Teachers called to action

LAUREN NOVAK
DANIEL WILLS

EDUCATION union officials have issued an “urgent call to action” to teachers, advocating they fight changes that would weaken the union’s power on school boards and disciplinary tribunals.

The state Opposition is refusing to support changes to TAFE funding unless Parliament abolishes laws giving the Australian Education Union a monopoly on appointments to school policy and regulation panels.

The union has written to members, calling on them to take to social media, including Facebook and Twitter, and bombard Opposition Leader Isobel Redmond with complaints.

It is understood more than 500 complaints have been received since the campaign launched a week ago.

The State Government wants to make TAFE more independent, to allow introduction of a HECS-style loan scheme, which has backing from the Federal Government. Opposition education spokesman David Pisoni said the changes provided opportunity for an overhaul of appointments to school boards, which would allow non-union teachers to join.

Currently, teachers appointed to merit selection, classification review, school closure and amalgamation panels must be members of the Australian Education Union.

Mr Pisoni said the changes would make the system “more democratic”. Australian Education Union state president Correna Haythorpe called the plan “a union-bashing attack”.

Employment, Higher Education and Skills Minister Tom Kenyon said he would prefer to renegotiate the TAFE reform than strip power from the teachers’ union.

“If worse comes to worse and we couldn’t get the Bill through ... we’d probably have to go back to the Feds and negotiate,” Mr Kenyon said.
Industry plea on training

Mathew Dunckley

Industry groups have urged states to consider the needs of business as well as students in designing vocational training after Victoria’s experiment with a student voucher-style scheme championed by Prime Minister Julia Gillard led to a budget blowout on “soft” courses such as personal fitness.

Australian Industry Group chief Innes Willox said there was “great concern” state-based training reforms would do little to fix skills shortages and “may make the situation worse”.

“The other states and the Commonwealth should look closely at the Victorian experiment and not head down the same path,” he said.

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry training director Jenny Lambert said Victorian students were gaining qualifications that did not...
Train for needs, urges industry

match industry needs. “The system we need to implement should be an industry-driven system, not a students-demand-driven system — that is a significant difference,” she said.

Victoria has reined in its voucher-style system in response to ballooning budgets and a deluge of students with qualifications that are of little value to employers.

But after an agreement signed with the federal government in March, other states are rolling out a similar system that means funding follows students into their course of choice with either the public or private sector.

“IT is not clear exactly how they are going to implement it as yet,” she said. “We are keeping an eye on what they are planning to do. The vocational system is extremely important for Australia and its skills development.”

Ms Lambert said it was also important that students had good quality information about the job prospects stemming for their qualifications.

She said a contestable voucher system was fine, but the price signal needed to be implemented carefully and supply needed to respond to industry demands.

South Australia’s entitlement system opened yesterday and the state government insists stronger quality control, an ability to cap course numbers and a differential subsidy heavily favouring TAFEs will help prevent the excesses seen in Victoria.

Queensland Training Minister John-Paul Langbroek said the government’s skills taskforce appointed to overhaul the training sector would hold its first meeting tomorrow.

It would report by year’s end on “how to best proceed”, he said.

A West Australian Department of Training spokesman said providers were “comfortable” with the government’s approach to the “minor changes” proposed in that state.

“The Victorian experience has in fact been important for WA, and we have already undertaken considerable consultation as part of this approach,” the spokesman said.

Green’s federal higher education spokesman Lee Rhiannon said the Gillard government had pushed privatised vocational education and could not “wash their hands” of the problems in Victoria.

“[The federal government] says it is up to each state to structure their system, but the federal government should learn the lessons from Victoria and undertake a rigorous assessment of the flaws of contestability rather than continue blindly with ineffective reform,” Senator Rhiannon said.

Mr Willox of Ai Group also attacked the Baillieu government’s cuts to block funding for TAFEs in Victoria, saying it would affect services not on offer in the private sector.

“Success for many individuals without these services will be severely compromised,” he said.

Victoria’s deputy opposition leader, James Merlino, said the state’s cuts disproportionately affected regional TAFEs and students with special needs.

“Labor always supported TAFEs that provided services not always available in the private sector, while ensuring crucial courses such as Australian and regional hospitality diplomas were available even when demand was low,” Mr Merlino said.

It should be an industry-driven system, not a students demand-driven system.

Jenny Lambert, ACCI
Do we have a course for you

Rebecca Thistleton

“When can you start?”
That is about the toughest question aspiring students face when seeking out a government-subsidised training position in Victoria.

Two-year diplomas of kinesiology (human movement), remedial massage or aromatherapy, which usually would cost about $15,000, can cost as little as $4500 with government subsidies.

The only broad requirements are state and federal subsidies are for participants to be Australian citizens without an equal or higher qualification, and the course must be from a registered provider.

This reporter contacted vocational providers across Victoria, posing as a 20-something considering study.

Enter the hard sell. Brilliant careers in massage, personal training and retail were pushed, with one provider offering a course start date of July 9 if enrolment were confirmed on the spot. Another emphasised how online course components could be blitzed in as few as five hours a week.

One provider queried whether there were too many personal trainers already in the market, but insisted "things are great for our graduates, there are no dramas there".

While there were no offers of cash or iPads, suggesting recent rule changes might have altered practices, there was a heavy emphasis on easy public money.
Online courses persist, promising a government subsidy for vocations such as personal training, office management, massage and aromatherapy and all without entering a classroom.

One phone call to a private tertiary provider, regarding a certificate III course in digital media, led to a college offering the chance to progress to a $32,000 bachelor degree that supposedly would result in an opportunity-filled career as an animator.

Easy enrolments in subsidised courses have sparked big enrolment spikes, such as personal training, which increased more than 2000 per cent in the three years 2008-11.

To be competitive in the heavily subscribed personal training area, the Australian Institute of Fitness offers students careers advice and coaching from trainers already working in the industry.

Spokeswoman Helen Jones said prospective students needed to meet acceptance criteria. Students begin their course after discussing their suitability and commitment to study.

Effects of government policy on private education showed up long ago in the international sector. Bob Birrell of Monash University’s Centre for Population and Urban Research was part of an independent review into skilled migration, which looked at vocational hospitality courses that allowed migrant students to obtain visas following completion around 2005-07.

The study showed colleges were taking advantage of overseas fees, delivering simple courses which had resulted in an enrolment blow-out and, ultimately, a government toughening of visa requirements.

Dr Birrell said he had not investigated the current system in the same way, but similar subsidy exploitation had appeared and was likely to continue unless governments cracked down on content.

While government assistance to help young people into the workforce was successful in principle, governments needed to ensure the courses they were subsidising were worthwhile, he said.
Make the training system work

Skills funding should be rejigged to train people for jobs which actually exist, writes Innes Willox.

Despite years of attention from policymakers, persistent and often crippling skills shortages are still frequently cited as the number one constraint facing business.

As this newspaper has so clearly highlighted this week, there’s great concern that changes being introduced in Victoria, before being rolled out nationally as part of COAG reforms, will do little to address skills shortages and may even make the situation worse.

The Skills Reform model, introduced by the previous Victorian government, switched the funding of the system over to individual demand. In essence, the choice of a course by an individual triggered the flow of funding to the registered provider, public or private. All accredited courses were eligible for funding.

This unfettered approach has led to excessive enrolments in some programs without regard to employment prospects, let alone the needs of the economy — for example, the notoriously high number of gym instructors in training. The overnight explosion of enrolments in a range of courses and the doubling of private providers in the market should have set off a code red alert that the system lacked adequate control.

Ai Group has consistently argued for a balance between the individual demand-driven model and a model which recognises the needs of the economy.

The recent Victorian budget announcements have slashed Vocational Education and Training (VET) spending. While courses identified as having a high public benefit including the skilled trades have mostly been spared, 80 per cent of programs have had their subsidies reduced, in many instances below an unsustainable $2 per student contact hour.

Programs in these categories did gobble up large tranches of public funds with questionable levels of public good. However, the flow-on impacts of the VET funding cuts are immense — for example, reported cuts of $25 million and $20 million for Holmesglen and Ballarat TAFEs respectively.

A more prudent approach would have seen a sensible reintroduction of supply mechanisms so that, for example, full funding would be available for only a limited number of gym instructors or other recreational courses.

The biggest impact on the Victorian training system has been the sudden removal of full service provider funding from the TAFE institutes. This is not part of the latest COAG agreement. It is a budgetary measure specific to the Victorian government. This cut alone slashes $170 million a year from TAFE.

These changes together will mean the loss of $290 million and at least 2000 jobs from the TAFE system.

So what does the economy need and what does industry want? Most importantly, we need a training system that delivers a broad range of occupationally linked skills that lead to real jobs.

The primary purpose of the training system is to develop our current and future workforce. This can only be achieved with strong industry leadership encompassing necessary and strong industry advisory arrangements. An entitlement system will work best within an industry framework.

It is the combination of the range of services and programs that underpins an effective delivery model, and this in turn is critical to moving many individuals from training into work. TAFEs are more than the sum of their courses — they are an important part of our economic and social infrastructure.

The simple test for any reform rests upon understanding the nexus between skills, jobs and quality. Improved outcomes will include higher employment participation rates, higher skill levels and a more mobile workforce. This in turn will deliver a valuable social dividend. It is through this lens that the changes in Victoria will be judged.

Industry wants and needs a training system comprised of both public and private providers which is contemporary and sufficiently resourced. Its core mandate should be to give individuals the skills that will enable them to be meaningfully and sustainably employed.

The other states and the Commonwealth should not head down the Victorian path. We need a viable training system that builds our skill base for years to come.

Innes Willox is chief executive of Australian Industry Group.

The other states and the Commonwealth should not head down the Victorian path.
Earning capacity to almost double before benefits are affected

Boost for working students

JAMES FETTES

STARTING this week, students receiving Youth Allowance or Austudy can earn more from part-time or casual work without having their benefit payments reduced.

From July 1, students will be able to earn up to $400 each fortnight before their benefit payments are affected, up from the previous threshold of $236.

University of Ballarat student Kylie Rippon is one of 315,000 recipients who will benefit from the change.

“It’s definitely a welcome move. It’ll go back into paying the household bills and help make mortgage repayments without having to stress that there’s not enough money to pay for the groceries,” she said.

Ms Rippon, a single mother, has found casual, part-time work at the university while she completes her undergraduate degree in Rural Social Welfare.

“I’ve worked all the way through my degree, because for me there’s no way not to,” she said.

“Without Austudy, I wouldn’t be at university. Studying full-time, working casually and juggling the family is as much as I can cope with.”

The change comes in the wake of one-off payments of up to $190 for eligible students as part of the Household Assistance Package. Ms Rippon says that while these payments are welcome, they are only working to offset dramatic cost of living increases.

“You’ve now got a carbon tax that’s going to put up my gas bill, my power bill and who knows what else,” she said.

“These payments, as great as they are, work as a band-aid. Students are still struggling because everything else gets so much more expensive.”

Federal Minister for Tertiary Education, Senator Chris Evans, said the Youth Allowance and Austudy reforms have contributed to the rise in the number of students enrolling.

“Having more students with the qualifications they need for tomorrow’s jobs will be of huge benefit to regional businesses, industry and the economy,” he said.

In addition, the Student Income Bank will raise from $6000 to $10,000. The bank allows students who work more hours during holiday periods to ‘save’ part of their income threshold during semester when they work less.

Both measures will, for the first time in 2012, move annually in line with the Consumer Price Index.
New allowance threshold

PEOPLE receiving Youth Allowance of Austudy will now be able to earn up to $400 per fortnight from employment before their benefits will be affected.

Introduced yesterday, the increased threshold is almost double the previous threshold of $236 per fortnight. Federal Minister for Tertiary Education Chris Evans said the Government understood the cost of living could be a barrier for students.

Additional assistance in the form of the Household Assistance Package was also provided earlier this month. Eligible students received payments of up to $190, ahead of the introduction of the Carbon Tax.

Student income support recipients will also receive twice-yearly supplementary allowances of $210 for single people and $175 if partnered.
University refocus

I WANT to congratulate the University of Ballarat for its refocus of Vocational Education and Training, VET, programs to meet industry needs.

Despite much angst in the VET sector, the university is an institution that is now showing leadership and a positive approach in responding to the Victorian Government’s revised VET funding policy.

The university last week announced it will open up a new employer-focused Industry Skills Centre.

This new skills centre is very much what the refreshed Baillieu policy is about – creating the very skills that our industries, manufacturers and employers need now and into the future – skills such as food processing, hospitality, agriculture and plumbing.

Very little has been made of the $1 billion extra the Baillieu government is injecting into the VET sector over the next four years to make this all happen.

I applaud the university Vice-Chancellor Professor David Battersby for taking such a responsible, sensible, well considered and proactive approach to this change.

In making these changes, the university advises that it has consulted widely with its staff to determine which courses will stop because they are no longer viable. These are not easy decisions, but they are necessary.

The Baillieu government will continue to work with the university to enable the changes to proceed with maximum effectiveness.

I urge other education providers to use the University of Ballarat as an example of what can be achieved.

Simon Ramsay MP
Ballarat