

WHY QUALIFICATIONS *matter*

Why qualifications matter for TAFE teachers, and why the Productivity Commission got it wrong

By Pat Forward

SKILLS Australia released its roadmap for vocational education and training, *Skills for Australia* on 3 May and the Productivity Commission released a Research Report from its study of the VET workforce on 5 May. On 10 May, the Gillard government brought down its first budget, and skills for the workforce featured prominently. If there is a single theme which runs through these important events on the vocational education landscape it is the sense of urgency generated by the call in the budget for reform of the sector, in the Skills Australia report for action from government to meet impending skills crises, and the headline message in the Productivity Commission's report that 40% of TAFE teachers are unqualified.

The public VET system is being portrayed as a system in crisis. Those who work in the system should be angry about this. In the hiatus which followed the release of these reports and the budget, not one government minister — state, territory or federal — stood up for the public TAFE system. Not one government official questioned the sloppy work of the Productivity Commission. No-one asked why a federal government which had commenced privatising the public vocational education system twenty years ago was making further privatisation (under the guise of the euphemistic National Partnership for reform of VET) the mainstay of its 2011 VET budget. And no-one asked Skills Australia how the answer to skills shortages and underinvestment in TAFE and VET was to get students to pay more for training.

The real theme which runs through the TAFE system in Australia today is underinvestment. Government recurrent expenditure per hour of training, the Orwellian measure of efficiency used by governments in VET, has declined by 11.9% between 2003 and 2008, and by about 22.3% since 1997. No other education sector has sustained such long

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term underinvestment as TAFE. At the same time, governments have worked assiduously to create an artificial training market, encouraging unsustainable growth in private provision so that now in Australia there are about 60 TAFE institutes which deliver 85% of government funded training, but a market of 5,000 registered training organisations (at least 3,500 of which are small private providers) who deliver the remaining 15% or less. Governments have encouraged the proliferation of these providers, enticing them with easy access to taxpayer funds, and with the discrete promise of an averted gaze when something goes wrong. Witness the timid and polite approach to the creation of national VET regulation to gain a real sense of how importantly rigorous regulation is approached in VET.

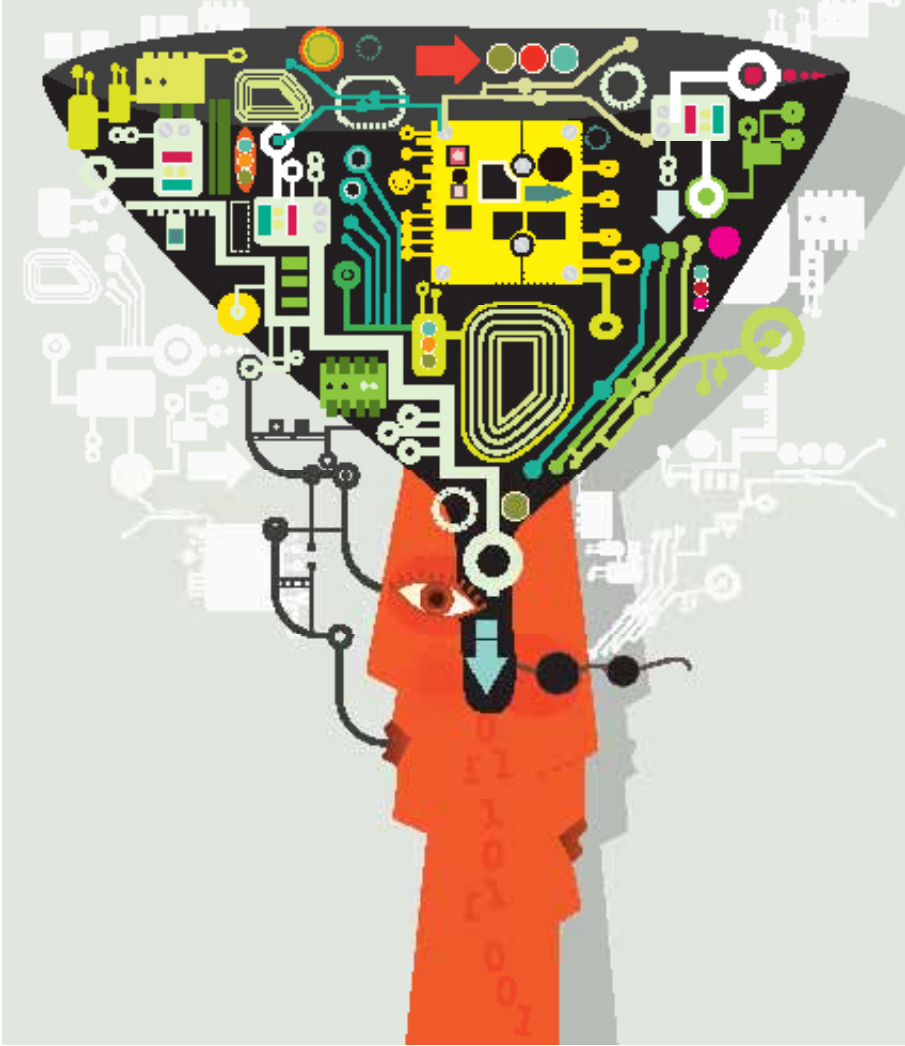
If the 2011 Budget, the Productivity Commission report, and the Skills Australia roadmap tell us anything, it is that the TAFE system is a system in turmoil and that its future could not be more delicately poised. And that is why the governments who own the system, who have played with it in policy terms carelessly over the past few years, and

who have shown little pride in its considerable achievements should hang their heads in shame for their silence over the last few weeks.

The Productivity Commission's assertions around the qualifications and skills of the TAFE workforce would have been a good place to start. The quality and the reputation of the TAFE system depend on the capacity of a teaching workforce which is dedicated to the 1.3 million students who go to TAFE. Far from being significantly unqualified, as the Productivity Commission wrongly asserts, the TAFE teaching workforce is relatively well qualified, both in terms of teaching qualifications and in terms of industry qualifications. The Commission has been selective and tardy in its use of data. It eschewed data derived from a DEEWR survey in 2010 which estimated that 90% of trainers and assessors in TAFE held teaching qualifications because it considered the figures overestimates on the basis that it had under-sampled non-permanent employees. It then went on to use TAFE administrative data from an *anonymous* jurisdiction which estimated only 60% of TAFE trainers and assessors had a CIV TAA or higher, implying, according to the Commission that 40% of trainers and assessors in the whole public TAFE sector do not have even the CIV. This data has been challenged by the unnamed state, on the basis that the Productivity Commission has seriously misrepresented and misinterpreted the information it was sent.

More importantly, every state and territory in Australia has evidence available contradicting this finding. The AEU's 2010 survey of 2,800 of its TAFE teaching members showed that 99% held teaching qualifications at or higher than a CIV TAA (78% held teaching qualifications higher than a CIV). This is evidence that was available to the Productivity Commission, but which it chose not to access.

This is not the only significant error in



the Productivity Commission study, but it is an important one because it is part of a narrative which the research report, posing as it does as an objective study, attempts to spin to undermine arguments for a genuine investment from all levels of government in the TAFE teaching workforce. The Commission report wants it both ways — it strongly implies that the alleged lack of evidence

around a link between teaching qualifications and quality student outcomes in any education sector forbid it from supporting increased investment in these qualifications by governments, but then supports the largely discredited and poorly delivered CIV TAE, despite it being, in the Commission's own words an "at risk" qualification. The damage done to the sector's reputation as a result of

the unchallenged headlines generated by the Commission's report are an indictment of the Commission, and of governments state and federal who chose not to rise to the defence of their TAFEs.

The Australian TAFE system has a huge job ahead of it, and its ability to meet the challenges of a changing economy and society will lie in no small part with the capacity of its teaching workforce. And that is why a program to support this workforce, as its more experienced and qualified members retire, and its younger and less experienced members step up to the challenges of preparing the next generation of workers and citizens, is crucial.

The AEU argues for a sustained re-investment in teaching qualifications, and a plan which draws on the experience and expertise of those in the sector and in industry to provide education in a staged and manageable way to teachers once they have entered TAFE with their industry qualifications and experience. We have argued for ongoing professional development, and for genuine programs in industry, developed in close cooperation with industry itself to maintain and build the specialist industry knowledge for which TAFE teachers are so well known. Our arguments are based on an understanding that just as it requires skills and knowledge in specific industry areas, so TAFE teaching requires teaching expertise — the capacity to develop teaching strategies, based on knowledge of individuals learning styles, on pedagogy, on the impact disadvantage has on individuals, on how hard it is to learn

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