



Warwick Farm Forum -TAFE Community Alliance

July 23 2013

Acknowledgement of Country. Traditional owners: Darug, Gandangara and Tharawal peoples

Good morning to all of you and welcome to this Forum. This is the fifth forum in a series of forums organized by the TAFE Community Alliance. Its aims are to inform a broader community of the effects of federal and state government policies on technical and further education in NSW.

Welcome to the Hon Carmel Tebbutt Shadow Minister for Education and Training, Dr John Kaye Greens MLC and articulate advocate for TAFE over many year, the Hon Paul Lynch, Member for Liverpool and Councillor Wendy Waller; my thanks to students, teachers and business owners for their attendance. Thanks especially to Liverpool Neighbourhood Connections and the Warwick Farm Community Hub for the hosting and organizing of this Forum. May I emphasise the importance of these forums for the future of TAFE. Well-informed citizens, active politically, can make a difference to what governments do. You can all make a difference, but you need to know and understand what is happening to your TAFE colleges in their large Institutes.

(I grew up in western Sydney first in the Villawood Migrant Hostel and then in the suburb not far from the Hostel. I went to school in Guildford, Granville and Birrong. I taught in the Liverpool area in Lurnea High School and headed the South Western Sydney Institute of TAFE for five years. I know, love and understand these western suburbs. The migrant composition has changed over the years, but the needs and aspirations of people living here are not very different from when I was growing up.)

The South Western Sydney Institute of TAFE has campuses or Colleges across the entire region from Campbelltown to Miller, to Wetherill Park, Lidcombe and Bankstown and the largest and oldest college in NSW at Granville. The Liverpool College is in heritage buildings which TAFE has maintained

and conserved. It is located in an important community precinct in the heart of Liverpool. Macquarie Fields College serves a growing community far from many education services with a lower than average education participation like much of this region. Wetherill Park College was the centre for automotive courses, but I note now it is scheduled in the State Budget 2013/14 to have a new Transport, Engineering and Technology Centre built for use in three years as an industry training hub for Transport and Logistics. This is a welcome initiative in a high cost area of training when the full financial impact of new funding arrangements comes to fruition next year.

Throughout its long history of over 100 years, technical and further education has served local communities and their businesses, training apprentices, offering further education to those returning to study or needing to upgrade their skills and knowledge. You could rely on your local TAFE College. When I first joined TAFE there were more than a hundred campuses across NSW. It was always affordable and always relevant. It was there in times of crisis and economic upheaval, industry restructuring, technological and social change. It was part of our public assets; part of the fabric of our communities. It was an employer and a user of local services. We expect it always to be there and always to be funded by our taxpayer dollar from government budgets.

TAFE is acknowledged in the O'Farrell state government's Regional Action Plan for South Western Sydney. The Plan aims to improve education outcomes by working in partnership with schools to provide students at risk of leaving school with employability, language, literacy and numeracy skills and to increase support for School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships.



The Plan also refers to the *Ready, Arrive Work* project providing migrant youth with advice on education and training opportunities. The SWSI TAFE will offer a range of customized training programs for migrants. The *Indigenous Pre-Recruitment and the Hands-On Indigenous* programs will introduce Aboriginal participants to a broad range of vocational training with Aboriginal elders mentoring students; all the kinds of activities which TAFE does well. Will they continue to be done well? How will they be paid for into the future with all the staff and budget cuts and fee increases? What will happen to these and mainstream programs which TAFE has offered; programs critical to the economy of south western Sydney. Indeed without skilled workers to fill jobs, economic growth and business prosperity is imperiled.

The diverse and widely dispersed population of this region was counted at nearly 830,000 in 2011. There are cities and major town centres, health and arts precincts, schools and a university. There are over 267,000 dwellings. This is a vast region requiring good public transport as well as deserved and needed investment in education and training. No use having wonderful road networks and plenty of housing if you do not have the public assets and the employment and training opportunities to support the families who settle here.

TAFE should be in the forefront of initiatives to drive sustainable economic development, productivity improvement and deliver appropriate services to disadvantaged and vulnerable people. What is the future of TAFE for women and people of migrant background who are looking to train or retrain? Where is Outreach one of the most successful and responsive of TAFE's many arms of activity? All of this is being abandoned or, at best, reduced in an effort to cut costs.

These programs and their staff are casualties in the latest of numerous restructurings, reviews and budget cuts so that TAFE can compete with the

hundreds of private vocational and training providers being established across the suburbs in little retail outlets or shop-fronts. At last count, there are 5300 of them across Australia. Access and equity for which the South Western Sydney Institute of TAFE won the National Training Provider of Year Award in 1996 is being abandoned to foster entrepreneurialism as a key goal.

The creation of the private training market is part of several changes implemented by governments which include funding of private providers through competitive tendering, increasing course fees, commercializing courses, taking over TAFE buildings to lease them back to TAFE or to private operators as is happening in Queensland.

TAFE has had a unique value to the community and its businesses. It is reliable. It is government supported. It is quality assured. It is not a fly by night *private* provider. It offers opportunities for lifelong learning. It is the key to maintaining and enhancing economic prosperity and preparing industry for new challenges. It has public value because it builds workforce skills, not just for the here and now, but for the future.

It assists individuals to achieve self-fulfilment and re-build esteem so that they may function as contributing members of society. It contributes to our social capital and community capacity to identify and solve our own problems or prevent them from occurring.

It is a public education institution, but all governments are treating it as a business operation in a manufactured training market. A public good, a public asset has value beyond its costs or the money it saves or makes. It is there as a beacon of hope and inspiration accessible to all. It can afford to care for and about the community. Its goal should not be profit; its primary focus should not be the bottom line.



With the changes, more and more courses are being offered in struggling communities at big prices. From Accounting to Business Administration, Hospitality, Enrolled Nursing, Children's Services, Tourism, Youth Work, Community Services, Counselling, Information Technology diplomas costing from a few hundred dollars to a Diploma in Outdoor Recreation being offered at Lithgow for \$11,300. Beauty Therapy at Liverpool will cost over \$7000 in a simulated workplace form of delivery. This was once the main form of delivery for this type of course in a specialist, purpose-built facility already paid for by the taxpayer. Why should we have to pay thousands for again? These courses used to be offered for the modest administration charge and once for a brief period without any fees at all.

The **VET-Fee Help Loan Scheme** offers students doing Diploma courses a loan, but you incur a debt which you have to start repaying to the Tax Office once you start earning a certain amount, about \$50,000 this year. If you want to borrow say, \$1000, there is a loan fee of 20% which means \$200 more so your debt is \$1200 at the outset. The average Diploma fee is about \$3000 so add \$600 onto this amount.

This loan scheme is better than no scheme, but study at any stage of life is a struggle. It is an immense and complicated juggling act for mothers or mature workers with family responsibilities. Much is sacrificed financially as well as personally. Why punish aspirants for a better job or life with huge financial burdens? Why destroy motivation with such massive disincentives?

The introduction and increase of fees for TAFE has been gradual and supported by all governments, but without ever being explicit in their policies.

This year the state government is seeking to set new fees for its **Smart and Skilled** initiative. (The Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal is preparing this advice. Already most Diploma

courses are unaffordable for many potential TAFE students. There are fee exemptions for Aboriginal students and students who receive a disability support pension. There are also concession fees and some access courses. Many of these courses will not be run by Institutes because they cannot afford to offer them. They need paying customers.) We do not know yet what the new fee schedule will be for 2014.

Why is this happening? Why are we aiming to price TAFE out of certain fields of study? Why are we underwriting a private training market when we have underutilized TAFE facilities? Superficially, the government will say we are getting more for the public dollar? More of what is the question? Competition, theoretically should lead to lower prices for students. All it really does is create more cheap-to-deliver courses; attracts a lot of small providers which come and go and then the market is taken over by big corporate providers, many which are overseas-based.

Governments argue there is more choice, but the effect of all these measures is to price the public provider, TAFE, out of the training market and to lower the quality of what is being offered as compared to what would be on offer in a well-funded public institution. Eventually, choices will shrink because the economies of scale of a system have disappeared and some specialist industry and community courses will be too expensive to deliver by any provider.

The changes are also damaging the teaching service which is increasingly casualised or part-time. The specialist knowledge and skills of TAFE teachers are being eroded as the network of specialist teachers in various areas is disappearing. Collaboration across Institutes is disappearing. Purpose-built facilities are being run down. Dedicated specialist facilities will become a past reality from a TAFE golden age. These so-called reforms to make the system more flexible, nimble and responsive are



leading to its decline as has happened so dramatically in Victoria where its share of the so-called training market has declined to 40%. This is not so smart and is likely to result in the disappearance of public capacity to teach certain skill sets.

The confidence of teachers has been undermined; their qualifications devalued as the government looks to create categories of instructor who will be paid less than teachers. In addition, teachers work in an environment where their jobs are insecure and where the constant pressure to make savings or to chase work through tendering for contracts has top priority for management and politicians who govern them. Learning outcomes for students, skill building for business, upgrading knowledge to cope with future shifts or economic upheavals cannot be the priority in this uncertain and fragile environment.

Students are being forced into debt or making cheaper, less appropriate course choices. (More courses are being delivered electronically (even a Building Diploma) or through a form of blended

delivery, a combination of classroom or workshop and online or distance. This is appropriate for some students and courses, but certainly not for all.)

The TAFE system has been reviewed, restructured, reorganized, downsized and right-sized, reformed and modernized. It is never enough because it will never be cheap enough until it is totally privatized and we pay for everything. No system is perfect, but we had a world class TAFE which is now suffering a barrage of staff losses, equipment neglect, building neglect, resource inadequacy, funding uncertainty and a merry-go-round of change. Quality cannot be assured. This costs; it costs the community in its aim for a better life and job through education and training. Education and training is the country's insurance for the future. We need to protect this precious public asset and defend it against policies the community has not endorsed.

This Community Alliance urges you to become informed and active; to protest fee increases; to support your local College and to see your local member and make your support known. Become political, become active. **Jozefa Sobski**