Agile TAFE

Rising to the challenges of the pandemic

Zombie skills sets resurrected as micro credentials

Resisting the digital automation of teaching
For more than thirty-five years, Union Aid Abroad - APHEDA has worked with unions and social movements abroad to support their efforts to defend their rights. In a globalised world, your contribution gives power to workers everywhere. Help continue the fight for global justice by buying and selling raffle tickets today!

Raffle closes 2 October 2020 - Winner drawn 29 October 2020
We’ve all had to muddle through the last few months the best we can and as the gates closed on TAFEs across Australia, it is a tribute to the dedication of TAFE staff that learning and support has continued in some shape or form.

I’ve heard from many members in recent months who are experiencing anxiety about having to re-skill and quickly adapt to different learning environments, often putting in extra unpaid overtime hours to make sure that learning wasn’t interrupted and flipping teaching and assessment strategies around, tearing up lesson plans and re-thinking delivery. I hope the article by Professor Neil Selwyn on page 17 will encourage you that these digital methods we have embraced will never replace real-life classrooms, campuses and fully present teachers, and we must make sure, as he cautions, that the wider community appreciates the importance of the role teachers play, and that it cannot be replicated by technology.

Juggling act
I also know that many people are feeling worn out trying to sustain a juggling act and feeling like more balls keep being added. So, I found it heart-warming to hear the stories of TAFE teachers going out of their way to support stranded international students during the pandemic with food drives on page 20.

That’s what’s special about TAFE. It’s not a business, but an integral part of the community – a public good in other words. It’s examples like this that make me wonder how governments could possibly leave TAFE at the mercy of a contestable market when the people that work there are plugging the gaps in our society.

It is telling that a significant number of private training providers have had to close during this period, because they lack the agility to respond to the crisis. Meanwhile TAFEs have demonstrated their creativity and flexibility and you only have to look at pages 8-11 to see examples of innovation from TAFEs around the country.

I’ve been interested to see that micro credentials are coming to prominence again, and certainly becoming the new buzzword with the Education Minister Dan Tehan promising money for short courses linked to jobs as part of the recovery effort. The persistent drive of the government into forcing education to become a pipeline to employability and ignoring wider social needs, is worrying and addressed beautifully by Professors Gavin Moodie and Leesa Wheelahan on page 12.

The way ahead
As I mentioned in my last column, the union’s plans to make a roadmap for TAFE, charting the way forward have taken a different turn and now we are working to include the impact of COVID-19 on TAFE into our strategy and future campaign.

At the same time, the AEU is continuing to lobby state and federal governments to keep TAFE on the agenda. In May a comprehensive submission was made to the Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the Government’s Response to the Pandemic, which was set up to scrutinise the decision-making during the crisis. It sets out a true strategy for recovery to get under and unemployed Australians back into work.

Free TAFE
Now more than ever, TAFEs need support and commitments from government, rather than bad policy and underfunding which puts TAFE at jeopardy. Strong TAFEs will be vital to regional areas where youth unemployment is escalating and as Professor Jeff Borland of Melbourne University writes on pages 24-26, providing free TAFE next year should be the answer to helping the nation’s young people get back on their feet.

We all want to be back teaching on campus or working with apprentices and others in the workplace and supporting students, but until we all can, stay safe, stay strong and know that your union will continue to work with and for you (if sometimes remotely).
The VET system needs informed reform, not more spin

Listening to teachers would be a great first step for the Prime Minister in his rush to restructure the VET system and revive the economy. While no one could disagree with his analysis in his speech to the National Press Club in May that the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector is “marred by inconsistencies and incoherence”, we could shed some light on the real reasons why and prevent the policy mistakes of the past being repeated.

Time for change
The VET system does need changing. It has been marred by years of poor policy decisions by successive governments who have consistently tied funding to their neoliberal ideology. For the past forty years, TAFE has been starved of billions of dollars in funding and forced to compete for government resources in an increasingly competitive and fractured market where the odds of survival are stacked against it. Time and time again, private providers have been allowed to line their own pockets at the expense of both TAFE and the taxpayer.

Australia is still paying the price for the VET FEE-HELP student loan scheme debacle, where private providers were given subsidies upfront from the federal government for enrolling students on courses of questionable quality, regardless of whether the course was completed or even ran at all. Rorting of the scheme was widespread. Reports of ‘ghost colleges’ are still being investigated today as private providers enrolled students for courses that didn’t exist. Students were left with thousands of dollars in loan repayments and often no education to show for it.
Funding

In just three years, the VET FEE-HELP scheme blew out from millions to billions of taxpayer money. The federal government are now mopping up those debts, courtesy of the taxpayer, through a redress scheme. According to the latest figures from the VET Ombudsman, $462 million of bad debts have been wiped from 36,000 students since the redress scheme started, and with over 7000 active complaints yet to be investigated, that figure is set to rise. Little wonder this scheme is now considered one of the biggest policy scandals in Australia’s history.

Lipstick on a pig

The system does need the promised overhaul but instead the Prime Minister has stayed true to his marketing roots and re-branded the same tired neoliberal solutions to give them a new sheen. It’s clear the government doesn’t want to invest in quality education, but rather to just run the system like a business. This lack of vision and refusal to learn from mistakes of the past can be seen in the Prime Minister’s new marketing slogan, ‘industry to define the quals’, essentially keeping the market in charge of education. In his own words again: “It is all about the money.”

Industry has really been driving the curriculum for VET for the last 10 to 15 years and this is the point that we’ve got to.” Yet, despite industry involvement, this government has overseen a critical shortage of apprentices during its time in office.

Allowing industry to define qualifications is diminishing the role of TAFE teachers, taking the power and autonomy of curriculum design away and leaving many experienced teachers to feel more like trainers than teachers. Vocational education has been reduced to narrow units of competency-based skills training set by industry, rather than educating students with the critical skills they will need for an uncertain future of work.

The Prime Minister’s comments that funding will be based on what business needs sounds the death knoll on the broad range of creative vocational courses offered by TAFEs and signals an increased shift towards tying vocational education funding with employability targets.

Putting the fox in charge of the chicken coup

The Prime Minister made no mention of providing any additional Commonwealth funding for his ‘reforms’, which can only

Craig Robertson
TAFE Directors Australia CEO

PICTURED
TAFE teachers and supporters taking the message out

“Industry has really been driving the curriculum for VET for the last 10 to 15 years and this is the point that we’ve got to”
mean that he is attempting to subjugate TAFE to the demands of big business and private training providers. The marketisation of vocational education and the boom in private providers has been a disaster for skills-based education in this country. The recent scandals have proved that private providers cannot be trusted and they are largely unsuitable for this vital task.

The pandemic has created a pivotal point in history. We have the opportunity to learn from the past and realise that the public money that has flowed to private providers has not improved education or led to better employment outcomes.

As Australia looks for ways to revive the economy, we should look for new bold ideas, not rely on ideology that we know doesn’t work. It took just a few weeks for our capitalist system to break down as the pandemic took hold and the federal government was forced to use public money to bail out businesses. We need to realise as a nation that the best use of public money is for outcomes that have a public benefit. Investing in robust and trusted public institutions is the best method to deliver this.

**Agile TAFE**

If the Prime Minister had taken the time to speak to teachers, he would have discovered how agile TAFE has been recently in adapting teaching and learning to community needs. TAFE NSW is offering bushfire relief short courses to provide the skills needed to rebuild communities devastated by bushfires in recent months. TAFEs are well placed in regional communities to provide this vocational education, as opposed to private providers motivated by profit that tend to be situated in the more populous, urban areas.

At the height of COVID-19 TAFE teachers worked around the clock to adapt practical courses to remote learning and to come up with innovative solutions. Meanwhile, many private providers closed down and relied on government subsidies.

**Reward success**

The preferential treatment for private providers over the past decades has seen their share of government funding soar and has undermined TAFE as the leading vocational education institution in Australia. This favouritism is so overt that the Prime Minister made no direct reference to TAFE throughout his entire speech, a clear indication that TAFE is not part of the reform agenda.

As Professor Michelle Simons of Western Sydney University said the day after the Prime Minister’s address: “Firstly, the road to recovery needs to build on the very best that the current vocational education and training system has to offer.

Recent scandals have proved that private providers cannot be trusted and they are largely unsuitable for this vital task.

We need to promote a strong student-centred approach that recognises the diversity of people who turn to the VET sector for their skill development.

Australia’s world leading TAFE has proved itself to be the best and its highly qualified workforce can offer tailored education to a diverse range of student needs, backed up by comprehensive support systems. TAFE should be rewarded for its success by being the government’s preferred solution for providing the vocational education to assist the escalating number of Australians who are now out of work.

**Vision for reform**

Investment into TAFE is the best road out of this crisis. But TAFEs need to be given control, not have the purse strings tied to employment prospects. TAFEs should not be expected to run like businesses. They are a public good and we should treasure them as such.

TAFEs should not be thought of as jobs factories – that only serves to diminish opportunities for people to follow their vocation and choose the education path that they want to follow. Life is not about serving the economy, there is a diverse range of courses that people should be able to pursue to broaden their perspectives or just to socialise and integrate in the community.

Teachers need autonomy to teach, not be treated like trainers of content agreed by industry, but back in charge of the curriculum. Just like universities are able to design their own courses and work with industry to get them industry certified. They should be treated as equal partners with industry.

**Capable people**

The future is becoming increasingly uncertain, but we can be sure that a VET system that continues to be based on competency-based training will only create students that are ‘competent’ in handling a defined set of tasks. A VET system that is publicly funded as a public good and puts the emphasis back on education will create capable students that are better able to handle whatever life throws at them in this uncertain future.

Any TAFE teacher could tell the Prime Minister that.
As the pandemic forced TAFEs into emergency modes of operation, it also proved an opportunity for TAFEs to demonstrate how quickly they could adapt. We looked at some of the innovative ways that teachers and support staff have sprung into action around Australia.

New and different ways of learning at TAFE SA

TAFE SA collaborated with other TAFEs across the country regarding education delivery and engaged with peak industry bodies to prioritise components of learning, and working with quality standards bodies in the development of the alternative delivery models.

Following an extensive amount of work by educators, TAFE SA transitioned over 90 per cent of its courses to digitally enabled learning from the beginning of term 2.

Students were able to learn from the comfort of their own homes or access computer hubs at some TAFE SA campuses, which are following social distancing and cleaning practices based on the latest health advice. These hubs enable students to bridge the digital divide with those who can’t access the Internet or a computer at home able to keep up with their studies.

TAFE SA Chief Executive David Coltman said that a huge amount of work had been done to ensure training could be delivered. "I couldn’t be prouder of what has been achieved to date. Given the practical nature of so much of our training, to have 94 per cent of our courses ready for delivery from April 27 is a wonderful achievement."

Online plumbing training tackles theory first

Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT) made contact with all plumbing apprentices and their employers to help them prepare for online study. A lot of apprentices have been able to work with their employers during the COVID-19 situation, so CIT reorganised units to adapt resources to online and remote training delivery.

CIT Plumbing Head of Department Adrian Clarke said the new course structure allows plumbing apprentices to focus on the theoretical aspects of skills development online, without compromising high quality training. The aim is to reintroduce the practical components as social distancing requirements allow.

Mr Clarke said plumbing courses at CIT were well prepared for online and remote training delivery, as much of the theory content of the units is already available online. "In a normal term our students would do much of their study in a classroom setting via eLearn, CIT’s online learning platform, with a teacher on hand to provide guidance."

All students’ need is a quiet and private place to study. This could be at home, work or anywhere.

“We have redesigned much of our coursework to allow students to work more independently of their teachers. Of course, we will still have teachers on hand to assist students via a virtual classroom or tutorial setting.”

CIT Plumbing will continue to run classes online for about 380 students in a range of units including reading plans, workplace health and safety, drainage, trench constructions, water supply for irrigation, metering, gas installation and many more.

Mr Clarke added that the Department had previously trialled similar online classes to help students who study interstate, so teachers were already in a good position to know what works and what doesn’t.

“The new course structure allows plumbing apprentices to focus on the theoretical aspects of skills development online, without compromising high quality training.”

Adrian Clarke
CIT Plumbing Head of Department
With the hospitality industry the hardest hit, TAFE NSW hospitality teachers introduced an innovative way to keep students engaged at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Inspired by popular at home meal-kit companies, Hello Fresh and Marley Spoon, teachers Michael Apps and Lindl Taylor sent out fresh ingredients in the form of ‘Hello TAFE boxes’ to the students, who then joined an online live-streamed demonstration and followed along cooking in their own kitchen.

Mr Apps said, “Not only are the students able to learn practical skills, they will also be able to provide their family or housemates with a home cooked meal afterwards.”

Ms Taylor said she contacted each student to make sure they had sufficient Internet access and were comfortable with the new delivery method to make sure the classes ran smoothly.

“We will also be doing theory lessons each week and students can use the chat function in Microsoft Teams to ask any questions or interact with their classmates. We’re also just a phone call or email away if they need anything.

“It’s such an exciting opportunity for the students to engage in connected learning, as it will also provide them with the opportunity to build skills highly valued by employers.”

Michael Apps
Hospitality teacher, TAFE NSW

**PICTURED**
The meal-kit inspired Hello TAFE boxes which were sent out to hospitality students for participation in an online live-streamed cooking demonstration.

**NSW TAFE teachers think out of the box**

With the hospitality industry the hardest hit, TAFE NSW hospitality teachers introduced an innovative way to keep students engaged at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Inspired by popular at home meal-kit companies, Hello Fresh and Marley Spoon, teachers Michael Apps and Lindl Taylor sent out fresh ingredients in the form of ‘Hello TAFE boxes’ to the students, who then joined an online live-streamed demonstration and followed along cooking in their own kitchen.

Mr Apps said, “Not only are the students able to learn practical skills, they will also be able to provide their family or housemates with a home cooked meal afterwards.”

Ms Taylor said she contacted each student to make sure they had sufficient Internet access and were comfortable with the new delivery method to make sure the classes ran smoothly.

“We will also be doing theory lessons each week and students can use the chat function in Microsoft Teams to ask any questions or interact with their classmates. We’re also just a phone call or email away if they need anything.

“It’s such an exciting opportunity for the students to engage in connected learning, as it will also provide them with the opportunity to build skills highly valued by employers.”

Michael Apps
Hospitality teacher, TAFE NSW

**PICTURED**
The meal-kit inspired Hello TAFE boxes which were sent out to hospitality students for participation in an online live-streamed cooking demonstration.
such as digital literacy, remote working, problem solving and resilience. It’s great that TAFE NSW can continue to equip students with the practical skills they need for employment in an industry that will be booming once it is back up and running.”

**TAFE Queensland provides lifeline for high school students**

HIGH school students on the Gold Coast in Year 10, 11 and 12 can now access Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications online, providing them with a creative outlet at a time where most other opportunities via school and extracurricular mediums have been cancelled or postponed.

TAFE Queensland General Manager on the Gold Coast Karen Dickinson said the course offerings have shifted to focus on community services, health and nursing, creative industries, and specific trades in light of COVID-19.

“We are anticipating an increased interest in health related courses due to the heroic and selfless work health care staff are currently undertaking as we navigate through the pandemic.”

In the past, high school students have not had the opportunity to enrol into these courses via a mid-year intake, particularly in the case of community services, health and nursing qualifications.

Not only will these TAFE Queensland courses provide academic stimulation and career motivation during this time, but those students who complete a Certificate III will have it count as an entire subject towards their final ATAR score.

**Victorian TAFE students attend virtual networking event**

THE William Angliss Institute took its anticipated speed networking events online to help students maintain and create vital connections with industry during the lockdown.

The four free events gave students the chance to pick the brains of key industry professionals from different disciplines from their own homes.

The panellists included top chefs, travel and tourism professionals and events experts. The first virtual event was with Payden Rowe, events coordinator of RACV City, a previous graduate of the William Angliss Institute who was awarded the Most Outstanding Events Student Award in 2017.

She answered questions relating to developing a career within the hotel and hospitality industry and gave her top tips for job hunting.

Jacinta Francis, teacher for Events and Entertainment said: “The virtual networking event was fantastic as the students loved hearing about Payden’s journey knowing she was an events student, just like them, a few years back. They also valued hearing industry tips that she has learnt along the way, which will help them when they begin seeking event roles after graduating.”

**Seamless student support**

UNLIKE private providers, TAFEs provide pastoral care to students to make sure they can navigate the personal matters that may affect their wellbeing and get the most out of their learning experience.

TasTAFE was just one example of the student support teams across TAFEs that moved quickly to ensure continuity of services during the coronavirus period, understanding the extra pressure students are under from the increased anxiety and stress.

While student support services are usually provided in one-to-one sessions at TAFE locations, TasTAFE continued

“...students are struggling with many different impacts of COVID-19, including financial hardship, juggling study from home while supervising their children’s own education...”

Michelle Purdy
Aboriginal VET Officer, TasTAFE
to provide assistance, advice and
counselling services via telephone and
online video conferencing to maintain
social distancing.
Support is also continuing to be
provided for international students,
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
students, students with disability and
for students who want careers advice.
Michelle Purdy, Aboriginal VET
Officer at TasTafe said: “Students are
struggling with many different impacts
of COVID-19, including financial
hardship, juggling study from home
while supervising their children’s
own education, missing the social
interaction and practical learning and
not having online learning basics such
as access to a computer and reliable
internet.”

She said that students are presenting
more frequently with heightened anxiety
and concerns over lack of motivation and
are reaching out to student support staff in
higher numbers to help get them through.
“A common catchphrase is ‘I didn’t sign
up for this’ when they are talking about
online learning.”

“WA fast-tracks new
COVID-19 hygiene course
WHEN” the WA state government
launched a mandatory course for all
hospitality and tourism staff, TAFEs
Institutes in WA acted quickly to
integrate it into their existing courses
for all lecturers and students studying
hospitality, commercial cookery,
patisserie and events. They will be
equipped with the skills to manage the
risk of the virus and act as safely
as possible, for both themselves and
their customers when they return to
their workplaces.
The course has two tiers and
covers a mix of skills and knowledge
to prevent COVID-19 cross
contamination, including venue
restrictions, personal and professional
hygiene practices and cleaning and
sanitising practices.
Businesses will have to display
signage that the venue is compliant
with all conditions. Students will
receive a certificate of completion,
a badge and wallet card, which
contains prompters of the key
learning outcomes from the course.
Venues in WA are not able to
reopen unless all staff have completed
the first tier, making it essential to
finding a job in the industry.

Karen Dickinson
TAFE QLD General Manager on the Gold Coast

“We are anticipating an increased
interest in health related courses due
to the heroic and selfless work health
care staff are undertaking as we
navigate through the pandemic.”

Karen Dickinson
TAFE QLD General Manager on the Gold Coast
Zombie skills sets resurrected as micro credentials

The aphorism ‘No good deed goes unpunished’ has a little known corollary in Australian tertiary education: ‘No bad policy goes undoubled down’. And so it is with the Australian Government pushing micro credentials onto higher education under the cover of responding to the COVID-19 crisis.

Skills sets
Australian vocational education and training has a long history of micro credentials in the form of skills sets. Skill sets were first created in training packages in 2008 and by 2019 there were almost 1500 training package skill sets. An analysis of training package skill sets by John Stanwick and Gitta Siekmann from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) in 2019 found that a little under 40 per cent of skill sets are in just five training packages or around 10 per cent of all training packages.

Most skills sets comprise three to four units of competency, although there are over 100 skills sets with only one.

Micro credentials are the most recent attempt to improve the match between education and work by changing education, while leaving work unchanged.
competency and there is one skills set with 33 competencies.

Training package skills sets have never been popular with students: they were only 3.7 per cent of all program enrolments in 2018.

Stanwick and Siekmann found that only around 16 per cent of skills sets had any reported enrolment between 2015 and 2018, and just 10 skill sets or under 1 per cent of all skills sets accounted for 68 per cent of enrolments in 2018. Those skills sets were concentrated in a small number of training packages, so that just five training packages accounted for 83 per cent of training package skill sets enrolments in 2018, and indeed just three training packages accounted for 73 per cent of the enrolments.

Conversely, there were over 1100 or about 84 per cent of training package skill sets with no enrolment in 2018.

Over 75 per cent of skills sets enrolments were in New South Wales and Queensland in 2018.

Skills sets are not often used to top up or upgrade existing qualifications, since only 41 per cent of students enrolled in a skills set in 2018 had a Certificate III or higher.

Skills sets probably under-reported

The skills set with the biggest enrolment was the Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA) with approximately 13,800 skills set enrolments in 2018. However, there were an additional 178,490 subject-only enrolments in RSA in 2018, which were not reported with a skill set program identifier.

Stanwick and Siekmann report that “in 2018 there were over 2.5 million students enrolled in subjects that were reported as not being associated with qualifications, accredited courses or training package skill sets”. They found that “many of these students are enrolled in combinations of units that have likely been developed and offered to students as non-nationally recognised skills sets, or in other cases, are enrolled in nationally recognised skills sets but not reported as such”.

This lead Stanwick and Siekmann to infer that there is significant under-reporting of skills sets enrolments. They plan a second report to analyse all student enrolments in units or combinations of units that are not nationally recognised or reported as skill sets.

Lesser outcomes from incomplete qualifications

Skills sets are likely not popular with students because of their educational limitations, which we elaborate below, and because of their comparatively weak outcomes. NCVER has published a number of studies which find that students who do not complete a full qualification have lower outcomes than graduates who complete a qualification.

Tom Karmel and Peter Fieger reported in 2012 that there was substantial value in completing a vocational education qualification. Graduates who completed a qualification improved their employment outcome by 35 per cent over students who did not complete a qualification, and completing a qualification improved graduates’ prospects of proceeding to further study by 123 per cent.

In a 2015 study completed for the NCVER, Tham Lu found similar results for studies in the trades: Compared with module completers, graduates are estimated to have a 12 per cent greater chance of being employed after training, a 27 per cent greater chance of having their employment status improved after training, and a 71 per cent greater likelihood of working in jobs that match their training.

Micro credentials in higher education

One might have expected such poor outcomes from uncompleted qualifications to kill off micro credentials, but in its all too familiar necromancy, the Australian government pushed them onto higher education.

The government commissioned a review of the Australian qualifications framework to recognise micro credentials “to allow providers to offer short, highly targeted courses to students and employers looking to fill a skills gap without getting bogged down in red tape”, as Minister Tehan claimed in his media release announcing the outcomes of the review in October 2019.

Universities’ responses were tepid. But Tehan had his opportunity six months later as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold to include micro credentials in the higher education relief package in April 2020. It is yet another example of that tiresomely familiar political trope: Because of alleged disruption X we should implement my hobby horse Y, where in this case X = COVID-19 and...
Micro credentials

Y = micro credentials.

The higher education relief package guaranteed government payment to universities for government places regardless of whether they were filled, but offered no support for the expected loss of international students, who provide 26 per cent of universities’ income. Instead the government encouraged higher education institutions to offer higher education certificates of up to half a year’s full time study, at least initially from May to December 2020.

Undergraduate certificates

To authorise these the federal government had to get the Council of Australian Government’s education and skills councils to approve the inclusion of the undergraduate certificate as an addendum to the Australian qualifications framework. Undergraduate certificates can be at Australian qualification level 5 (diploma), 6 (advanced diploma or associate degree), or 7 (bachelor). The framework already has graduate certificates and graduate diplomas at level 8.

By May 2020 some 22 universities had listed 202 short courses on the government’s Course Seeker website; about half graduate certificates and half undergraduate certificates. Universities have long offered graduate certificates and diplomas, which are reported with other qualifications as ‘other postgraduate’ which in 2018 made up 2.4 per cent of all higher education institutions’ student load and 9.6 per cent of their postgraduate load.

In addition the Minister for Education announced in May that the federal government is funding 1015 places in 58 undergraduate certificates at “mostly private providers”.

Over the past two decades, in Australia, employers cut their investment in their employees’ training by focusing on specific knowledge, skills and other requirements for jobs. The loose match between formal tertiary education and work has been bridged by employers’ induction and internal training programs. However, employers cut investment in their employees’ training by 40 per cent over the last two decades in Australia, Canada, the UK, and the USA. This has intensified calls, not for employers to reinvest in their employees’ development, but for education to be tied ever more tightly to the jobs for which it is meant to prepare graduates. It is students and governments who pay these costs. This is wrong for at least four reasons.

Failures of human capital theory

Human capital theory has been the orthodoxy in tertiary education since at least the 1980s. It claims that there is a direct relation between appropriate education, the development of graduates’ productive skills, an increase in workplace productivity, and an increase in the value of the graduate’s work. It is said to apply at the levels of the individual, employer, industry, region and country.

Human capital theory has been criticised since the 1960s on theoretical and empirical grounds. Here we object strongly to tertiary education being limited to preparing graduates for jobs. All tertiary education including vocational education has an important role in developing graduates’ understanding of and participation in society, and it has important social justice roles. And we observe that well over half of adults in Australia, Canada, and the UK report that they work in a different field to the field of their highest qualification. Their productive careers cannot be explained by a simple human capital theory. Human capital theory also ignores the social contexts of occupations, and the social contexts of individuals by focusing on specific knowledge, skills and other requirements for jobs.

Putting education in an employment straitjacket

Illustration: iStockphoto

By May 2020

22 universities

had listed

202 short courses

on the government’s Course Seeker website; about half graduate certificates and half undergraduate certificates

In May it was announced that the federal government is funding

1015 places

in

58 undergraduate certificates

at “mostly private providers”
The first step in pushing back against micro credentials is to reiterate the importance of knowledge in understanding the world, in being the core of expertise, and in informing expert judgement.

The Minister restricted undergraduate certificates “to national priority areas such as nursing, teaching, health, IT and science”.

**Alternative: Knowledge and its certification matters**

The first step in pushing back against micro credentials is to reiterate the importance of knowledge in understanding the world, in being the core of expertise, and in informing expert judgement. We are not restricting ‘knowledge’ to theoretical knowledge, but include applied knowledge and expert skills, which embed knowledge. Knowledge’s certification in qualifications is important for two reasons. Qualifications’ rules specify what is valuable to know at what depth, and guides students on how that knowledge should be sequenced and developed.

Secondly, qualifications signal to society in general and to employers in particular that graduates have a body of knowledge and expertise in the qualification’s domain. Qualifications’ critics claim that employers are not interested in people with broad knowledge and expertise, but in paying only for the application of specific skills that are signalled by micro credentials and badges.

But so far employers have not shown widespread interest in developing expertise in evaluating new types of credentials and matching them to their internal needs. Thus far they have preferred to rely on readily recognised qualifications.

We therefore argue that all tertiary students should be supported to attain a qualification that is:

- Valued in society and in the labour market;
- Prepares them for a career and for citizenship; and
- Is based on deep, meaningful and sustained engagement with theoretical knowledge to participate in debates in society and in their field of practice.

**Micro credentials seek to facilitate gig work**

Micro credentials are the most recent attempt to improve the match between education and work by changing education, while leaving work unchanged. Micro credentials are designed to atomise learning by certifying small amounts of learning. In principle micro credentials may be awarded for mastering academic knowledge, but overwhelmingly they are contemplated for acquiring knowledge and skills that can be applied directly to the workplace.

The Minister restricted undergraduate certificates “to national priority areas such as nursing, teaching, health, IT and science”.

**Illustration: iStockphoto**

**GAVIN MOODIE** is Adjunct Professor in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, OISE, University of Toronto and Adjunct Professor of Education at RMIT University, Australia.

**LEESA WHEELAHAN** is William G. Davis Chair in Community College Leadership, Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

---

A particular occupation would reduce its relevance to the other occupations for which qualifications are currently relevant.

Secondly, tying education more closely to work ignores the role of demand for graduates in shaping the match between education and work. Employers consistently look at the level of qualification graduates have to screen them for jobs, so those with degrees have better labour market outcomes than those with diplomas.

Thirdly, numerous studies have shown labour market forecasting to be far too imprecise to plan educational provision in detail. Anticipating the demand for workers is so notoriously unreliable that it is said that labour market forecasting was invented to give astrology a good name.

A fourth reason for not tying education to specific occupations is the uncertainty in future occupations expected to be brought about the introduction of new digital technologies to work and its organisation, known as the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

---

MICHELLE PURDY is the Federal TAFE President at the AEU.
Resisting the digital automation of teaching

While there is a place for digital technologies in learning, the support that expert human teachers provide can never be fully replicated though technology.

Article by Professor Neil Selwyn / @neil_selwyn

COVID-19 has certainly pushed teachers and technology into the headlines. In the short term, technologies such as Zoom, Google Docs and Microsoft Teams are proving invaluable ways for educators to continue doing their jobs as best as possible. However, the sight of TAFE teachers, lecturers and tutors hastily turning to remote teaching methods has also triggered renewed calls for the longer-term radical rethinking of education.

As Frederick Hess observed in the initial weeks of the lockdown, “a few education analysts have started to sound positively giddy about this exciting opportunity to spitball ideas and try out nifty new programs”. Since then, EdTech gurus have been quick to talk of the ‘silver lining’ of COVID-19 and ‘the genie [being let] out of the bottle’. Andrew Cuomo – state governor of New York – perhaps best encapsulated this sentiment when arguing for a permanent switch-over to sophisticated ‘remote learning’ across the education system:

“The old model of everybody goes and sits in a classroom and the teacher is in front of that classroom, and teaches that class, and you do that all across the city, all across the state, all these buildings, all these physical classrooms … why, with all the technology you have? It’s hard to change the status quo. But you get moments in history where people say, ‘OK I’m ready. I’m ready for change. I get it’. I think this is one of those moments.”
Reimagining teaching, again
As with many aspects of the pandemic, these arguments for change are not new. Technologists have long been calling for the radical digitisation and automation of teaching – especially across the tertiary sector. These visions move well beyond what most teachers might currently understand as ‘digital education’ (for example, managing student learning through the college ‘learning management systems’). Instead, the development of powerful artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, driven by powerful advances in computational processing and ‘big data’ generation, continues to fuel arguments for a radical ‘reboot’ of how teaching and learning takes place. Crucially, neither the expert teacher nor the ‘bricks and mortar’ classroom tend to central components of these reimaginings.

Such arguments are certainly ambitious, but they are not without substance. Indeed, the technology already exists for student cohorts to go through much of their college day working fully online and without coming into direct contact with human teachers. Facial recognition systems can be used to verify each students’ ‘attendance’ as they study at home, as well as continuously monitor their attention and engagement. Powerful AI-driven systems can provide ‘personalised learning’ provision – analysing each student’s past performance to calculate bespoke recommendations for what they should learn next. Helpful software-based ‘chat bots’ and ‘conversational agents’ can appear at any time to answer queries, offer guidance and support. At the end of the day, students can be assessed through automated marking systems and online proctored testing.

While few people anticipate that these technologies will do away with the need for human supervision altogether, there is a growing feeling that the teacher-led classroom is no longer the ideal setting for teaching and learning. Even when these technologies are deployed in a physical classroom, it is beginning to be reasoned that highly trained, costly professional teachers are no longer required to oversee proceedings. Indeed, digital education systems are sometimes sold with the promise of being ‘teacher-proof’ – i.e. guaranteeing high quality learning regardless of the individual teacher.

Few people anticipate that these technologies will do away with the need for human supervision altogether.

The logical connotations of ‘teacher-proof’ technology is straightforward. If AI systems are doing most of the educational heavy-lifting, then it does not require a highly-trained professional educator to steward the technology and occasionally trouble-shoot any glitches.

At the moment, these powerful applications, platforms and systems are beginning to be introduced into Australian education with very little dissent from the education community. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that we live in a world that is increasingly shaped by Silicon Valley and the idea that digital technology is a neutral ‘tool’ rather than a threat. Indeed, this new wave of AI-driven educational innovation has tended to be sold to teachers as a benign source of support and assistance. We are assured that the AI-assisted teacher will be freed from repetitive tasks to work with individual students and utilise their pedagogic and industry expertise. However, as many other professions are now finding, there is a fine line between being ‘assisted’ and being told what to do. Teachers working with personalised
COVID-19 has provided a stark reminder of the crucial (but often taken-for-granted) role that real-life classrooms, campuses and fully-present teachers play.

learning systems can quickly find themselves blindly following whatever the system directs them to do. What tech companies might be keen to market as ‘empowering’ can easily be experienced as constraining. All told, we cannot assume that increased automation will result in increased autonomy.

**Getting to grips with the harms**

Given all the above, tertiary educators need to quickly get to grips with the possible harms (as well as benefits) that these technologies might bring. In particular, we need coordinated push-back against the implication that highly trained, expert professional teachers are no longer needed in face-to-face classrooms (or their online equivalents). So, as the 2020s progress it will be increasingly necessary to restate the case for teachers, tutors and lecturers, and resist the excessive automation of the classroom. Current TAFE educators might feel confident that their skills are irreplaceable, but employers are going to increasingly suspect that digital technology might be more efficient, reliable and cheaper than humans. These claims are going to be made with increasing urgency as the post-COVID global economic downturn takes hold. The logic of digital automation fits well with the enduring popularist suspicion that teachers have long been a conservative and over-unionized workforce that is stubbornly resistant to change. Such thinking is reinforced by a general sense that all professional work that involves routine, structure and protocol is susceptible to automation. If journalists, accountants, lawyers, doctors and architects are now having to fear for their jobs, then why not teachers?

With all this in mind, it seems likely that the next few years will see highly trained expert teachers come under pressure to justify their existence. Pessimistically, AI-driven educational technology could well usher in an era of deprofessionalisation. We might end up with a new generation of ‘teachers’ in name only – poorly-trained and precariously-employed individuals acting primarily as non-specialised ‘facilitators’. So how should the education community respond? There is clearly a need for teaching unions, professional associations and everyone else with an interest in teaching to stand up and be counted. There needs to be concerted efforts to emphasise the ‘value added’ of having professional teachers in face-to-face and online classrooms, and to better promote the idea of what expert teachers do. In short, educators need to talk loudly about how expert human teachers are able to support learning in ways that can never be replicated fully through technology.

In the short term, we also need to be watchful that the ongoing COVID-19 disruptions are not misused to force radical education reforms by those who stand to profit directly from them. What teachers and students have been doing over the ongoing college shutdowns is certainly not comparable with the sophisticated and deliberate forms of online education being spruiked by EdTech advocates. Instead, the online education being deployed by colleges during the first half of 2020 is best described as a form of “temporary distance education”. These are emergency measures – involving what Sean Michael Morris describes as people “who never expected – nor ever wanted – to use digital technology to communicate or work” forced into quickly developing ways of studying and teaching as best they can.

If anything, then, COVID-19 has provided a stark reminder of the crucial (but often taken-for-granted) role that real-life classrooms, campuses and fully-present teachers play. In the aftermath of this crisis, there is a clear need to reframe ongoing debates about the future of tertiary education in ways that acknowledge – if not celebrate – the societal value of face-to-face education led by expert educators. No-one would claim that TAFE institutions are perfect – there is clearly much that can be improved, and substantial problems continue to blight our education systems. Yet COVID-19 has demonstrated how campuses and classrooms are woven deeply into our shared experiences of what makes for ‘good’ education – i.e. a communal, socially-driven and genuinely empowering process. As the initial shock and panic around the virus begin to fade away, to now argue for the complete digitisation and automation of education seems an even more misguided argument than it did before the pandemic took hold.

**NEIL SELWYN** is a professor in the Faculty of Education, Monash University. His latest book ‘Should Robots Replace Teachers? AI and the future of education’ is essential reading for those that want to engage with the possibilities and risks further.
TAFEs step up for international students

The federal government’s newfound concern for vulnerable students, isn’t being extended to the hundreds of thousands of international students who have been caught up in the pandemic.

Having flooded into Australia to experience a different culture and gain a quality higher education, international students didn’t expect to be left high and dry when the pandemic hit. Yet many have suddenly found themselves stranded far from home, family and support networks, facing homelessness and poverty, and worrying where their next meal is coming from.

A high proportion of international students were supplementing their savings with part-time jobs in the hospitality and retail industries, which were among the first to close. Although Australian students could access the safety net of JobKeeper payments, international students are being locked out of federal initiatives.

Stranded
While it’s true that international students do have to prove they have the finances to support themselves for their first year in Australia, the Prime Minister’s remarks that they should “go home if they can’t support themselves” were particularly heartless, and impossible for some, once borders were closed.

International student Ahmed Adegomlu, President of the Council of International Students, responded to the Prime Minister’s remarks saying “It is fair to expect international students to support themselves in a normal situation, but this is beyond their control, in fact it is beyond everyone’s control. We need international students to be equally considered in various support and welfare packages that are being offered by the government.”

Those that found themselves in difficulty were left at the mercy of state governments that eventually stepped up to provide relief payments, hardship funds and charity.

A helping hand
TAFE Queensland is just one of the examples of TAFE stepping up to provide support. With 2400 international students, they discovered nearly all of them were facing financial hardship.

International Administration Officer, Jarred Hopkins kick-started the initiative when his generosity in buying essential groceries for struggling international students with his own money, inspired TAFE Queensland’s international team to host food drives at campuses across the state.

TAFE Queensland International Executive Director, Janelle Chapman said that with many part time jobs on hold, international students were struggling. So unable to wait for government support, TAFE teachers and staff stepped in to source non-perishable goods.

As word spread, TAFE Queensland’s campuses have been bombarded with acts of kindness and inundated with donations in support of international students from their communities.

The first contribution saw a load of tomatoes, capsicums, chicken portions, cakes, bread, milk and rice to TAFE Queensland’s South Bank campus. This donation was quickly followed up with a local bakery delivering baked goods for the steady stream of international students who visit the campus to collect food parcels.

“We’re receiving everything from tinned food, fresh produce, personal care items and frozen meals,” said Ms Chapman.

TAFE Queensland is still accepting food donations at various campuses across Queensland and is encouraging those with anything they can spare to contribute.
TAFE TEACHERS were forced to jump through hoops in the rush to upgrade their Certificate IV’s in Training and Assessment with the new mandatory units of literacy and numeracy, and designing and developing assessment tools by the deadline of July last year.

Now, less than a year later in response to the pandemic, the federal government is rushing to cut regulations and introduce free short micro credential courses, which in some TAFEs are being overseen by ‘assessors’ rather than fully qualified teachers.

Maxine Sharkey, AEU federal TAFE secretary, highlighted the AEU’s concerns about the quality of tuition offered by these education support officers who were not required to hold a full teaching qualification to teach these new free TAFE courses. “It is a race to the bottom,” she said. “For more than half the 100,000 students it is their first contact with TAFE. They deserve for it to be a quality experience.”

The government has also responded to calls from the private provider lobby to cut red tape by delaying audits and suspending compliance activity in response to the pandemic. As Correna Haythorpe, AEU Federal President said, “This rush to cut regulations will only serve to encourage private providers to cut corners in seeking increased profit and is nothing but a recipe for another policy disaster on the scale of VET FEE-HELP.”

Rapid review

These actions come hot on the heels of the rushed ‘rapid review’ of the Australian Skills Quality Authority’s (ASQA) regulatory practices and processes which was completed in March this year, after the Expert Review of Australia’s Vocational Education and Training System (the Joyce Review) identified ASQA as an area that required significant reform.

The AEU was not approached by the consulting firm that was commissioned by the Government to undertake the review; however, as indicated in the report, those that were complained of inconsistent auditing practices, inconsistencies in auditors’ interpretation of the standards and convoluted and unclear audit reports.

The federal government accepted all 24 of the recommendations from the rushed review, which amount to little more than adjustments to the organisational structure and a focus on strengthening strategic oversight and managerial capacity.

A true strategy

The AEU pointed out these failings in its submission to the Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the Government’s Response to the Pandemic, which was submitted in May, and called for a true strategy for workforce renewal. One that can only be achieved through national support for TAFE and by making use of TAFE’s longstanding partnerships with industry. The submission argued rebuilding Australia’s skill base was too important to be left to private providers.

The submission illustrated how for years prior to the pandemic the TAFE sector has existed in crisis and that unless governments act urgently and decisively to restore the systemic erosion of TAFE funding, its place in Australian education is under threat.

As the Prime Minister has repeatedly stated that his aim is to get a million people back into work, the AEU argued that the October 2020 Budget provides a unique opportunity for the Commonwealth to move from the support of its economic response to COVID-19 to the stimulus phase and to guarantee the future of Australia’s TAFE.

The AEU is proposing that the government take the following steps to guide Australia, and particularly young Australians, through the crisis:

- Launch a coordinated effort to put TAFE at the forefront of the recovery efforts through immediate increased federal funding support and investment in infrastructure, equipment, staffing and programs;
- Restore the more than $3 billion funding cut from TAFE and training since 2013;
- Implement targeted support for the public VET provider, guaranteeing a minimum of 70% of all government VET funding to TAFE.
Members speak out

Among the thousands of students that come through the doors of TAFE, every teacher has a story of at least one that stays with them. We asked a selection of members around the country about their most memorable student.

**NATHAN SMITH**
Teacher (Fitting and Machining), TasTAFE

My most memorable apprentice was one who completed his TAFE studies in record time and is now one of the most competent trades people I know. He works for a small engineering company south of Hobart manufacturing components for the rowing industry and fish farms. He started his time at TAFE completing a Certificate II in Engineering before picking up an apprenticeship in the mechanical trade. Again, he completed his Certificate III in Engineering Mechanical early, eager to learn all aspects of the trade in his pursuit to learn as much as possible. He taught himself how to operate and program Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machines and even taught himself how to use Computer Aided Manufacturing (CAM) software. His commitment and dedication to the trade is outstanding. This is why he became one of my most memorable apprentices, because of his passion and commitment to the trade. Currently, he is rebuilding a full-sized steam traction engine, which is a mammoth job, requiring someone with the skills to understand how steam works and use traditional and modern skills in the refurbishment of the engine.

**SHARRYN USHER**
Part-time casual teacher, Grafton TAFE, NSW

My most memorable student’s experience at TAFE is one of transformation. Sari, a young early school leaver, over the course of her Career Preparation studies evolved from a non-communicative person, plagued with severe anxiety, to being nominated for a TAFE student excellence award. From initially being unwilling to contribute to group activities, Sari slowly allowed herself the freedom to laugh, lead discussions and develop some lifelong skills. Her love of K-pop drew her to our AMEP Korean students and she began to open her eyes to new opportunities. Sari spent every spare hour she could with these students, speaking with them and immersed in the stories they shared. Sari completed her Certificate II, eyes sparking with all the possibilities life held for her. She had dreams of travel, an enrolment in a Certificate III course and a job interview. Sari still continues to face her demons and have setbacks, but during her time at TAFE she developed friendships, became more independent, and built resilience and strategies to cope with the stresses that life sometimes throws her way.

**KAY WEBSDALE**
English as a second language teacher, Canberra Institute of Technology, ACT

I had a student years ago who I will remember for the rest of my life. She was from Sudan, and was an amazing woman who always came to class despite the overwhelming challenges she faced in life, including bouts of homelessness. She had managed an orphanage in Sudan and became separated from her husband in the civil war. She cared for four children and her ability to navigate life was inspiring, despite the stressful issues she endured from the Australian government who wouldn’t recognise her right to reunite with her husband in the United States. She would get angry with me for coming late to class, even though I was early. It took me a while to realise that she had no concept of time. She would get angry with me for coming late to class, even though I was early. It took me a while to realise that she had no concept of time. She would drop her children at school and then come straight to class and wait for me—even though some of the classes started at 2pm. Teaching her about time really made a difference to her daily life.
Thirteen years ago I taught Electrotechnology at TAFE Queensland. One course I delivered was the pre-apprenticeship UEE22011 Career Start Certificate II, which was a pathway to an electrotech apprenticeship for year 11 and 12 students. It’s my privilege to teach/mentor hundreds of students, providing an alternate pathway to work. Each year brings new students and positive memories. But there’s one that stands out.

I’ll call him ‘John’.

John began his two-year Cert II with me in 2013. He was attentive, productive, travelling fine through most of semester 1. But in semester 2, his focus declined and he disengaged. Attendance erratic, he fell behind with studies. Concerned, I contacted his school. We set up a meeting with John, his mum and a guidance officer to see how he was able to continue into 2014. Not going into details, but family issues had deeply affected John, triggering problems at school and TAFE.

Circumstances considered, I provided John the opportunity to continue, enabling extra attendance with extra tuition in class.

John started attending as regular at the beginning of 2014. Quickly, attendance increased to two days a week then three. By semester’s end John had caught up. He attended over the school holidays hitting the ground running semester 2. He ended up completing the course two months early.

Winning the annual awards night Encouragement Award for effort and quality of work, he wore the biggest smile I’ve ever seen on a student’s face. His mum was the proudest I’ve ever seen in the audience. That’s the reason I’m a TAFE teacher.”

Scottie Tibaldi
Lead vocational teacher (Electrical SkillsTech), TAFE Queensland

“I have been a TAFE teacher, interspersed with working as a generalist, and addiction and other drugs counselor, since the 1980s. I’ve been teaching in my current role in community services at TAFE Gippsland for two years. My most memorable student is from my most memorable student group. Dolly Talbott is from the Biridja Clan of the Gamilaraay/Gomeroi people of Northern NSW. She is memorable because she was, and still is, a fine advocate for her people.

I met Dolly when she started her TAFE teaching career in the Northern NSW town of Gunnedah. Dolly was one of a group of First Nations women who had been instrumental in having an identified access program set up to run at the local TAFE, and I was fortunate enough to be selected to coordinate and teach in the course. Dolly and others in the group gave me the best possible start as an adult educator – a true collaborative experience whereby learning started with the expressed needs of the students.

I’m still in contact with Dolly and as inspired by her now as I was then. Currently Dolly is fighting alongside her family, other Gomeroi elders and community, to defend their traditional country from a massive coalmine. They are currently waiting on a decision from the Federal Court, challenging the minister for the environment’s decision not to protect their country from mining works.

Despite the minister stating that she agreed the sacred areas are of “immeasurable significance” the minister has still put mining interests above the significance of the sacred sites.”

Joanne Murphy
Community services teacher, TAFE Gippsland
The next employment challenge from coronavirus: how to help the young

Young Australians will be significantly affected by the fallout of COVID-19. How can they be helped?
Article by Jeff Borland / Professor of Economics, University of Melbourne

Even before COVID-19, young Australians were doing it tough in the labour market. Slower economic growth and the increasing employment of older Australians since the global financial crisis had been crowding them out.

In recent research, Michael Coelli and I estimate that crowding out reduced the proportion of young Australians aged 15 to 24 years in employment by four to five percentage points since the global financial crisis.

As a result, more young people have become long-term unemployed or have had to gain full-time work through part-time work. And many of those who have found work have needed to spend extra time and resources (doing things such as unpaid internships) to get it.

Now, young Australians are going to be hardest hit by the COVID-19 recession. Partly this is because the young are always hardest hit during economic downturns – needing to make the transition from education to work at a time when there are few new jobs on offer.

Young Australians are still reeling from the GFC

Look at what happened after the global financial crisis.

The chart on page 26 uses data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey to show changes in employment to population ratios over time compared to 2008, which was the start of the global financial crisis.

The proportion of the population aged 25 to 54 years in employment fell for several years before bouncing back.

But the decline in the proportion of young who were employed was much larger – almost double the size – and took longer to reverse.

Young Australians went into the global financial crisis doing increasingly better than older Australians and came out of it doing increasingly worse.

COVID-19 should be worse

This crisis brings with it extra reasons to believe young will be hard hit.

First, a sizable group of older workers are likely to delay retirement to rebuild their superannuation balances. This will make it even harder for young job seekers to find work.

Second, the young account for a disproportionate share of workers in industries being most affected by COVID-19 shutdowns, such as hospitality and retail trade.

Third, the young are also a large proportion of casual employees who have been in their jobs for less than 12 months. That means they will not be eligible for the JobKeeper payment, making them more likely to be laid off and less likely to be rehired than workers who are.

Worryingly, the disadvantaged young are likely to be the hardest hit of all.

To see this, we can again draw on experience from the financial crisis.

The chart overleaf presents the same information on changes in the employment/population ratio as the chart indicates – this time for groups within the 20 to 24 age group.

Those with bachelor’s degrees were largely unaffected.

Those who were in full-time study at the time suffered a drop in employment, but recovered after a decade.

But those not in full-time study and who do not have a bachelor’s degree saw a massive fall in their likelihood of employment of 11 percentage points, which has only partly been reversed.

Why should we worry about the impact on the young?

We should worry about the impact on the young because it matters for equity today, but also for the long-term consequences.
but also for the long-term consequences. We know that what happens to people at the start of their time in the labour market will affect what happens to them in the rest of their working lives.

Many international studies have shown that trying to move into employment during a major economic downturn cuts the probability of employment and future earnings for a decade or more.

Why this occurs is less well-established. Reasons suggested include being forced to take lower quality jobs, losing skills and losing psychological well being.

The best way to improve the outlook for young Australians is to get back to high rates of job creation as quickly as possible. It is what the government is trying to achieve by keeping jobs open through JobKeeper and other initiatives.

In the meantime, there is a pressing case for programs targeted at the young to improve their prospects of employment when the economy recovers.

Priority should be given to the low skilled and long-term unemployed. Recommendations made by the Employment Services Expert Advisory Panel on enhanced services to assist job seekers with high barriers to employment would be a good place to start.

To prevent young people having a spell of unemployment they could be encouraged to undertake further study with free TAFE courses for 2021.

**New graduates are in great danger**

Something also needs to be done for the many young people who will graduate over the next 12 months.

To prevent them having a spell of unemployment, they could be encouraged to undertake further study - with a holiday from Higher Education Loans Scheme loans and free TAFE courses for 2021.

Allowing young people to build and maintain contact with the labour market through scaled-up and government-funded paid internship programs would be a further valuable step, although its implementation would need to be timed to match the economic recovery.

**Above:** The chart above uses data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey to show changes in employment-to-population ratios over time compared to 2008, which was the start of the global financial crisis.

This article was originally published on The Conversation.
TAFE, is now more visible, the potential for compromised learning and assessment continues. In its haste, to deliver training that responds to unemployment growth and continued skill shortages the Australian Government is condoning, yet again, the lowering of vocational education standards. Compounded by the impacts of completion funding 2020 is likely to be the year when vocational competencies are awarded with minimal, if any, ‘real’ or workplace learning and assessment.

The ACT AEU is discussing these issues with the Minister for Education, and additionally the workload burden and cost of semester

needed for online learning and assessment. The ACT AEU seeks commitments for a closer alignment for all educators: schools and Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT), as we move towards the state October election.

While educational inequality, especially for 1 with delayed practical assessments and placements. There is also the time and cost of working with students in smaller groups, requiring teachers to repeat skills coaching and assessment many times, with no offer yet of additional hours or pay. CIT moved through its pandemic response keeping the unions at arm’s length. As the gradual return to campus plans progressed, without the inclusion of a strong voice from AEU educators and CPSU support staff, a rapid intervention occurred backed by the ACT Government.

The AEU and CPSU is now included in the planning processes, as required by our enterprise agreements.

Students of nursing, carpentry, plumbing, electrical, horticulture, early childhood education and care and other essential disciplines returned to college on May 11. Major changes to the layout of practical workshops have been implemented to ensure physical distancing during face-to-face learning. Changes include workshop alterations, student access to corridors, waiting areas to enter classrooms and building hygiene. This increased workload, plus completing essential risk assessments, has greatly affected staff members.

COVID-19’s impact on our students’ employment is also a major issue. Apprentices have lost their jobs, and full-time students have lost the part-time work they need to pay rent, internet connection and data downloads. In particular, tourism and hospitality students have been dramatically affected. Some colleges are reporting about 60 per cent of first-year apprentice commercial cookery students have lost their jobs.

The state government has used the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to provide economic stimulus to delay the finalisation of the TAFE NSW Teacher and related employee’s enterprise agreement. Months prior to this the enterprise agreements for TAFE; mangers, support staff and childcare centre employees had all been finalised. This action is part of the NSW government’s decision to place a wage freeze on all NSW public sector employees.

The Federation and NSW TAFE teachers are appalled at the behaviour of this government regarding this matter and continue to canvas all legal, political and industrial options available to bring this matter to a swift
and just conclusion. TAFE is part of the NSW government’s strategy to rebound from the economic slump that has accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic — offering 21 fee-free, accredited, online TAFE short courses to re-skill job seekers and workers. To accommodate social distancing these free statement of attainment courses were offered through TAFE Digital, the distance delivery arm of TAFE NSW, which was formally known as the Open Training Education Network (OTEN). These free online courses were extremely well received by the general public with over 100,000 enrolment applications within the first few weeks. Proof that if barriers such as fees are removed, students will return to embrace vocational education.

QUEENSLAND
DAVID TERAUDS

Term 2 rolled in and we all spent more time in our own company than is normally recommended (even for the introverts among us). Everything was COVID. Everything else, I mean EVERYTHING else, had ‘pause’ pressed. From March 30, a week prior to the Easter school holidays, with limited exceptions all vocational delivery in TAFE Queensland (TQ) and Central Queensland University (CQU) stopped. Educators spent that week preparing to move to digitally mediated delivery. The ensuing weeks of Easter break were spent preparing materials for students to work remotely. The beginning of term saw most staff Zooming in to work meetings and classes from home.

In mid April the state government COVID-19 Worker Retraining and Assistance Package committed up to $500 million to assist workers who had lost their job or income with retraining, job-matching and other help. It aimed to transition workers into the industries that are vital to get Queensland through the crisis the program prioritises funding for the public providers to deliver skill sets and micro credentials training. Initial skill sets aligned to a range of job areas are available through TQ and CQU. Training in micro-credentials are available fee-free to eligible students through TQ and CQU through existing projects funded under the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training’s Micro-credentialing Pilots Program.

Central Queensland University commenced discussions with unions in mid-March flagging the impact of COVID-19 on finances primarily due to exposure to the international student market. The university flagged several approaches including a voluntary separation round and some campus closures. At the time of writing a final change proposal is before staff, which proposes a restructure and redundancies.

In terms of delivery TQ has indicated that until medical advice changes there will be a conservative approach to returning staff and delivery to campus. An increased number of cohorts are returning to campus but for the short term those who can work from home should do so. Vulnerable employees continue to be directed to work from home. Term 3 may bring a different approach. In the meantime matters are managed on a case-by-case risk assessment basis with only essential delivery occurring face to face.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA
ANGELA DEAN

The response to COVID-19 saw an early end to term 1 and a move to an Alternate Education Delivery Project announced for term 2. Members across TAFE SA felt the employer was listening to their concerns on safety for staff and students. An extended break for students and options to work from home helped ease the safety concerns of members.

Over the extended term break staff worked feverishly to get student packages and online courses ready for term 2 delivery. With workloads increasing dramatically, many staff are now managing a variety of delivery models to ensure that they cater for all of their students. In this time of crisis there has been increased support from leaders, providing additional funds and training for staff and students to move to online delivery. Support hubs were set up for students to use for online classes from the beginning of term 2, so they could access video conferencing technologies.

Unfortunately, another reason for the immense support for the move to an online delivery platform was highlighted in ongoing communications from the employer. The clear message is that there will be a new era for TAFE SA post COVID-19, with all courses now being reviewed to see which can be permanently moved to an online format. TAFE SA’s goal is to increase educational delivery in an online/external format, and staff will face challenges returning to a face-to-face delivery. AEU members support the continuation of online/external delivery at TAFE where appropriate. However, it should not be the primary delivery mode and any consideration of this mode must be in consultation with educational staff.

The push to cut Educational Leadership is still underway with the employer offering
Targeted Voluntary Separation Packages (TVSPs) to Education Business Unit Review.

The AEU wrote to the employer on 31 March asking for a business-as-usual approach during the pandemic. This was rejected by the employer who proceeded with the restructure under review.

Due to the employer not maintaining the status quo while the matter is still in dispute, the AEU returned the matter to the South Australian Employment Tribunal and a hearing commenced on Friday 29 May. Despite the strong case put forward by the AEU, the Commissioner’s recommendations included support in reclassifying Educational Managers to Senior Business Managers.

The AEU is concerned that this would lead to an increase in workloads for remaining educational staff and, therefore is moving to further legal action to retain the Educational Manager positions in the new TAFE SA structure.

During the COVID-19 crisis, there was a slight delay to our EB Negotiations. However these recommenced with the employer finally submitting their initial changes to the workload clause. While it is important to remember that these are just a starting point in negotiations and do not represent a final position. Our members are very concerned that the proposed changes, as they would greatly increase educational staff members’ already overwhelming workload.

Some key points in the employer’s proposed workload clause include; an increase in the normal span of hours, annual instruction and assessment hours increased, annual non-instruction time increased, requirement to consult regarding work hours removed, educational leadership removed from work scheduling, work location removed.

The employer is still asserting that workload isn’t an issue. Given the overwhelming feedback from our members to the contrary, the AEU anticipates that this matter will not be easily resolved.

---

**TASMANIA**

SIMON BAILEY

COVID-19 has impacted VET programs and people’s lives across our great state. The AEU lobbied hard before Easter to have programs suspended so that staff and students could be kept safe from the spread of the virus. We were told categorically by TasTAFE that classes would not be suspended, however just two days later TasTAFE did concede to our request and finally agreed to suspend classes the week before Easter.

Since then many teams have still not been able to return to face-to-face delivery. While initially it appeared that the decision not to resume classes was centred on people’s safety we are concerned that other plans are being made.

It appears that there is a big push for TasTAFE to reduce face-to-face on campus delivery and move as much of the programs to a distance based delivery model that utilises an online platform. In some cases, students who attend TasTAFE have been told that they will no longer be coming onto campuses for their qualifications and they are to complete their full qualification off campus.

Our CEO reported that WorkSafe Tasmania is currently developing guidelines that all workplaces will have to adhere to from June 15 2020. These include guidelines relating directly to tertiary education specifically stating that TAFEs must continue to facilitate online learning where possible, and to maintain small class sizes if face-to-face learning is required.

In response to these guidelines, TasTAFE has started to prepare a COVIDSafe Plan. Where our courses absolutely require practical learning sessions and/or practical assessments that can only be done on campus using TasTAFE equipment, teaching teams have been working through new policy and procedures to develop a Job Safety Analysis for each class group. At this time 80+ JSA’s had been approved but many more are either waiting for approval or still under development. Teaching areas with high-risk courses such as Hair and Beauty, where social distancing cannot be maintained, will take longer.

Since May 11 2020 small groups of four students can be invited on to campus for practical classes of 1.5 hours. It is hoped that maximum class numbers and the length of classes will be extended as restrictions ease. Students can also book a computer in the library if they do not have access to a digital device or internet at home. Other than these two reasons students are not allowed on campus.

At the beginning of June many TasTAFE staff still remained working from home and that may continue up until mid-July. Teachers are doing an incredible job of learning how to work and deliver teaching in the online environment during this pandemic but for many it has taken its toll.

Fourth year apprentices, even those who have lost their jobs, have been prioritised to complete their qualifications. Many first semester students have had their course end date extended. Second semester course offerings will look very different with many skill sets and fewer full qualifications. Most of the skill sets are new and include the Skill Up program with 10 free courses. Of the full qualifications being offered two-thirds will only be available online and the remainder in mixed learning and/or online.
WA

GARY HEDGER

On March 30 2020, as a result of COVID-19, all TAFE colleges went into a training pause (except for delivery that was deemed essential) for two weeks to allow lecturers to develop material for alternate modes of delivery. It resulted in a mad scramble by management putting pressure on lecturers to have everything ready to go online for when students returned to a blended mode of delivery (online and attending TAFE for practical and assessments). It also caused a bit of chaos and confusion amongst students and employers as to what was going to be happening with completing units and courses. Admin went into meltdown as they were not given any advice and directed the majority of enquiries to lecturers, who were being pressured by management to respond and reps to voice concerns about what was actually happening on the ground.

The union’s TAFE organiser has been an absolute powerhouse during this time, setting up zoom meetings and phone hook-ups to keep lecturers at the five colleges informed as to what was happening. She setup a phone hook-up for lecturers, so that problems, ideas and solutions could be exchanged between lecturers across the state. They are still running three days a week, and are a terrific way to exchange thoughts and maintain our sanity during this time.

And if this wasn’t enough we have had to complete bargaining for our replacement General Agreement. An in-principle agreement has been reached and the union and the department are finalising changes and the wording of clauses. A very hectic time in the west! ●

VICTORIA

ELAINE GILLESPIE

Within a very tight timeframe, TAFE teachers were required to change from on campus teaching and learning to designing, developing and preparing to deliver a remote curriculum. This significantly increased the workload for staff, with the majority of work that had been planned for the Easter period put on hold as teachers worked to ensure their students received engaging quality education and were able to transition to remote delivery as smoothly as possible.

The 12 Victorian TAFEs and four dual sector universities mostly adapted well, by providing training, resources and health and wellbeing care and advice to work from home. However, there were two TAFE’s who made the transition difficult and challenging for staff. Both of these TAFE’s were, and in some instances still are, not providing staff with the equipment they need to teach off campus, whether that be the most obvious equipment like computers to being able to borrow their work chair to assist in providing an ergonomic home working environment.

In regard to onsite delivery and accessibility, there has been wide variety of OHS standards put in place across the state and sometimes within one institute. The requirements vary from the very strict, having campuses locked so that no students or staff can access any facilities or resources, whether that be off campus, whether that be providing training, resources or using equipment they need to teach off campus.

The Victorian Government has developed a program to support apprentices and trainees who have lost their jobs to continue their education and locate a new employer. This is in addition to the ‘Working for Victoria’ program that provides educational opportunities for Victorians who have become unemployed. The program enables people to commence a course of study in a priority area either by commencing a partial unit (theory component) to obtain work in high need COVID-19 jobs immediately, or to commence a full course of study in priority free TAFE courses for work that will be needed as we move through and beyond COVID-19. ●
The Macklin Review Issues Paper

Earlier this year, the Victorian government commenced a substantial review into the state’s post-secondary education and training system led by former federal Labor minister Jenny Macklin. The Skills for Victoria’s Growing Economy Review was commissioned to demonstrate the importance of the post-secondary system in educating Victorians for the state’s future prosperity.

Workforce development

The review has identified Victoria’s need for a vocational education workforce development strategy that will ensure an adequate supply of high-quality, industry relevant teachers. Quality teachers are the most worthwhile investment the sector can make in improving learning and assessment so it is concerning that the Australian Skills Quality Authority has identified the capability of teachers as an area of challenge for VET in its last three regulatory strategies.

Given the importance of teacher capability to student learning, this review is keen to explore how recent reforms can provide a basis for ongoing professionalism and development of the VET workforce.

The AEU is also arguing that salaries for VET teachers must compete with wages in their associated industries.

Positives so far

The issues paper acknowledges the extreme damage to VET, and to TAFE in particular, caused by dramatic variations in government funding...

The issues paper acknowledges the extreme damage to VET, and to TAFE in particular, caused by dramatic variations in government funding...

It recognises that investment in skilling local workers achieves higher wages and productivity growth than the pursuit of short-term job creation strategies; and that higher levels of educational attainment lifts productivity for businesses. For workers, post-secondary education and training leads to better employment opportunities, higher salaries, and improved living standards throughout their working life and in retirement.

The Macklin review will aim to show how excellence and innovation in the VET sector can be generated from a well funded, efficient and high-quality TAFE system, first and foremost, combined with well-regulated publicly funded provision with a focus on quality.

This review will canvass how sustainable arrangements for TAFE infrastructure investment can best be achieved, through a combination of state level strategies and negotiation with the Commonwealth.

Areas of concern

While the first signs are positive, there remain some areas of concern for the AEU. These include:

• Piloting of skill sets rather than full qualifications with industry
• The recommendation to improve the recognition of short-form credentials in response to the Australian Qualifications Framework review
• Micro credentialing
• Employer/industry perception of job ready graduates
• The use of assessor only terminology as the AEU Victoria does not recognise this and only has teacher classification.

The review is looking for feedback on ways to raise the profile of vocational education, recognising the important role it plays in skilling up Victorians and building a stronger economy. The issues paper also confirms the concerns the AEU has been raising about the increased focus and time allocated to regulatory requirements, which is having a negative impact on quality learning and teaching and on students’ experience. It also looks at ways in which TAFE institutes can work together as a single unified TAFE system rather than in competition with one another. It is also pleasing to see that the paper includes clear evidence of the benefits of vocational education for the economy.

Article by Elaine Gillespie
In unprecedented times your dedication and commitment to your students has ensured continuity of teaching and learning. The AEU will always be there to support you and to advocate for public education.

OUR HEARTFELT THANKS AND RESPECT GOES OUT TO ALL OF YOU.

AEUFEDERAL.ORG.AU

Authorised by Susan Hopgood, Federal Secretary, Australian Education Union, 120 Clarendon St, Southbank 3006.