

TAFE Community Alliance Launch – 22nd February, 2013

(Acknowledgement of Country.)

Good morning to The Hon Carmel Tebbutt, Geoff Lee, Member for Parramatta, John Kaye MLC, Maree O'Halloran and my colleague, Mary Waterford and all of you community supporters of TAFE. Special acknowledgement of John Piper former TAFE Principal. May I emphasise the importance of this Alliance to TAFE's continuing vitality as a public education and training provider.

Throughout its long history, TAFE in NSW and nationally has been an essential contributor to the economy and society; responsive in times of crisis: like wars and disasters, through economic upheaval, industry restructuring, technological and social change. It is a public institution ready to perform its public duty. It belongs to all of us. Its losses are ours. Its success is also our success

Its network of campuses in Institutes across the state proudly boasted some of the best training facilities in the world. This is not hyperbole. It is fact.

National investment in TAFE has been consistently focused on producing and maintaining a skilled, mobile labour force as well as targeting the unemployed and those returning to study or work; those upgrading or updating skills, those most vulnerable and disenfranchised or disaffected with education. Skills gaps and shortages in regional centres have been addressed by astute and strategic programs and interventions: green skills, advanced manufacturing and design, mining and engineering, workplace initiatives, online learning and all forms of flexible delivery.

To mobilize education and training in this vast country to meet national priorities and emergencies, you need to have a state-wide system, one that is distributed in major centres; one which benefits from economies of scale and can respond to a coordinated plan. You need to be able to assure its quality and have a teaching service ready and trained to the highest standard, able to understand adult learning styles and needs, as well as industry changes and requirements.

In the last two decades we have witnessed the commercialization and commodification of tertiary education; the construction of a training market; the expansion of funding to private providers and the introduction of performance-based funding. In short, government subsidized and underwritten market competition, when what is needed is collaboration on and coordination of training effort in partnership with industry and the community.

These changes have come with an aim to lower input costs like teaching salaries, equipment, resources and technical infrastructure. They have resulted in the gradual erosion of professional knowledge and specialization, more delivery online, increases in student fees and charges, the wholesale casualisation of the teaching service and the under-utilisation of dedicated purpose-built facilities or running them down. Like any market there are *no names* and *new names* providers and programs to cut corners and costs.

Of course, there have been positive reforms as well, but their benefits have often been compromised by the negative effects of these changes which have: undermined the confidence of teachers, forced students into debt or making cheaper, less appropriate course choices and decreased the capacity of TAFE to maintain its flexibility and range of course offerings. It has to vacate areas cheaper to provide as they are offered by smaller providers. It is still expected, however, to rise and meet emerging national and regional priorities. It has to be there for the local community as well as big business, for the low income or poor as well as the powerful and well-heeled.

We have witnessed a dramatic reduction in TAFE funding with more reliance on commercial courses or fee for service activity. The more this grows the less is available of the public dollar, our money. The number of private providers has grown. They are of variable quality and it is arguable whether their alleged efficiency or cheapness delivers real skill benefits. Their facilities are often poor and not fit for purpose.

We have downgraded the minimum qualification of teachers and continued attacking their working conditions making teaching increasingly unattractive to potential high quality applicants from industry and business; they are the learning lifeblood of the system. We review, restructure, reorganize, downsize, right-size, reform and endlessly modernize. This future proofing lasts until the next funding round or the next election.

No system is perfect. That is axiomatic. But, a system cannot survive in a barrage of staff losses, equipment neglect, resource inadequacy, funding uncertainty and a senseless merry-go-round of change. This costs; this costs the community. It costs in loss of momentum. It stalls progress and creates a climate of dashed expectations and imminent doom. Education and training is the country's insurance for the future. You don't pay later. You pay now to reap the rewards in the future.

What can we do? What can you or I do? A community alliance can restore the focus to local needs. The TAFE system needs defending its student services, its child care centres, its mix of courses and programs, its outreach to the vulnerable, its second chance for the retrenched or unemployed, its refugee and language and literacy and basic education support as well as its core technical and trade training. This Alliance seeks to reach out to those who have benefitted from this system and those who will benefit in the future. Support its work by responding to its calls to action. Engage in the debate. Challenge your local members of Parliament. Inform your local Councillors. Activate the passive. Visit your local campus. Find out what it is axing and ask what is replacing it? Demonstrate your support for TAFE as a major public institution. TAFE is not a business, it is a major education and training institution with a history of service to our community and its economy. Help it to prosper and thrive.

Jozefa Sobski