

# Election '07:

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We are coming to an election that many people say will be one of the most crucial since World War Two. The key question will be about whether we will use these boom times to set Australia up for long-term growth and success.

The best way to do this is to have simple, clear but compelling objectives driving federal and state policy. These should be that, subject to their ability, every young person:

- will attain Year 12, or, over time, a vocational equivalent at AQF Certificate III level<sup>1</sup>
- will be engaged in full-time work or learning, or a combination of these
- will be provided with the resources, and facilitated with relationships and integrated pathways needed to achieve these outcomes.

These goals are necessary because:

- School completion rates have barely shifted in Australia over the past 15 years. Close to one in five young adults in May 2006 had not completed Year 12 or a Certificate III vocational qualification.
- Currently there are between 45,000 and 50,000 young people leaving school each year and not going into full-time work, full-time learning or a combination of these.<sup>2</sup> They face many disadvantages in work, and in society, compared to their more skilled counterparts.<sup>3</sup>
- Currently, 526,000 Australians aged 15 to 24 years were neither in full-time work nor full-time study. 306,000 of these young people were not in full-time study and were either unemployed, underemployed, or wanting to work.

Among young people the rise of part-time work, and the level of participation in post-school education, have abated unemployment more than the creation of full-time jobs. While the number of full-time jobs for older Australians has risen by 1.270 million since 1995, full-time jobs have been static for teenagers and have actually declined by 42,000 for young adults.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile Australia faces a shortfall of 240,000 in the supply of people with VET qualifications over the ten years to 2016.<sup>5</sup>

Policy must simultaneously address these issues: raise Australia's level of school and vocational qualification completion; engage more young people in full-time work; and overcome the skills shortfall in health, mining, building and construction, design and engineering, sustainability and a number of other sectors.

Setting the school completion equivalent at the standard of an AQF Certificate III qualification is important. Tom Karmel at NCVER recently noted:

"For some students completing VET is an alternative to completing school, for others an alternative to university. While participation is high, outcomes are mixed. Completion rates are variable, and 12 per cent of students have no recorded achievement at all. Relatively few young people graduate at certificate III or higher, and only a small proportion of people undertaking certificates I and II complete the qualification and move onto further training."<sup>6</sup>

TAFE is central to meeting these challenges and reforms in states like Victoria that offer 'youth guarantees' to enable students to complete their initial education at TAFE are becoming increasingly important.

So far, however, both federal major political parties have made worthy but incomplete policy commitments in these areas. As I write, neither party has outlined their approach to TAFE over the next term of government.

The policy framework and reforms needed in a range of areas were outlined recently in the *It's Crunch Time* report released by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum and the Australian Industry Group.<sup>7</sup>

Ten main reform areas were suggested:

- successful transitions for all students from primary to secondary schooling;
- purposeful student learning during the 'middle years';
- high quality vocational education in schools and in structured learning at workplaces;
- realistic and rigorous training and work options for students to complete their education;
- support for intermediaries and incentives for apprentices to complete their training;

- second chance options for young adults to complete Year 12 or its equivalent;
- renewed purpose and scope for traineeships;
- personal support or mentoring for every potential early school leaver to make a successful transition to further learning or work;
- improved teacher support and preparation for 'hard to teach' students; and
- an Indigenous presence in schools and support for Indigenous students and communities.

In all about 40 actions were suggested. Several areas will be of particular interest to TAFE teachers. We recommended:

- lifting the quality and quantity of school-based VET programs that offer school students a structured placement in work;
- more comprehensive pre-vocational programs, including, but not limited to, pre-apprenticeship programs;
- actively linking TAFE into the network of Australian Technical Colleges, the ATC counterparts being established in most states, and into Labor's proposals to extend trades training to every secondary school. Efficient use of the public investment in training means TAFE must be a key player in these emerging arrangements;
- providing incentives for retired tradesmen and women to become teachers and mentors of apprentices, and encouraging teacher education faculties to train trade teachers; and
- incorporating increased vocational experiences into the training and development of all teachers.

Australia needs a vision that reshapes schooling in such a way that vocationally-based learning builds bridges to a richer world of learning and skills attainment.

The headline story in training over the past decade has been a phenomenal growth in the take-up of traineeships. Over the past 20 years more than 1.7 million Australians have been part of the traineeship experience, with over 650,000 completing one in that time.<sup>8</sup>

Traineeships are especially popular with employers in service industries (about one in five

# It's **crunch time** for Australia's skilling effort



employees in retailing and in hospitality are on contracts of training, for example) because they can tailor entry-level training and skills to their particular needs.<sup>9</sup> However there is a significant imbalance between the sectors where jobs are growing in the economy overall and where the bulk of traineeships are.

There should be a major review of the purpose, scope, funding and future potential and priorities of traineeships. Consideration should be given to segmenting traineeships into two streams: one to meet future technical, para-professional and design demands, and another that positions traineeships as transitional labour market opportunities for disengaged teenagers, young adults, and others

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marginally connected to the labour force.

TAFE is a unique and vital element of Australia's training effort. It has to be part of the solution to the skills issues looming for the country over the next few years. TAFE needs to be front and centre of the policy response.

At a time when some of the major universities are recalibrating their offerings around comprehensiveness and specialisation, (eg. ‘the Melbourne model’), it is a concern that vocational education is in danger of being stripped back to the bones of ‘competency’, and to the development of ‘just-in-time’ skills. This approach will not provide the basis for quality and performance that individuals and Australian industry need over the long term.

Proposals to restructure the provision and institutions of education and training often come easily to policy-makers. The harder, and more worthwhile task, however, is to shift the focus from the institutions to young people, as learners and as workers.

This will involve some changed expectations of students: to learn not so much by being attentive consumers of knowledge as by actively helping to shape and expand the frontiers of their knowledge. Vocational education is crucial to this occurring.

If students are truly to be at the centre of learning, then linking, brokerage, guidance, advice and intermediary roles will no longer be discretionary; instead they will be vital in turning large and impersonal systems into accessible networks.

Done well, these roles represent a powerful way of enabling students to build the self-reliance and informed decision-making necessary to ensure that learning is better accessed and work is well negotiated. In particular, intermediaries like Group Training organisations, have the potential to be a critical juncture through which students can link between schools and training, TAFE, industry and employment.

In developing education reforms in Australia,

policy-makers must not reduce education to an endeavour so instrumental that it is just concerned with the basics, turned into a mere mirror of the market, or satisfied with just delivering work-ready and employable workers. In a changing and dynamic economic world it would be a mistake to educate and train for narrow occupations that may not be there in ten years time.

The task in education is to equip students more broadly, to become and to be active, free and meaningful participants in their communities, society and in the economy.

A unique conjunction of factors - strong economic conditions and growth into the foreseeable future, Australia's continuing need for a skilled workforce, and the forecast demographic squeeze facing the nation - tell us it is now crunch time to really deliver and to open the doors to greater youth engagement in learning, in the economy and in the society. ❖

1. Certificate III qualifications encompass an array of occupations (and related skills). These include, for example: an animal attendant; beauty therapist, electrician; milliner; painter & decorator; motor mechanic; pastry cook; plumber; tailor; or tiler. The nature and duration of

these courses vary and not all will necessarily be completed in the time it takes to complete high school.

2. Six months after leaving school in 2005, 46,000 early school leavers were in this situation. 45 per cent of Year 11 leavers were either unemployed, not in the labour force or working part-time but not studying. 48 per cent of Year 10 or below leavers were in these situations. M Long, *How Young People are Faring 2007, At a Glance*, DSF, 2007

3. Access Economics, *The Economic Benefit of Increased Participation in Education and Training*, Business Council of Australia & DSF, 2005.

4. M Long, 2007, op.cit.

5. C Shah & G Burke, *Qualifications and the Future of the Labour Market in Australia*, Centre for the Economics of Education & Training, Monash University, 2006

6. T Karmel, *Vocational Education and Training and Young People: Last but not least*, NCVET Occasional Paper, 2007

7. DSF & AiG, *It's Crunch Time: Raising youth engagement & attainment*, 2007. See [www.dsf.org.au](http://www.dsf.org.au) or [www.aigroup.asn.au](http://www.aigroup.asn.au)

8. M Cully, *Kirby Comes of Age: The birth, difficult adolescence, & future prospects of traineeships*, GTA & DSF, 2006, p14

9. T Karmel, ‘Future skill requirements and implications for TAFE institutes’, NCVET, 2003, Table 12

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