

Ms Mary Johnston  
Branch Manager  
Australian Technical Colleges Branch  
DEST  
GPO Box 9880  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Ms Johnson

Group Training Australia (GTA Ltd) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the government's consultation process on its policy of establishing Australian Technical Colleges (ATC). However, unlike some other national associations involved in the vocational education and training sector, GTA Ltd is not expressing a formal interest in becoming part of any particular consortium wishing to "build" or manage an ATC. I have no doubt that a number of individual group training organisations (GTOs) will express such an interest. However, as the national association representing a national network of GTOs employing over 40,000 New Apprentices, I thought it appropriate to provide some feedback and to raise some issues that have been flagged by our members.

GTA Ltd has been a vocal supporter of much of the government's vocational education and training agenda, announced during the 2004 election. Along with other key national associations, GTA was at the forefront of calls over the past few years, for speedy and effective action to be taken against deepening skills shortages. We have particularly welcomed the renewed national leadership role that the commonwealth has embarked upon in the roll out of VET policy. Critical to that new "national" effort in tackling skills shortages is clearly the establishment of the Australian Technical Colleges.

In principle, GTA Ltd supports the ATC policy. We see it as a genuine attempt by the Commonwealth to "buy in" to the vocational education and training arena. We also see it as an attempt to not only put a specific policy focus on trade and apprenticeship training in the school system but equally to ring the alarm bells on national skills shortages. It is also an excellent vehicle through which to be promoting the benefits and expanding the take up of school-based New Apprenticeships (SBNAs).

In canvassing the question of the establishment of the 24 ATCs, a number of issues have been raised with me. As the government prepares to consider submissions on this policy proposal, I think it appropriate to raise them so they can be part of the ongoing policy discussion.

Much of the feedback we have had from members centres around student selection criteria, curriculum content and the size of the so-called "feeder" areas from which students can be drawn.

There has also been a fair bit of discussion around how the establishment of Australian Technical Colleges will be integrated into the existing VET in schools and structured workplace learning policy frameworks.

Some of our regional members have raised the issue of the potential impact the establishment of ATCs *could* have on a range of existing VET programs and resources, particularly those devoted to servicing smaller regional areas. They talk of stretching already very thin markets.

Another issue raised by some in our network has been to do with the size of the “feeder” areas from which ATCs can draw potential students. Given that it is highly possible that for some of the larger regional ATCs, students could be accepted from remote locations, it was thought that the dual issues of travel and accommodation would clearly have to be addressed when setting policy.

There is also concern to ensure that the introduction of the 24 ATCs does not in any way usher in a two-tiered system of school based New Apprenticeships. The value of a school based new apprenticeship should not be devalued simply because it was achieved at a “normal” government/non government school and not at an Australian Technical College.

There have also been questions raised as to what is written on Page 9 of the recently released *Australian Technical Colleges – a Discussion paper*. It is stated that an ATC *may* have to register as a school. Surely if we are talking about students being able to complete their senior secondary certificate in conjunction with their trade training, and possibly even achieve a tertiary entrance score, it will be necessary for the ATCs to be registered as schools by the State/Territory registering authority. If this issue remains unclarified, my concern would be that it could undermine community confidence in the overall policy.

Throughout the course of 2005, much of what has been raised in this letter will no doubt be debated and dealt with by all the relevant parties.

The key to the success of implementing the ATC policy will not only be found in proper consultation but also effective communication. ATCs have the capacity to change the culture and attitude towards the trades and make a substantial dent in national skills shortages over the medium to long term. Like at the beginnings of any brand new policy process, affected stakeholders and constituents tend to operate somewhat in an information void. Misinformation and rumour can often become “fact”. For this reason I welcome the government’s desire to get as much information on the ATCs out there as early as possible and also to engage in a lengthy consultation process in order to get it right. GTA and the group training network looks forward to receiving more information on ATCs as it comes to hand, to being part of the information/communication process around ATCs and to closely following the policy implementation as it unfolds throughout 2005.

Yours Sincerely

Jim Barron  
CEO - Group Training Australia

31<sup>st</sup> January 2005