

TAFE campaign

A long-term decline in TAFE funding is causing thousands of people to miss out on vital training and education.

by **Steve Packer**

Briefly

- TAFE funding has been in decline for more than a decade.
- Most TAFEs don't have enough resources to meet industry and student demand.
- The AEU is campaigning to raise awareness of the critical role TAFEs play in vocational education and training.

The funding trend for TAFE runs counter to the federal government's stated goals for preparing the workforce to meet skills needs, two new reports reveal.

The AEU, which released the reports in March as part of its 'Invest in quality, invest in TAFE' campaign, is calling for urgent additional funding for the TAFE sector in the May budget, and an additional \$200 million a year over the next decade.

"TAFE is recognised as one of the highest quality providers of vocational education and training anywhere in the world, and our prosperity as a nation is directly linked to it," says AEU federal president Angelo Gavrielatos. "Yet TAFEs are unable to meet the growing demand from students or industry



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because they are so starved of funds."

Results from the AEU's State of Our TAFEs survey show that most TAFEs have insufficient resources to meet industry or community needs (see Shortfalls and waiting lists page 33).

The second report, prepared by the independent Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET) at Monash University, reveals that government spending per hour on vocational education and training declined 11.9 per cent in 2003-08. "If both [VET] expenditure per hour and TAFE's share of that expenditure had been maintained at 2003 levels, TAFE's funding would have been \$623.6 million greater in 2008," according to the report, TAFE Funding and the Education Targets.

It says the trend away from TAFE

funding extends back beyond 2003. It has declined by about 22 per cent since 1997.

"We're arguing that we have a well-established and highly regarded public TAFE system," says AEU federal TAFE secretary Pat Forward. "We also have a government that has set quite ambitious but commendable targets for increasing the participation and qualifications of the Australian workforce over the next 10 or 15 years. But there has been a fairly gloomy picture of funding for the sector over the past 20 years—a well-established pattern of under funding.

"Given that TAFE delivers almost 90 per cent of VET, the government and Australian society need a well-resourced TAFE system to deliver on the government targets."

Halving and doubling

In 2002, the Council of Australian Governments set targets to halve the number of Australians with no or low-level qualifications, and double the number with higher qualifications at the diploma/associate diploma level.

“These are ambitious, important targets we clearly support,” says Gavrielatos, “but targets without funding are as good as no targets at all.”

“The CEET report—one of the most significant reports on TAFE funding in a very long time—shows that, in order to meet the targets, governments would have to allocate a further \$2.2 billion in the period 2009-20. On average, that’s about \$200 million a year.

“If they are serious about meeting their targets and tackling the issue of skills shortages and under-qualification in this country, they must provide the necessary funding.”

Gavrielatos says there will be no education revolution in Australia unless substantially more is invested in TAFE.

“The federal government must show greater leadership. As the Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, has pointed out, some of the things that will not be possible without TAFE in the next decade include ‘the national broadband network, cleaner power generation, hybrid and electric vehicles, more efficient houses and buildings, and capturing carbon.’”

Public funding of VET amounted to just over \$4.1 billion in 2008. Had it been maintained at 2003 levels, it would have been \$554 million more, says the CEET report.

Between 2002 and 2008, TAFE’s proportion of government VET funding fell from 91.6 to 89 per cent. Payments to non-TAFE providers increased correspondingly.



The decline in VET funding has varied between states and territories. Since 2003, it has been greatest in WA (20 per cent), NSW (16 per cent) and SA (16 per cent). The fall has been relatively modest in Queensland (6 per cent), Victoria (5 per cent) and Tasmania (5 per cent).

Social justice role

The AEU’s campaign focuses on educating the community about the critical role TAFEs play in delivering training for every industry. Just as importantly, it is also about recognising the role they play in terms of social justice and increased participation in the workforce for disadvantaged groups, says Forward.

... there will be no education revolution in Australia unless substantially more is invested in TAFE.

Angelo Gavrielatos
AEU federal president



Almost 1.3 million students are enrolled in 58 TAFE institutes around the country. Hundreds of TAFE campuses are located across metropolitan, regional and remote Australia. More students go to TAFE than to universities.

“Vocational education for work is a laudable and necessary focus of the VET sector,” says Forward. “But vocational education should also be about continued educational opportunity, and this is not currently the case. Unless the sector works purposefully with the higher education sector to increase the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher-level qualifications, we are as a society entrenching social disadvantage and division, and

undermining our future prosperity.”

The trend towards giving public money to private VET providers on a market-driven basis has dangers for TAFE that can't be overstated, she says.

“VET qualifications are meant to provide individuals with the knowledge and skills they need for their careers, and not just to provide funding for employers' internal training. The money should go to areas where increases in the depth and breadth of skills are important for the economy and future employment.”

Allocating public funds competitively to industry skills councils or directly to employers will not achieve a more direct alignment between areas of skills need and the funding, she says.

“It is not in the interests of students, the community or government to give so much power to one interest group over the allocation of funding, or over defining the content of qualifications.”

A well-provided TAFE education system recognises the need for people to have career choices, which in turn recognises the changing nature of work, she says. “The existing workforce and the next generation will need to adapt and use new skills. We've moved beyond the era when people are initiated into a job for life. All the literature now tells us that people will change jobs several times during their working life.

“The strength of a TAFE education is that it gives people the skills for their immediate entry into the workforce, but it also gives them a whole range of transferable skills which allow them to access further learning, go into other areas of work and up-skill in their existing profession throughout their working lives.” ●

Steve Packer is a freelance writer.

Shortfalls and waiting lists

The AEU's State of Our TAFEs survey in February received 2691 responses—93 per cent from TAFE teachers and 7 per cent from managers:

- 70 per cent of respondents said they did not have enough resources to meet industry needs, particularly in the local community.
- 56 per cent said student demand in their area had increased in the last two years.
- 58 per cent said they had been forced to turn away students in the last two years.
- 46 per cent said they had student waiting lists in their department or TAFE. The longest waiting lists were in engineering and related technologies (21 per cent), education (17) and language, literacy and numeracy (16).
- 53 per cent said the overall budget in their department had decreased in the last two years.
- 49 per cent said class sizes had increased in the last two years.
- 84 per cent said their workload had increased in the last two years.
- Respondents said that, if additional resources were made available, the highest priorities should be computers and technology (58 per cent), trade equipment (50), technical and administrative support (49) and classrooms (46).