

## Auburn Forum: TAFE Community Alliance, 29 April, 2013

Acknowledgement of Country.

Good morning to all of you and welcome to this Forum organized to discuss the effects of federal and state government policies on TAFE NSW and its education and training services for the community, its businesses and industries.

Welcome to the Hon Barbara Perry, member for Auburn, Dr John Kaye MLC, students, teachers and business owners. May I emphasise the importance of these forums organized by the TAFE Community Alliance in conjunction with community groups in this case the Auburn Interagency. Citizens, active politically can make a difference to what governments do. You can all make a difference by becoming informed and active.

I grew up in western Sydney in the Villawood Migrant Hostel and then in the suburb. I went to school in Guildford, Granville and Birrong. I taught in the Liverpool area and headed the South Western Sydney Institute of TAFE for five years. I know, love and understand this community. 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.

In Greater Western Sydney, there are two Institutes of TAFE with campuses or Colleges across the entire region from Campbelltown to Penrith, to Richmond, Blacktown and Bankstown and the largest and oldest college in NSW at Granville. The

original building in the main street of Granville was established in the 1880's, built by apprentices supervised by their teachers.

Throughout this long history, 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. It was always affordable and always relevant. It has been there in times of crisis and economic upheaval, industry restructuring, technological and social change. It is part of our public assets; part of the fabric of our communities. It is taken for granted that it will always be there and will always be funded by our taxpayer dollar.

It is acknowledged in the O'Farrell state government's Regional Action Plans for Western and South Western Sydney. In the one for South Western Sydney under the goal of improving education outcomes, it is 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 mentions the Refugee Youth Engagement Program for Years 9 and 10; the Ready, Arrive Work project providing migrant youth with advice on education and training opportunities. The Indigenous Pre-

Recruitment program and the Hands-On Indigenous program introduces 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 cuts that have been announced?

Of course, there is a lot more which TAFE has offered which has been critical to the economy of Greater Western Sydney from the south to its northern reaches. Indeed without skilled workers to fill jobs, economic growth and business prosperity is stunted or stymied. The region has a diverse and widely dispersed population well over 2 million. There are cities and major town centres, health and arts precincts, schools and universities. There are over 650,000 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 stock if you do not have the public assets to support the people who settle here.

The Regional Action Plan aims to grow the economy in this region and deliver appropriate services to disadvantaged and vulnerable people. It wants to improve Aboriginal capacity building, reform specialist homelessness services, support culturally and linguistically diverse people with a disability and so on. Its ambitions or actions for TAFE are modest indeed; one might even see them as focused on the margins. An Associate degree in Accounting

is to be offered by Liverpool TAFE College, customized training programs and recognition services for migrants and also the Participation Phase initiative with Job Services providers and Youth Connections. These are, of course, welcome, but where is the integration of TAFE into the heart of economic development and productivity improvement? Where is TAFE for women and people of migrant background in this vast region who are looking to train or retrain? Where is Outreach one of the most successful and responsive of TAFE's many arms of activity. Has all this been costed out of the system? Has it become a casualty in the latest of numerous restructurings and reviews? Has it been cut out of TAFE's heart?

TAFE has a unique value to the community and its businesses. It is there. It is reliable. It is government supported. It is quality assured. It is not a fly by night no names or new names private provider. It offers opportunities for lifelong learning. It is the key to maintaining and enhancing economic prosperity and preparing industry for new challenges with climate change and environmental degradation. 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 contestable 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 inspiration. It can afford to care for all in the community. It should not be about profit.

TAFE with these government policies is being increasingly commercialized with more and more courses 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 it again? It used to be offered for the modest administration charge and once without any fees at all.

But wait, there is assistance! There is a VET-Fee Help Loan Scheme and you can qualify for this help, 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. There is more. 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 fees for a public good.

The introduction of fees for TAFE has been gradual and supported by all governments. Nobody has asked the community. Why do we have to pay twice? Our taxes pay for the system already? Why is it not adequately funded?

This year the state government is seeking to set new fees for its Smart and Skilled initiative. It has asked the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal to provide it with advice on price and fee arrangements. 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.

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 our 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. The government can argue there is more choice, but its effect is to price the public provider out of the training market.

The changes are also damaging the teaching service which is increasingly casualised. The specialist knowledge and skills of TAFE teachers are being eroded. 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 marginalization and decline. This is not so smart and certainly demonstrates poor skill planning for the future.

The confidence of teachers has been undermined. Their qualifications devalued. They work now in an environment where their jobs are insecure and where the constant pressure to make savings 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. It results in loss of momentum. It stalls progress and creates a potential climate of dashed expectations and dreams of a better life. Education and training is the country's insurance for the future. We need to protect this precious public asset and defend it against political plunder. This Community Alliance seeks to reach out to all those who have benefitted from the system to secure education and training for the next generations of students and their children. It is up to all of us to ensure that TAFE thrives and prospers into this future.

Jozefa Sobski