

# A 5 POINT PLAN for quality, affordable TAFE

Peter de Graaff

**D**URING the NSW State Election campaign early in 2011, 160 candidates signed pledges to support the *TAFE 5 Point Plan for a Better State*. Notably, Ministers in the new Coalition government to sign or support the pledge include Deputy Premier Andrew Stoner, Education Minister Adrian Piccoli, and Transport Minister Gladys Berejiklian.

Following the election, 46 MPs in the new Parliament have pledged their commitment to support the principles underpinning the *Invest in TAFE for a Better State* campaign. These MPs are distributed across all political parties and their commitment reflects the strong community support for TAFE as a provider of quality, affordable education and training. For many students and families, TAFE provides an answer to their modest aspirations for prosperity and a living wage.

The TAFE 5 Point Plan for a Better State is:

1. **Invest in services** — Government must guarantee TAFE funding.
2. **Look after public assets** — Ensure that TAFE jobs and courses are not contracted out to the private sector.
3. **Plan long-term** — Invest in infrastructure for TAFE that ensures a skilled workforce.
4. **Back our workers** — Increase permanent teaching positions and invest in teacher training.
5. **Govern for the common good** — Ensure that everyone in NSW has affordable access to a TAFE education.

The principles underpinning this plan are aimed at contesting the pressures of economic rationalism, market 'reforms' and competition, which has meant that governments have failed to invest in the quality services which the public sector can provide. Competition, and outsourcing to the private sector is a method used to reduce the quality

of services that communities receive from the public sector. Inevitably outsourcing is used to disguise planned declines in the quality of service delivery, cost increases, and private profits.

The impact of governments failing to invest in TAFE has been that costs have been shifted to students and families through fee increases under the guise of co-contribution. Pressures to save costs are also experienced by teachers in cuts to delivery hours, increases in class sizes, reductions to teaching and learning resources and an over reliance on casual teachers.

So-called 'reforms' proposed currently by governments to VET funding means that the broad introduction of income contingent loans in a market driven demand based student entitlement scheme could leave families and students paying off education and training debts for years after finishing their TAFE course. For many TAFE students this will mean paying a regressive tax in

the form of a fee debt on getting a job. On the other hand, government will guarantee through these reforms that providers profit through the fee increases that student debt will fund.

Members of the community have always had an **entitlement** to attend a TAFE college at an affordable fee rate. In NSW, the cost of TAFE fees has been the subject of political controversy in recent years, with TAFE teacher activists and their union, opposing increases.

In 2007, the NSW National Party sought to introduce TAFE (Freezing of Fees) Bill 2007 into Parliament. The National party also launched a community *Freeze TAFE Fees*

‘Governments failing to invest in TAFE has caused costs to be shifted to students and families through fee increases under the guise of co-contribution.’

website with an online petition “in opposition to outrageous increases in fees.” In resumption of debate on the Bill in September 2008, then Opposition Spokesperson on Education and Training, Andrew Stoner said:

There is no doubt that the cost of living is a huge issue right across our community in New South Wales. But for TAFE students who usually work part-time and study at TAFE struggling with the normal cost of living — increased grocery prices, fuel prices and in some cases interest rates — it is a very difficult time and the Government has not helped by increasing these fees by some 9 per cent, which is well and truly above the consumer price index.

The impact of the increase in fees has been that enrolments in TAFE are falling, and that is a real shame because TAFE has been a great success story in this State, especially at a time when we have a skills shortage. In 2002 total student enrolments for TAFE New South Wales were 525,865. According to the latest statistics, by 2007 that number had declined to a total enrolment of 497,747 — a reduction of more than 28,000 in

student numbers at a time when industry demands more trained young people with appropriate qualifications.

From 2009 there has been a recovery in TAFE enrolments, and in 2010 there were 556,340 students enrolled in NSW TAFE. It is worth noting that the bulk of the increase to student enrolments since 2007 has been in part-time female enrolments. Since 2006 there has been an 18.1% increase in female enrolments. Full time enrolments in TAFE have remained relatively static over this period with 42,099 students in 2010, whilst part-time enrolments have increased by 11.7% to 514,241 since 2006. Enrolments by male students have only increased by 4.9% between 2006-10. Counted within the increase to the total number of TAFE enrolments since is a significant of students participating in distance education through the Open Training and Education Network (OTEN). In 2007 there were 31,803 students enrolled in OTEN and by 2010 this had increased to 59,474. In the recently announced NSW state budget, enrolments in TAFE are forecast to flatten in the 2011-12 financial year.

Attempts by the government to increase TAFE fees by some 9% had a serious impact on student enrolments. Subsequently, rises in TAFE fee have been constrained to CPI increases.

Contrasting TAFE enrolment data from 2007 by campus, with 2006 census data on weekly median income, and unemployment rates demonstrates the degree to which disadvantaged communities rely on TAFE. Given the changes to TAFE enrolments, outlined above since 2007, it is likely that at a campus level student numbers may have increased slightly overall.

In Mr Stoner’s seat of Oxley there are three TAFE campuses Macksville, Kempsey and Wauchope. In 2007 there were 4,015 TAFE students enrolled in these campuses. In the neighbouring seat of Port Macquarie, at the local college of the same name there were 4,034 TAFE students enrolled. Both sitting National MPs for these state seats have pledged to support the TAFE 5 Point Plan.

Federally, the campuses of Port Macquarie, Taree and Wauchope fall within the electorate of Lyne. In 2007, there were 8,484 students enrolled at these TAFE colleges. In 2006 the median weekly family income in this electorate was \$851, the unemployment rate was 9.4%, and for 15-19 year olds the unemployment rate was 18.7%.

The *Electoral division rankings: 2006*

*census (2009 electoral boundaries)* produced by the Federal Parliamentary Library reveal that Lyne had the third lowest weekly median family income of any electorate in Australia. This seat had the third highest unemployment rate of any electorate in Australia, and for 15-19 year olds it ranked number 142 out of 150 electorates.

The ranking of Federal electorates from 133-150 by unemployment rates for 15-19 reveals that the worst were all in NSW except for two. The unemployment rate in these NSW seats ranged from 17.8 to 21.7%. These seats are Parramatta, Blaxland, Charlton, Cunningham, Watson, Sydney, Cowper,

‘There is a strong correlation between lower incomes, unemployment rates and TAFE enrolments.’

Dobell, Lyne, Throsby, Werriwa, Gilmore, Shortland, Newcastle, Chifley and Fowler. All of these seats are held by the ALP, except for Cowper and Gilmore that are held by the Coalition, and Lyne by an Independent.

Similarly, when electorates were ranked according to the unemployment rate, 17 out of the worst 20 were in NSW. These seats are largely held by the ALP.

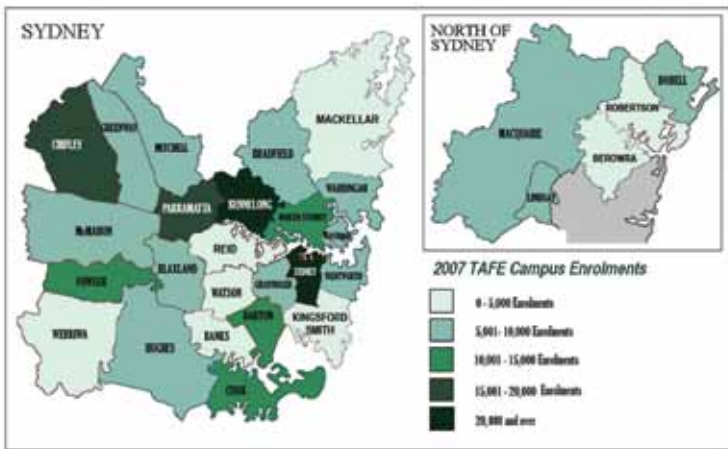
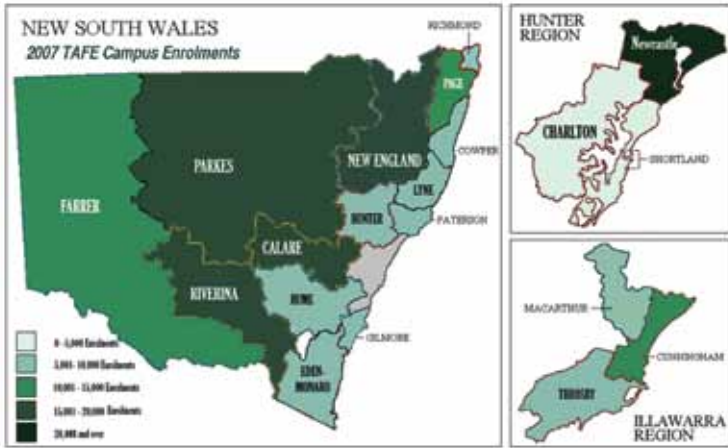
When electorates are ranked by median weekly family income, 11 of the 20 lowest are NSW. Many are held by the ALP, but the National seat of Cowper on the mid-north coast of NSW had the lowest median weekly family income of \$798 according to 2006 census data. Sadly the huge gap between rich and poor in NSW is also highlighted by electorate ranking which reveals that the Liberal held seats of Warringah, Bradfield, North Sydney and Wentworth have the highest median weekly family incomes in Australia.

The electorate of North Sydney has a median family weekly income of \$2,289, an unemployment rate of 3.1%, and for 15-19 years olds an unemployment rate of only 9.1%. In 2007 there were 10,976 students attending the three TAFE colleges in the electorate, and one would also expect strong levels of participation in higher education.

In comparison the marginal Liberal electorate of Macquarie (1.3%), which extends across the Blue Mountains from western Sydney, has a weekly median family income of \$1,326, an unemployment rate of



FEDERAL ELECTORATES: TAFE ENROLMENTS



Coalition would require a swing of between 0.9% and 5.2% to take. Many of these electorates have low median family incomes, and high unemployment rates both in general and for 15-19 year olds. These seats are in rural, regional and on the fringe of metropolitan areas. Many of these electorates in 2007 had significant TAFE enrolments.

The accompanying map allocates 2007 TAFE student enrolments by campus according to 2009 electoral boundaries. Clearly there is a strong correlation between lower incomes, unemployment rates and TAFE enrolments. In comparison, in electorates where there are high median weekly family incomes there were lower levels of unemployment overall and for 15-19 year olds. This is hardly surprising given that in these electorates there are also higher levels of school retention, private school presence, and high levels of participation in both TAFE and higher education.

Everyone must continue to have an entitlement to attend TAFE, but it must not come in the form of a regressive tax posing as a loan scheme to disguise fee increases. Nor must funding change proposals be used to diminish the quality of education and training delivered by TAFE. Both the federal and state governments must recognise that there are high levels of community concern at competition and privatisation proposals undermining our public sector education and vocational training system.

There is an answer, and that is all governments must invest in TAFE and commit to our 5 Point Plan. ❖

*Peter de Graaff is the NSW delegate to the National TAFE Council Executive*



5.5%, and for 15-19 year olds this rose to 13.2%. There are two TAFE colleges in the electorate at Richmond and Wentworth Falls that in 2007 had a combined total of 8,996 student enrolments. Students in this electorate could also attend colleges in neighbouring electorates. In NSW, there are 5 Coalition held electorates the government would require a swing of between 1.3% and 5.4% to take.

The marginal ALP seat of Page (4.2%) on the far north coast has a median weekly family income of \$887, an unemployment rate of 8.9%, and for 15-19 year olds the unemployment rate was 15.9%. In 2007 there were 11,566 students enrolled at the 6 campuses in the electorate.

Recently the ALP Member for Page, rightly wrote to the Hon Chris Evans MP, Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Jobs and Workplace Relations on behalf of constituents who have joined the *Invest in TAFE* campaign and said:

I have for some time now been very concerned at the way Governments have been privatising essential studies such as literacy and numeracy programs, these I believe are core Labor values and must remain in the public sector education system with TAFE.

I understand that as part of the Budget, the Government announced that it will work with States and Territories to renegotiate the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development and introduce a National Partnership to reform the vocational education and training system.

I, like my constituents, am very concerned that these proposals will lead to a downgrading of the TAFE System, especially our rural TAFE'S.

In NSW there are ten government held federal electorates that the

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