



Victorian TAFEs facing hard times

TAFE in Victoria is under extreme stress as a direct consequence of the Brumby Government's Skills Reform Policy.

Jo Fogarty

THE state government's aim in introducing their Skills Reform Package was to address skills shortages and increase the numbers of Victorians undertaking training at Diploma and Advanced Diploma levels. Other elements of the policy include the introduction of hefty enrolment fee hikes, fully contestable funding, the abolition of concession enrolment at Diploma and Advanced Diploma levels and the introduction of HECS style student loans for TAFE students.

The Brumby government is not achieving its policy aims, as enrolments in Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas in many courses have decreased across the state.

The AEU has argued from the outset, before its implementation in July 2009, that this is a very flawed policy. We knew that many students would be affected by these changes. Approximately 45 per cent of students use concessions to enrol, many of them have a current qualification at the level they wish to retrain in or even higher, making them ineligible for a government subsidised place. Many are debt averse, so taking out a loan is out of the question. We also predicted the devastating consequences this would have on the TAFE system.

Despite strong campaigning from the AEU and many other concerned groups, the government chose to ignore expert comment and implement its policy.

Nearly eighteen months later we see TAFEs across the state battling to implement the government's policy. Enrolments in Diploma and Advanced Diplomas are down by 30 per cent across the state and in some TAFEs the rate is even higher. Students have voted with their feet and left the public TAFE system that once guaranteed them a TAFE place they could afford.

The logic is very clear; fewer students means less income. This means budget deficits and this means TAFEs need to tighten expenditure. This is achieved by decreasing

costs; larger class sizes, narrowing course offerings to those that will make money, increasing worker productivity and staff redundancies.

TAFEs were not funded to implement this policy. Some have said it has cost several million dollars to enable the transition to a new system of enrolling students and implementing new reporting and accounting requirements.

Under a fully contestable market, TAFEs are also competing with a burgeoning number of privately registered training

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organisations who are gaining massive amounts of government money. We have all heard of the private RTOs shutting down and leaving students stranded. Vocation Education and Training should not be allowed to operate for a profit or to undercut an inadequately funded public system.

Our TAFE members are telling us very disturbing stories about what is happening at their TAFE. Regional and metropolitan TAFEs are identifying staff in excess and redundancies have and will be offered. With each staff departure a set of well developed training skills also goes. TAFEs will be faced with a skeleton teaching profession only retaining the teaching skills relevant to the courses that are profitable to run.

TAFE teachers are under enormous stress. Not only are they fearing the loss of their jobs, they are also under constant pressure to give more productivity. They are under pressure to chase down students, increase enrolments and do whatever they have to to keep the students enrolled. Teachers are

being told they have to be even more flexible, be more innovative, quicker in responding to students, and are being asked to constantly market programs and engage more with employers. Their annual working hours are being scrutinised over and over again to see if they can do more.

How a TAFE teacher can be expected to bear the brunt of the negative impact of the Skills Reform is disturbing indeed. The Victorian TAFE system has been the most productive and underfunded in Australia for some years now. The effects that these demands are having on our members are of grave concern to the AEU. We are constantly working with our members to support them and help them through this time. Employers need to focus on policy and underfunding, and lobby on these grounds rather than resort to more employee productivity.

The state government will argue the successes of this flawed policy. They will tell us that enrolments across the state in TAFEs have increased. Yes they have, but at Certificate IV or below and this is because these certificates will not be affected by the skills policy until 2011. Clearly students have opted to enrol in the lower certificates to avoid costs.

As I write this the AEU is anxiously waiting on the outcomes of the policy review which was conducted earlier in the year. We had hoped that the outcomes would have been made public some months ago. The AEU took part in the review process and we have strongly reiterated our concerns to government. We hope that the Brumby Government has listened to us and other stakeholders and will make recommendations that address the issues discussed in this article. We must have a properly funded public TAFE system that can offer a breadth of courses and programs that meet both training and community needs. ❖

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