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Vote **1** TAFE

The National TAFE Activists Seminar held in Canberra in March was the fourth time that TAFE members across the country have met to lobby politicians about TAFE. The first time was prior to the last Federal election, where despite extensive lobbying, TAFE was hardly mentioned. This year the recognition and support for TAFE was significant. Some of this recognition comes as a result of the Senate Inquiry report into current and future skills needs, Bridging the Skills Divide, which acknowledges the skills shortages in a range of traditional labour areas such as engineering, electrical, refrigeration, carpentry, bricklaying, plumbing, hairdressing, furniture upholstery and metal fitting and fabrication, but also recognises the need for skilled employees in child care and aged care, and the continuing shortages in teaching and nursing.

The Report also recommends that 'the Commonwealth and the state and territory governments make a joint commitment to significantly increase the proportion of young people completing Year 12 or equivalent vocational education and training, within the next five years ... featuring more intensive support and stronger safety nets.' The Dusseldorp Skills Forum research published in 2003, found that 23% of young Australians were not in full time work, education or training.

These two issues of skills shortages and young people not in education or work, have been used as the foundation for the Federal Labor Youth Guarantee: Learn or Earn.

This policy was a significant part of Labor leader Mark Latham's budget speech in reply, on 13 May. Labor's Youth Guarantee will be phased in from 2006, if they are elected, with new support to keep 15-18 year olds at school, 7,500 TAFE places from the previously announced 20,000 new TAFE places allocated to 15-18 year olds, and extra apprenticeships for the same age group. 1,080 training mentors will be employed to act as case workers and life coaches for these young people. The Youth Guarantee goes on to say that 'A Labor Government will cover TAFE fees for students in all schools and will also provide incentives for students to enrol in courses that meet future skills shortages'.

Whilst welcoming this commitment from the Labor Party, how achievable these goals would be remains to be seen. The \$692.7m needed for the program through to 2008, will come from savings achieved through the dismantling of current Federal Government programs. The fact that the policy highlights TAFE as a significant part of Labor's program for the future of the country, is however, more than the present Federal government has shown.

The 2004/2005 Howard Government budget continued to direct funding away from the public system to open tender and employer incentives. Through the VET Priority Places program the Federal Government has directed funds for vocational education and training outside the ANTA Agreement. \$20.5 million will provide 7,500 training places for low income earners, people with a

disability, older workers and parents entering or re-entering the work force. The Federal Minister's press release emphasises that training places will be available for public, private and community providers. Out of the 12 regions, seven will be administered by private organisations. The Government's approach to skills shortages in trades revolves around shorter apprenticeships and fast-tracked training programs.

At the end of March, some 50 TAFE activists descended on Canberra to lobby politicians from all political parties around the AEU's claim for TAFE. Questions were asked of each politician around their commitment to:

- recognising and supporting TAFE as the major provider of vocational education and training
- recognising and supporting TAFE's role in training and education, for employment, for career development and for second chance and further education. This could include a National Plan for TAFE.
- supporting new additional funding for TAFE to meet continued growth and unmet demand (projected potential growth of 5.2%).
- freezing and reviewing User Choice
- capping fees and charges for TAFE courses in the ANTA Agreement, so that TAFE courses are accessible to all students. This would include exemption from fees for equity groups.
- supporting additional funding for quality improvement programs,

including professional development for teachers to gain and maintain professional standards and to increase the numbers of permanent teachers in TAFE

- funding an Education Equity Program.

The AEU's claim for growth funding, quality improvement and equity programs is for an additional \$1280m over the life of the ANTA Agreement 2004-2006.

As practitioners in the field, these TAFE activists were able to demonstrate the effect of the lack of funding, User Choice and fees, with stories of cut classes, students turned away and reduced offerings particularly in rural and regional areas and for students whose needs were high. By using figures provided by the NSW government, our press release

of 50,000 students turned away from TAFE courses this year brought a lot of media attention.

TAFE activists will continue to be involved in forums and lobbying in the lead-up to the election. Enrol to

‘...the need to make
TAFE an important
issue.’

vote leaflets and posters have been developed by the Federal office for distribution to TAFE students, highlighting the need to make TAFE an important issue. ‘Vote 1 TAFE’ is the message.

More information about the national TAFE campaign can be found on the Federal AEU webpage, at www.aeufederal.org.au



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