

# The great Victorian experiment

Vocational training has had to absorb many changes this year, the biggest being the push to expand the private sector, writes **Annette Blackwell.**

It has been a turbulent year for vocational education in Australia, with major changes impacting on public and private providers across the nation, yet as the year ends all eyes are on Victoria.

There has been the establishment of Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA); changes to the Australian Quality Framework (AQF) and changes to international student visas and rights.

RMIT policy adviser Gavin Moodie said these changes would have dominated any other year but there was an even bigger development that seems likely to shape vocational education in Victoria and most other states for years to come.

"In 2008 the Victorian government camouflaged a policy to reduce growth of its expenditure on vocational education with a radical change in policy it called the Victorian training guarantee," Moodie told *Campus Review*.

He said that while this was presented as a guarantee of a training place for all Victorians, the guarantee was greatly compromised and confused by conditions about students' age, their previous qualifications and the program they seek to study. He saw it as disguising a radical change, to make government-subsidised places available to approved private registered training organisations (RTOs) as well as public TAFE institutes.

It is that change, the full effect of which is now being felt, that dominates the debate as 2011 ends. It will also be the battleground in 2012.

Moodie said the fallout was because the Victorian government made government-subsidised places available to private providers before establishing a rigorous system for maintaining standards and quality.

He also predicted that since all states are under the same financial pressure, Victoria's vocational student entitlements seem likely to be followed by South Australia and Queensland and were being contemplated by NSW and Western Australia. "Their effects will take several years to emerge, but the end result is likely to be a radical restructure of vocational education providers."

He believes if the persistent failures of quality and standards are to be reduced governments will have to introduce monitoring and quality assurance far more rigorous than that contemplated by ASQA and "more thorough than is possible with an almost exclusive reliance on outcomes".

While not everyone agrees with Moodie there are a growing number who do, mostly those with a very keen interest in maintaining the viability of the public provider TAFE. Pat Forward, federal TAFE secretary of the Australian Education Union (AEU) described 2011 as a "bleak year" for

VET in Australia.

"Who would have thought that as we witnessed the unravelling of public provision in this one state [Victoria] four others would be actively pursuing the same policies, willing to risk 30 years of government investment in the sector, and happy to oversight the demise of a well respected and effective educational institution?"

She said Tasmania was the only state "which showed itself willing to sensibly review its troubled reform process". Forward also predicted there was little prospect of an improvement in the short term if state governments proceed as they currently are.

She said Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans discovered a welcome soft spot for the public TAFE system towards the end of the year "but his now oft-repeated mantra that it is the states who are responsible for the running and organisation of TAFE rings hollow from a government which as recently as the last national funding agreement required further competition as a condition of Commonwealth funding."

COAG is set to finalise at its next meeting detail around the next national agreement and partnership for reform of the VET system. That agreement is scheduled to start operating in July 2012.

Forward said a lot hung on the outcome of these arrangements for the VET sector in Australia. "It is clear that governments should choose the high road of a well resourced, high quality vocational education sector, with public TAFE institutes at the core. The alternative – the low road of thousands of poor regulated private providers, trashing the reputation of VET qualifications, fly-by-night providers delivering five-day diplomas from shop fronts – will not solve skills shortages, nor prepare the Australian economy for the future."

It is no surprise that Claire Field, chief executive of the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET), sees things differently.

Field said that despite "myths to the contrary" the evidence from Victoria demonstrated the benefits of skills reforms and a student entitlement model. She listed the percentage increases in student enrolments in Victoria. Field interprets them one way and others another (*see Enrolments rise in Victoria, page 5*).

She also said while some changes were needed to fine tune the Victorian reforms, "the benefits speak for themselves: offering learners more choice in where they study is encouraging greater levels of participation, and in turn, that participation is in higher level courses and in industries and occupations experiencing skill shortages."

The establishment of ASQA in 2011 was another win for VET, Field said. She particularly welcomed ASQA's advice

that regulatory interventions would be minimised for RTOs that consistently demonstrate compliance with approved national standards. She added, though, that transition issues had frustrated a number of ACPET members in the jurisdictions that have transitioned to ASQA and at the six-month mark of ASQA's establishment these outstanding compliance decisions should have been completed.

"In the long term, ACPET is confident that providers will benefit from a nationally consistent approach to regulation and the application of a uniform VET quality framework by ASQA."

Like others in the VET sector, Field welcomed the significant changes in the international market capped by the release of the Knight review and the government's response which she described as heralding a new era for international education in Australia.

The chief executive of TAFE Directors Australia, Martin Riordan, also identified Victoria's contestable funding model as a problem. He also challenged the data and the interpretation of the data showing rises in student numbers in Victoria.

Riordan said "the missing link to date by states and territories was answering what industry had demanded – improved quality of skilled training, and increased workplace training". He said TDA too was waiting for the COAG VET agreement to lift participation rates and attainment targets with the states and territories "clearly desperately short of funding options themselves".

He referred to the recent launch by the TDA of *The Case for a National Charter for TAFE*, a discussion paper which placed before government the argument that if TAFE was to be retained, agreement would be required on pricing for a comprehensive community and educational role which goes beyond a short- or longer-term training course. "There is great concern that student experience in learning, capacity to operate in regional and remote locations, and work with disability and students with learning difficulties may be sacrificed if VET funding models such as Victoria were to be left unchecked," he said.

On the research side of things, VET researcher and management expert at Edith Cowan University Associate Professor Llandis Barratt-Pugh said Australia could learn from the traumas that shook the world in 2011. "We are just one system and one country amongst many. We need to start wider and think wider. In the past, much VET structure has been imported from the UK as a kind of latter colonialism." ■