

TAFE is central to skilling Australia, says Evans



While Victoria gambles with the public provider's future, the federal Tertiary Education Minister says it will

remain the bastion of training.

By **John Mitchell**.

Some new and important voices are questioning Victoria's experiments with VET market reform and their impacts on TAFE institutes.

The new voices include the NSW Education Minister, Adrian Piccoli, (*Campus Review*, October 17), who said in relation to Victoria that "leaving training up to the open market there can be shortcomings".

He gave as an example of the student entitlement scheme gone haywire in Victoria the dramatic increase in the number of personal trainers graduating. With regard to TAFE NSW he said, unequivocally, "We want to protect the viability of TAFE".

The latest voice to question the Victorian approach and to express support for the TAFE system is the Federal Minister, Senator Chris Evans, who talked to *CR* about the long-term future of the public provider.

Evans has a commonsense view about TAFE institutes: the government has invested heavily in them and they have performed well, so why put them at risk. "TAFEs are great public institutions and we have invested millions and millions of dollars over the years in building their capacity and skills and they've served Australia very well."

He supports state governments making the VET sector more competitive, but not at the cost of destroying TAFE. "What the states are trying to do, and we support, is [inject] some competition and flexibility into the provision of services, but I don't want to do that at the expense of destroying TAFEs or reducing their capacity."

"We're interested in some competitiveness in the market but TAFE will remain the major supplier of skills and training in this country. What we've got to do is allow them a bit more flexibility and a bit more capacity to work with employers to meet those emerging skills' needs."

He compared how the government in his home state of Western Australia has provided its TAFE institutes with more flexibility and this measured approach was succeeding, while the Victorian government may have "over-reached" with its competitive agenda.

"If you look at my state, Western Australia, they have managed to free up the TAFEs to be more flexible, more entrepreneurial, and they're getting good results, whereas there's some concern that in Victoria the model may have over-reached in terms of the competitive market. We're seeing [in

Victoria] some developments that are less than ideal and [there are] serious concerns about it [the model] undercutting the role of TAFEs."

Evans pointed out that TAFE institutes provide access for many disadvantaged groups, which he doesn't want discarded by the new competitive model.

"People have to remember [that] TAFEs provide access to training for people in rural and regional areas, people from lower socio-economic groups, migrants and indigenous people. They are a great source of access for training so we have to make sure we don't provide a competitive model that actually gives us a worse result than we had previously."

He noted that some states have or are currently introducing reforms that seek to provide a student entitlement to training and to arrange their funding so that money follows students. "Most are also considering introducing some form of contestability into VET delivery, albeit a more 'managed' approach than was adopted in Victoria. These are decisions that rightly sit with state jurisdictions."

However, while the Commonwealth will not be mandating what form of training market the states implement, "we will be mandating the types of improvements we want to see in the VET system, in line with the principles of efficiency, quality, transparency and equity".

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Evans restated the government's objective to achieve a world-class VET system where Australians are able to choose "high-quality, accessible and relevant training delivered by qualified instructors in institutions with modern supporting infrastructure." While there is room for TAFE to improve, there is broad agreement that TAFE largely meet these three criteria, so why take unnecessary risks with it.

He is supportive of competition among providers, but repeated his view that TAFE can perform a central role in a competitive environment. "There is a role for healthy competition to promote greater responsiveness to both employers and students, but I believe this can be achieved while recognising and supporting the central role public providers play in skilling Australia."

TAFE is funded by state governments that are supported by Commonwealth funding under a national agreement, and TAFE is expected to receive some of these funds, said Evans. For instance, the new National Workforce Development

Fund is designed to put industry at the centre by making it the purchaser of training to meet the skills demand in high growth industries.

"This fund is for accredited training and I expect that this will be provided by a combination of TAFE and private registered training organisations," Evans said.

"We are committed to a strong TAFE system and providing funding to states and territories to support quality training outcomes. Effective workforce development is dependent on employers having access to a responsive and efficient VET system, including TAFE."

The minister is aware that "one of the criticisms of the normal training institutes, TAFEs and others, is that it's a supply-driven model and not as responsive to employers as people would like. Some of that's fair, some of it's not."

"TAFE have a great record of providing people with skills for employers but what we've done with the workforce development agency and various funds is use a demand-driven [model] where employers and the government partner to drive development of skills that are in demand in a way that's more responsive [than the previous model]."

He gave as an example of this new demand-driven approach the recent announcement by Bechtel that it would train 400 adult apprentices. "The other day I went to the launch in Gladstone. This employer needs metal and electrical trades so we've partnered with them to try and [help] get them adult apprenticeships in 18 months or so."

These demand-driven models are adding diversity to the way funds are made available in the VET sector, but they are not the only way to allocate funds. "The workforce development agency is about [promoting] greater awareness of workforce needs and employer input into that planning," Evans said. "The funds are [within] a demand-driven model that doesn't replace the institutional framework with states and TAFEs, but just adds a bit of diversity and a methodology that's more responsive to industry's needs."

Rejecting the view that TAFE is the only party that needs to improve its performance, he is measured in his approach to a complex sector. For instance, he believes better data needs to be collected, industry could do more to fund training, and he wants to support small businesses who struggle to put on paper their workforce development plans and strategies.

From opposite sides of the political spectrum, the reasoned voices of ministers Evans and Piccoli are refocusing the national discussion about VET reform. They are both saying that a more demand-driven and competitive VET sector doesn't require taking risks with TAFE. VET needs an effective TAFE system as well as quality private providers, working collaboratively with industries, communities and individuals. ▢

Dr John Mitchell is a Sydney-based researcher and consultant who specialises in VET workforce development and strategic leadership. See www.jma.com.au