

Defining moments

A new inquiry looks beyond TAFE's underfunding and staffing issues to establish the best way forward, reports **CAROLYN RANCE.**



With almost 1.6 million students around Australia—or 11 per cent of the working-age population—the TAFE system is one of Australia's great institutions. Today, TAFE is at a crossroads due to the cumulative effects of an indifferent federal government, underfunding and increasing casualisation of its workforce. But there is hope.

TAFE Futures, an independent national inquiry initiated by the AEU, aims to provide a blueprint for Australia's vocational education and training system. A thorough consultation process throughout metropolitan and regional areas will contribute to a report expected by the end of the year, possibly as early as October.

"The inquiry is looking at where TAFE should go in the next 10 years, taking the perspective of the people who are actually involved—teachers, students and employers," says inquiry chair Peter Kell. "Previous government inquiries

have tended to just see TAFE as a training enterprise—a skills incubator—rather than a system with a broad role as a builder of business and community," he says.

Peter Kell is the associate professor in adult and vocational education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong and president of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association.

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A former TAFE teacher, Kell says the public system has been caught in "an extraordinary paradox" of declining government funding during a period of economic growth and skills shortages.

Union figures indicate that federal funding to TAFE has

decreased almost 24 per cent and state and territory revenue has fallen 15.2 per cent since 1997.

Kell is concerned that the current market approach to education and training, underinvestment and lack of workforce planning could leave Australia economically vulnerable and without the strong skills base needed to build a prosperous long-term future.

Governments' "ad hoc" approaches to workforce planning can, he says, be seen within the vocational education and training sector itself. "The TAFE workforce is ageing and around 60 per cent of its teachers are now employed as casuals. Uncertainty about long term direction is a disincentive to build careers...robbing people of opportunities to contribute back to their professions and trades."

Highlighting innovation

Nevertheless, Kell is adamant that the inquiry will not be weighed down by pessimism. He hopes the *TAFE Futures* report will highlight the tenacity, innovation and

➔ Briefly

● **A national inquiry into TAFE's future will hand down its findings in late 2006.**

● **Funding cutbacks and the widespread use of casual staff have placed TAFE under pressure.**

● **TAFE makes an essential contribution to nation-building and needs urgent government and community support.**

entrepreneurial spirit among the system's staff and supporters.

"I am always amazed at the way that teachers and students make TAFE work...people are passionate and committed and have come up with major innovations that are recognised and taken up enthusiastically by overseas training organisations," he says.

ACTU industrial officer Michelle Bissett is a member of the reference group established to provide specialised, sectoral and industry experience to the inquiry.

She says TAFE has a critical role addressing current skills shortages and ensuring that the workforce is able to meet the economic challenges of a globalised future.

Bissett argues that underinvestment in TAFE infrastructure, equipment and staff all point to a lack of government and public understanding of the cost of delivering quality vocational education and training: "TAFE delivers a very good product but it runs on the smell of the proverbial oily rag."

She describes the rate of casualisation within the system as astounding. "To get the best quality people—those who really know the trades they are teaching—you have to offer jobs that are on a par with jobs offered by other educational institutions...we wouldn't tolerate the same rate of casualisation in schools or universities."

Pressure on TAFE to compete

with private training providers has also helped foster a "just-in-time" approach to training among employers, says Bissett. "Today's severe skills shortage can be traced back to policy decisions eight to 10 years ago...employers have been encouraged to train for the short-term but there has got to be a broader policy vision about where the country should be in five or 10 years time."

Kell agrees. Almost half of all people who begin apprenticeships and traineeships fail to complete them, according to research by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. He says this indicates that employers are willing to allow—and even encourage—workers to end their training as soon as they have reached a certain level of competence. Students are also increasingly concerned about education-related debt.

A new shape and focus

Jim Barron, the chief executive officer of Group Training Australia, is another member of the inquiry's reference group. This national association's member organisations employ more than 42,000 apprentices and trainees, including one in five of all traditional trades apprentices.

He hopes the hearings and consultations will help move the funding debate beyond the usual "finger-pointing and point-scoring."

"Hopefully it will be a chance to sit down and talk with people across the country about what a thoroughly modern TAFE system should look like, what funding it requires and what profile its teacher workforce should have," he says.

"This inquiry should allow people to look at what parts of the system are working and what parts need to be changed."

Barron says group training organisations—which place apprentices and trainees with host employers and then manage their training and progress—report that many employers are concerned

about the relevance of the curriculum to current industry needs and the modernity of equipment and technology.

While additional resources are needed, TAFE should strive to become more "flexible, accountable and commercially driven," he says. "The same processes that are expected of private training providers should be expected of the public system as well."

It is also time to look at the way the money spent on TAFE is allocated, he says. He hopes the inquiry will be part of a new national focus on vocational education and training that includes current initiatives to streamline TAFE and establish national training benchmarks.

Kell says a strong system of vocational education and training is important for Australia, and the Asia-Pacific region as a whole. While many TAFE institutes earn money from offshore training and consultancy, the system needs support to provide courses to international students.

"The training sector can be a vehicle to help build regional economic stability and a more predictable and peaceful environment," he says. ●

CAROLYN RANCE is a freelance writer.



TAFE Futures inquiry chair, Peter Kell

TAFE Futures inquiry

- This is an independent national inquiry, initiated by the AEU, into the future of the public TAFE system.
- It is expected to release its findings by the end of the year.
- From 15 May to 16 August, the inquiry received written and oral submissions from a range of different stakeholders of the system—including students, teachers, community groups, industry associations and unions (including the AEU), and small and medium businesses—around Australia.
- The inquiry's goal is to help define the future of TAFE.

www.tafefutures.org.au