

# Turning point

The time is ripe for renewal and reinvention in TAFE, according to a recent inquiry. **KRISTA MOGENSEN** and **DANIELLE TOWNSEND** report.

**F**ollowing months of consultations and contributions from TAFE's broad community, the *TAFE Futures* inquiry has released its findings.

This independent, national inquiry was commissioned by the AEU to bring together in one report the views of teachers, trainers, students, employers and industry, on the role and future of the TAFE system.

Led by Dr Peter Kell, the inquiry received 102 submissions and conducted more than 80 public hearings and private consultations around the nation for six weeks between July and August 2006. While it was commissioned by the union, the inquiry was an independent and open process with its terms of reference drawn up by a range of education specialists.

The inquiry uncovered a range of widespread adversity and challenges in the TAFE sector. TAFE systems across Australia have taken a beating from a decade of underfunding, casualisation of the workforce and the introduction of an open training market.

However, stories of innovation and inspiring partnerships with local community and industry, dedicated teachers and student support suggest a way forward for the renewal of TAFE. The inquiry's report includes recommendations for five major 'waves of renewal'. These relate to organisational rationale, student-centred focus, equity and access, renewed professionalism

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**Dr Peter Kell**  
Chair, TAFE  
*Futures* inquiry

for teaching, and improved funding and resources.

“We're optimistic about the future of TAFE. We encountered a lot of energetic and enthusiastic people and some really good projects,” says Kell.

### Strong local partnerships

The connection between TAFE colleges and industry is recognised as one of the greatest strengths of the TAFE system—particularly in regional and rural Australia. “Where TAFE works

## ➔ Briefly

- An independent, national inquiry into TAFE has handed down its findings.
- It recommends ways in which TAFE can best operate in the future.
- Key recommendations include increasing funding, improving student support and creating a more coordinated national approach.

really well is with local partnerships, and this was generally a product of strong and effective leadership at industry and TAFE level,” says Kell.

The same goes for TAFE's engagement with local government. “We saw joint economic planning, and integrated planning, between TAFE, industry and local government. Many social development programs running in communities are underpinned by TAFE,” says Kell.

But TAFE's valued social contribution is threatened by a broader community uncertainty about its role and status. There is also some frustration with current systems which are seen to impede innovation. “Our recommendations are, in a sense, a plea to incorporate innovations and good practices broadly across the system,” says Kell.

### Chronic underfunding

There were few surprises in the inquiry's finding that the TAFE system is chronically underfunded. The open training market has also resulted in an “uncritical approach to meeting efficiencies,”

says Kell. "TAFE people say they are asked to do 'more with nothing' rather than 'more with less'."

"The impact of underfunding has come through very strongly in the submissions, the consultations and the report," says Pat Forward, federal TAFE secretary of the AEU. "First, it's the impact of underfunding on infrastructure and resources, and the impact on teachers' workloads and their capacity to teach in the system," she says. "But it's also the impact on students' learning conditions."

Forward says the funding issue is critical—and complex. "It's not just about getting a knee-jerk reaction from state and federal governments about injections of funds into specific areas," she says. "It's more about creating a whole plan for the sector that takes into account its complexity."

### Student poverty

TAFE students face significant financial difficulty not just because of the fees and charges related to their study, but the associated living costs and loss of income. "We were quite surprised at the depth of student poverty," says Kell. "TAFE students are a very diverse group and, for many, location and socioeconomic factors make them very vulnerable."

The pressure for TAFE to get 'leaner and meaner' has also resulted in a marked reduction in student services. In this way, competition has undermined the things that have made TAFE unique, says Kell. "We need to shift the resources towards students and better student support services."

Dr John Spierings, a research strategist with Dusseldorp Skills Forum, believes the revelation of student poverty is one of the

most powerful sections of the report. "You do get a very strong sense that some students are doing it tough, and it's particularly important because TAFE is a vital link to a sustainable career for many of these students," he says. "Supporting them is crucial."

Spierings believes a broad set of changes are needed to help young people improve their

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**Pat Forward**  
AEU federal  
TAFE secretary

skills. "We've seen policy initiatives supporting older Australians, particularly around superannuation and tax and welfare benefits, but we have young people who are trying to get an education being burdened by high levels of debt and living expenses," he says. But it's not just about the TAFE system alone, he says. "It's a question about access to educational opportunities for all students."

### Lifting TAFE's status

The report emphasises the plight of TAFE teachers who face multiple demands beyond their usual teaching roles—such as student counselling, marketing, and liaising with partner organisations—with diminishing support and resources. Other issues such as the rampant casualisation of the TAFE workforce—which damages teacher morale and further threatens the system—and the imminent retirement of significant numbers of senior TAFE teachers, have also been highlighted.

The inquiry believes a key issue is lifting TAFE's profile as the public provider. "The government needs to identify TAFE as the provider of choice across the spectrum of schools, universities, technical and vocational education," says Kell.

But it's not just about additional funding. "It's one of a series of layers of current and simultaneous changes," says Kell. "There needs to be a change in the way funding is distributed. It impedes some local delivery and also impedes innovation and change."

Access and equity programs need to be seen as a part of TAFE's core business, says Kell, since many graduates of access courses go straight into occupational learning. "That's a problem that TAFE has to address, because skill development is a continuous process."

Kell is in no doubt that a properly funded and renewed TAFE system has a vital role to play in helping Australia address the profound skills shortage. "We have to accelerate the process by which people can get access to high-level training and general education," he says. "Yes, it's costly, but the price of not doing it is very, very expensive." ●

**KRISTA MOGENSEN is contributing editor of *Australian Educator* and DANIELLE TOWNSEND is a commissioning editor of *Australian Educator*.**

## Resources

● For the full report see [www.tafefutures.org.au](http://www.tafefutures.org.au)