s and while funding increased, new libraries were built

and staffing resources improved in numbers and professionalism, TAFE libraries remained inadequately resourced and the proportion of college budgets spent on libraries still remained on average between two and three per cent.

The second milestone for technical and further education arrived in 1989 with the emergence of a reformed training system influenced by the recommendations of the Finn, Carmichael and Meyer reports. A major objective of the National Training Reform Agenda is to make learning more client-centred than teacher-centred, consistent with the principles of flexible, lifelong learning. The ALIA TAFE National Section conference held in Melbourne in 1989 resolved to develop national guidelines for the development of TAFE libraries which built on those written in 1988 for Victorian TAFE libraries.

The draft presented to the 1993 conference in Canberra and subsequent lobbying to the National TAFE Chief Executive's Committee resulted in funding to complete the guidelines, including an extensive consultation process with teaching staff, administrators and policy makers. The document *Focus on learning: a framework for the provision of learning resources, library and information services in vocational education and training* provides flexible guidelines for the development of all aspects of TAFE libraries and was endorsed by all states in 1994 — just twenty years after the recommendation of the Kangan report!

The consultation process was a critical aspect in the development of *Focus on learning* and resulted in the identification of a set of underlying principles for the provision of TAFE libraries or learning resource services. These are 'that independent learning is promoted and encouraged only if:

- students are supported by well managed and appropriate learning resources;
- they have ready access to adequate resources, services and facilities; and
- there is a deliberate development of the skills to utilise the information sources — including making deliberate decisions about the value of that information.'

To effectively achieve these principles, the role of the learning resource service is accepted as one which:

- supports and responds to changes in educational programs and delivery methodologies;
- actively encourages, guides and empowers

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students and staff to acquire lifelong learning skills;

- guides, encourages and facilitates intellectual and physical access to information and resources; and
- promotes and implements the principles of equal opportunity including issues of social justice, equity and access.

Embedding the role of TAFE libraries in the educational rationale of their Institutes is considered by library staff to be critical to the library's success and continuing viability. Access to resources and facilities must be accompanied by integration of information literacy programs into curriculum delivery. Flexible delivery of TAFE courses has provided a catalyst which is enabling libraries to become an integrated part of the learning process, illustrated by a recent report about activities at North Metropolitan College in Western Australia in *Campus Review Weekly* (21-27 May 1997 p9).

The report stated 'that usage of the learning resource centre (which has grown by

thirty per cent a year, compared with student growth of ten per cent a year) is pivotal to the flexible delivery methodologies' which are the basis for the delivery of courses at Joondalup Campus. Other examples exist and reports such as this can well be made in all states across the TAFE sector.

TAFE libraries are not only critical to the success of TAFE programs but they are also an important contributor to the national bibliographic resource. Specialist TAFE programs have resulted in the development of unique and valuable collections of resources in areas such as education, music, automotive studies, tourism, hospitality and hairdressing; accompanied by subject specialist library staff.

TAFE libraries face an exciting future with further changes envisaged for the sector. This issue of *inCite* includes examples of activities across all states and will perhaps surprise many who may think that TAFE is still 'the etcetera' part of Australia's education continuum!

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