

Great vision, poor policy



As funds diminish TAFEs are left to the mercy of the markets, writes **Pat Forward.**

“We have a great TAFE network and many excellent TAFE institutions. But it’s the educators and teachers that make a difference. TAFE’s future depends on its people. You have one of the most important tasks in the country – to provide opportunities for working people and an economic future for the entire country. The greatest tribute we can pay to you is to ensure the people who follow you have the resources they will need to continue TAFE’s great job into the future. And it won’t be easy in a world of competing priorities.

But I think the Australian people understand that it’s a task we must take on – because they know just how important TAFE is.”

Julia Gillard,

National TAFE Day, 2009

As education minister Julia Gillard articulated a vision for TAFE that Australians could identify with and be proud of.

She spoke of skills and training, but she spoke also of hope and aspirations. In contemporary parlance, she got it. However, what the Gillard government hasn’t got is a clear or coherent strategy for the future TAFE as it continues to atrophy under the weight of relentless raiding by low cost, high volume training provided by a largely transient private sector. This has left TAFE increasingly at the mercy of a market it was never designed to compete in.

Again 2011 has not been a good year for TAFE, however that’s not because a great deal has changed since 2009. Instead it is because the TAFE system in Australia has continued its seemingly never ending struggle for survival within the contradictory policy imperatives that governments have thrown up around it for the last two decades.

Under the marketised model of VET, government funding for TAFE has declined very year since 1997. In 2010, the Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET) established that government recurrent expenditure per hour of training declined by 11.9 per cent between 2003 and 2008 – part of a longer term trend that has seen funding per hour reduced by about 22.3 per cent from 1997. If both expenditure per hour and TAFE’s share of that expenditure had been maintained at even 2003 levels, TAFE’s funding would have been \$623.6m (or 17.0 per cent) greater in 2008 than it actually was.

Since the early 1990s, governments of all political persuasions have pursued the narrow goal of creating a competitive market in vocational education. This simplistic policy objective has involved the encouragement of the growth of private RTOs (now in excess of 4500) across the country through the gradual opening up of government funds.

Since 2008, three state governments have announced and enacted policy which will

eventually see all government funds for vocational education available to private providers.

Victoria has been progressively implementing a fully competitive market for government VET funding since 2008. In the last two years, private provider numbers have more than doubled (from 225 in 2008 to 528 in early 2011) and private provider market share of government funding has grown from 14 per cent to 35 per cent.

In South Australia, the government has based its shift to full competition on the dubious bedrock of a decline in funding per student contact hour of 12 per cent since 2005, and an aspiration that its funding by this measure should be further reduced to the national average throughout the reform process. This would see a further decline in funding per student contact hour in South Australia of 6 per cent.

Queensland has just announced its plan to move to full competition through a demand driven system, lamenting the inroads made by private providers into the Queensland VET market, but painting their proposal as an inevitable response to the challenges TAFE faces in competing for ever diminishing funds.

In Queensland and the ACT, each government has made announcements around the establishment of Australia’s sixth and seventh dual sector universities – not because its necessarily the best thing for students and communities in the ACT and Queensland, but really because the

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market made it inevitable. In each case, stripped of the rhetoric of hasty government reviews, the arguments for these dual sector universities are economic, not social or educational. And in each case, despite the best endeavours of those who work in these institutions, communities will be poorer for the loss of their TAFE institutions.

All the attention has centred on this radical market experiment, not sustaining one of the greatest legacies of the Whitlam Labor government: the establishment of high-quality public institutions for VET that had a parity with public schools and universities. Such a vision cannot be contemplated in the market model, which is preoccupied with the cost rather than the value of VET. As the social infrastructure of TAFE begins to crumble under the weight of neglect, real questions must now be asked about the Gillard’s government ambivalence to this great Labor legacy. Does the Commonwealth accept responsibility for the maintenance of a high quality public TAFE system, or does it by neglect see it as yet another sacrifice on the alter of the neo-liberalism?

Despite the events in Victoria, South Australia

and Queensland – and in the ACT – TAFE enjoys high levels of student and employer satisfaction. Within the Australian community, TAFE is well recognised and highly regarded. It underpins regional communities, and is the cornerstone of many industries. It is the only network of vocational education providers that can guarantee support for industries encountering skills shortages or anticipating massive structural change in the shift to green skills.

It is the only provider which can guarantee a high quality response to the challenge of increasing the nations literacy and numeracy, and broader educational goals for the socially isolated and the disadvantaged. In essence, TAFE by all measures drives quality and inclusion in a system struggling for credibility under the growing weight of low quality private providers merely in ‘the market’ for profit rather than educational excellence, skills creation or building economic futures for communities.

TAFE institutes continue their work around the country, highly regarded internationally, poorly supported and funded domestically with their continual reduction to a ‘market participant’.

Those who work in TAFE view the 21st century narratives around seamless pathways in a tertiary education sector sceptically. The vision is laudable, the reality of achieving that vision threatened at every turn by the poorly conceived policy settings of reduced and reducing government funding.

TAFE can and must take its place in a properly conceived tertiary education sector in Australia. It must continue to provide vocational education to individuals and industry and to work with industry and governments in anticipating and addressing skills shortages. It must be allowed to continue its work with students and communities addressing social inequality and disadvantage through the hard work of a highly skilled teaching workforce. VET cannot have a future built on single training rooms in desolate office blocks, mass online courses or on fly-in, fly-out providers. Communities are more important than that and TAFE is a community builder of the 21st century.

Obviously, by all measures governments are not funding TAFE adequately. They are not developing public policy based on independent research, and critical dialogue. They will not articulate an expansive, indeed any vision of TAFE beyond a demand that they compete for funding, and become ever more “efficient” in a market driven by the imperative of cost shifting from governments to students. More recently TAFE is being further diminished to become “feeders” for a demand driven higher education sector, jeopardising the futures of many thousands of young people centred on VET and work, consigning Australian society and industry to the vagaries of the newest market for higher education places.

What has happened to the 21st century leviathan of Julia Gillard’s 2009 speech? How much more could TAFE achieve if governments told TAFE what they wanted from it, and then made a commitment to its future as substantial as those courageous Labor figures of times past? ■

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