Evans fires back over training costs

Federal Skills Minister Chris Evans has hit back at Victorian Premier Ted Baillieu, who blamed the federal government on Monday for cost blowouts in the state’s budget after a surge in low-quality vocational training courses.

Mr Baillieu told The Australian Financial Review on Monday that a $500 million budget blowout and the rise of low-quality courses could be blamed on reforms introduced in 2009 by then Labor premier John Brumby and federal minister Julia Gillard.

But Senator Evans said the blowouts could have been avoided, and students, teachers and industries in Victoria are now being forced to pay the price for Mr Baillieu’s mistakes through cuts to TAFE funding.

“Premier Baillieu can’t blame others for his failure to control the growth of poor-quality courses in Victoria,” Senator Evans said. “Through no fault of their own, students, teachers and industries.

Victoria was the first state to introduce reforms to training in 2009. They were aimed at boosting access to courses by establishing a voucher system, so that taxpayer funding followed students wherever they chose to study, in the public or private sectors.

But Senator Evans said the Victorian government had not ensured oversight of registered training organisations was in place. “Despite repeated warnings from the Commonwealth, the Baillieu government allowed unfettered growth of poor-quality training courses while refusing to join the national regulation scheme under the Australian Skills Quality Agency,” he said.

Victoria and Western Australia have refused to sign up to a national regulator that would monitor quality of training course providers. Senator Evans said enrolments at private training providers had surged by 300 per cent since the reforms, while TAFEs had grown by 4 per cent over the same time.

Other states are introducing reforms to improve access to training. “The South Australian model is a good example of how states are learning from some of the problems experienced in Victoria,” Senator Evans said. “The South Australian system puts caps on courses to ensure they are training in the areas industry wants and only allows quality providers to conduct training.

“While the particular details of each of the state-based training systems are a matter for state governments, the Australian government is working to provide better links between employers and the training system to ensure we’re not training for training’s sake; we’re training for jobs.”

Pip Freebairn
A lax education and training regulator allowed hundreds of new providers to set up in Victoria without sufficient policing of standards and quality, say groups representing TAFEs and private colleges.

They heavily criticised Victoria’s regulatory regime for vocational and education and training as the state government takes deep cuts because of a $500 million budget overrun.

The blowout was caused by too many students taking up their entitlement for government-funded places. Rather than addressing skills shortages, the policy led to an explosion in courses which were cheap to run and attracted government subsidies.

“The bar was set too low, so there was an explosion of 200 or 300 new providers given registration,” said TAFE Directors Australia chief executive Martin Riordan.

“International student revenue was declining because of visa issues, so suddenly private providers saw the opportunity to open up in Victoria,” he said.

The hourly per student subsidies to courses in fitness, retail, hospitality and basic business courses is being cut from $5 and $6 an hour to $1.50.

Funding will be increased for trade courses, most of which is delivered through the TAFE system.

Australian Council for Private Education and Training chief executive Claire Field said the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority failed to enforce standards as new trainers entered the market to compete for public money.

“If the criteria for offering government-funded places is not set high enough, and if the state regulatory body has not properly quality assured the market, there is a problem,” she said.

“You should not be throwing large sums of taxpayer-funded money at providers if you’re not confident of what you’re delivering.”

Both groups said the situation in Victoria should be viewed by other states and the federal government as a warning to focus on quality as contestable funding was introduced elsewhere.

In Victoria, government-subsidised training entitlements were introduced for diploma-level qualifications in 2010 and for other courses in 2011. Over that period the number of providers registered to deliver government-funded training increased from 200 to 411.

The Victorian auditor Auditor-General, Des Pearson, has questioned the state’s regulatory processes. In 2010, he found the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority “cannot reliably assure that it has effectively regulated VET providers”.

Victoria has refused to assign its regulatory powers in this area to the federal government, although providers that enrol international students or have campuses in multiple states come under the federal government’s remit.

Leesa Wheelahan from the LH Martin Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Management at the University of Melbourne said it was too easy to become a training provider in Victoria.

“The market settings of the Victorian government have resulted in the proliferation of low-quality providers with low quality, and sometimes dodgy, provision,” she said.

“Providers should be required to show that they can and have delivered high-quality provision before they get access to public funding for that provision.”
School’s in

Key metrics for the vocational education & training system

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Total 655.9

SOURCE: NIER
TAFE cuts linked to jobs spiral

BY MELISSA CUNNINGHAM

THOUSANDS of Brimbank students could miss out on vocational programs designed to prevent them from dropping out of school as the fallout from TAFE funding cuts continues.

Last month’s state government decision to reduce funding to 80 per cent of vocational programs has resulted in jobs being slashed at TAFE campuses across the state.

The effect is now being felt by schools.

TAFE leaders have warned principals that they will have to raise fees and reduce the number of courses they offer secondary students to cope with the $300 million cuts to the tertiary sector.

Catholic Regional College (CRC) principal Brendan Watson said the cuts could take away the “dreams, hopes and aspirations” of many students.

“Many families in this region cannot afford to fork out an extra $2000 or $3000 to pay for VET [vocational education training] courses in TAFEs on top of paying their children’s school fees,” Mr Watson said.

“It is essentially doubling a family’s school fees and making it increasingly difficult for students to stay in school.”

The cuts have come after $48 million was axed last year in co-ordination funding for the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning.

Among those hit hard will be Victoria University, the biggest education provider in the western suburbs. As reported by the *Weekly*, VU will shelve animal studies, boatbuilding and events and tourism courses and slash education in sports and fitness, hospitality, business and financial services. It could increase tuition fees by up to 40 per cent.

CRC’s VET co-ordinator, Marj Peel, said the school was discussing possible alternatives with VU.

“Victoria University is doing its best to negotiate with other TAFE colleges in the region,” she said. “But it’s extremely disappointing for students who have begun VET subjects this year that they now won’t be able to finish.”

CRC year 11 student Jordan Misfud, 16, who is completing a pre-apprenticeship in plumbing, said he wouldn’t have stayed in school without the VET program.

“It’s basically the only option for students like me who want to stay in school and do more hands-on learning,” he said.

“The increase in costs will make it out of reach.”

Sunshine College principal Tim Blunt said it was hard to tell how extreme the impact would be. “I can’t say whether it would deter students from undertaking VET studies or not, but it could certainly force them down a pathway they may not otherwise choose.”

He said costs of popular VET courses like hospitality were expected to rise by 30 per cent.

The *Weekly* understands that under changes forced by the funding cuts, VU will no longer cross-subsidise community programs like VET in schools. Many principals and co-ordinators have voiced their concerns and predicted more students will choose to leave school early.

In a statement, VU’s deputy vice-chancellor, Professor Anne Jones, said the university remained committed to providing TAFE education to Melbourne’s west.

Higher Education and Skills Minister Peter Hall said the government’s changes, designed to “save the TAFE system from collapse”, would lead to more people receiving training.

But opposition education spokesman James Merlino said the funding cuts would only worsen Victoria’s job crisis. “People have already lost their jobs because of these devastating cuts. By callously targeting vocational students, it’s stopping them from starting their careers and the vicious cycle continues.”
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TAFE cut slammed

BY JAMES TAYLOR

LOCAL and federal government representatives have urged the Baillieu government to reverse its $300 million cuts to the TAFE sector.

La Trobe MP Laura Smyth put forward a motion in Federal Parliament condemning the cuts made in the May state budget. In Casey, the council has invited residents to sign an online petition.

Introducing the private members’ bill to Parliament last week, Ms Smyth said she met Chisholm Institute of TAFE chief executive officer Maria Peters to discuss the issue.

The institute, which has campuses in Berwick and Cranbourne, faces a cut of about $25.5 million — about a quarter of its operating revenue.

“I know that Ms Peters is gravely concerned about the potential increase in course fees and the reduction in course availability,” Ms Smyth told Parliament.

“I know that she is extremely concerned about the long-term legacy of those cuts, particularly for students who face disadvantage and for whom TAFE presents an opportunity to find meaningful employment.

Earlier this month, Casey councillors resolved to support the Australian Education Union, the National Tertiary Education Union and the board of the Chisholm Institute in their campaign to reverse the cuts.

Mayor Sam Aziz said the state government’s decision was unprecedented and would hit hard in communities such as Casey.

“These cuts will put up to 1500 jobs at risk across Victoria and appear designed to put TAFE in direct competition with private providers, which will lead to fee rises, course closures and the eventual privatisation of TAFEs.

“The council considers these cuts particularly ill-conceived at a time of increasing job losses in other industries, as well as an Australia-wide skills shortage and hardship for many families.”

State Higher Education Minister Peter Hall said the TAFE reforms meant Victorians in government-subsidised training would be more likely to graduate with a qualification and in-demand skills, so they could find meaningful employment.

To sign the council’s petition, visit casey.vic.gov.au/advocacy.
THE Government has announced a skills reform plan that it claims will ensure Australia’s national vocational education and training (VET) system is better equipped to deliver skills to workers in a “rapidly changing economy”.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard said the reform would ensure Australia has the skills base necessary to drive growth in a high participation, more productive economy.

The Government has prepared a document setting out its reform plan, which it says will deliver greater access to affordable training.

“Skills are central to ensuring we have the workforce needed to deliver the innovative, high quality, high value products and services that will power our economy into the 21st Century,” said the report’s authors.

The government has committed $1.75 billion over five years to achieve key reforms, which will be negotiated with the states and territories through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG).

This is in addition to a National Agreement, which will see the government provide $7.2 billion in skills funding to states and territories over the next five years.

For more information, visit www.dpmc.gov.au/publications/skills_for_all_australians/
Super fund has no Gunns worry

By ALISON ANDREWS
Chief reporter

NATIONAL tertiary education superannuation fund UniSuper says it is not concerned about forest company Gunns' absence from share trading, despite holding an investment of more than $10.5 million in the company.

A spokeswoman for UniSuper said yesterday that there had been no practical impact so far.

Gunns managing director Greg L'Estrange informed the Australian Securities Exchange this week that the company was continuing its negotiations with potential investors and lenders to raise $400 million.

The UniSuper spokeswoman said that the fund's Gunns share investment was managed by external managers.

"It is insignificant from a value perspective in UniSuper's overall portfolio," she said.

This is despite Gunns listing UniSuper as one of its eight substantial shareholders in its annual report in November.

It is understood that these were the shareholders that the company had been negotiating with to increase their investment as part of the Gunns capital raising going on since the March 8 trading halt.

UniSuper chief investment officer John Pearce told The Age two days later that the company would not participate in a capital raising for Gunns.

At that stage UniSuper owned 4 per cent of the Tasmanian-based company.

National Tertiary Education Union secretary Grahame McCulloch said that he did not have detailed knowledge of the UniSuper fund's investment in Gunns and had not heard any concern expressed by members about the strength of the investment.

UniSuper is the tertiary education industry's super fund dedicated to those working in the country's higher education and research sector.

It has more than 450,000 members and more than $28 billion in assets at the end of last year.

Gunns' last annual report showed that UniSuper had 67,768,496 shares in the company.

At a share price of 16c each at the time of the March trading halt, that's an investment of about $11 million.
Vice-regal diary

YESTERDAY morning at the Hotel Grand Chancellor, Governor Peter Underwood gave an address and opened the 2012 conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australia.

Later at Government House, Governor Underwood received the Legislative Council President and clerk who presented bills for the royal assent.

In the evening Governor Underwood and Mrs Frances Underwood hosted a reception to mark the conference at which the Tasmanian Youth Orchestra performed for guests.
Building a rural health workforce

The Federal Government has agreed to investigate extending the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) rebate to allied health professionals working in rural and regional areas, following a question in Parliament from the Federal Member for New England, Tony Windsor.

The government already offers doctors a rebate on their HECS fees if they work in regional areas, with the greatest benefit flowing to those working in the most remote locations.

Mr Windsor is supporting the National Rural Health Students Network campaign to extend that rebate to allied health professionals as another measure to resolve the shortage in regional areas.

“Overcoming the higher rates of chronic disease in the country requires giving country people better access not only to doctors, but to a range of allied health professionals,” he said.

“Health graduates from a variety of disciplines should be encouraged to work in regional areas.

“I’m very pleased the Health Minister has committed to look at extending the HECS rebate to health graduates beyond medicine.”

Mr Windsor also acknowledged the presence of the National Rural Health Students’ Network in Parliament House, including Tamworth student Ben Crough, who is studying pharmacy at the University of New England in Armidale.

“The National Rural Health Students’ Network come from regional Australia and are determined to work in regional Australia,” Mr Windsor said.

“They are living proof that training country people to treat country people is a key part of the solution to overcoming the shortage of health professionals in regional Australia.

“These students represent 9000 members of university rural health clubs across the country.

“I’m delighted to see rural health students taking action to address the shortage of health professionals in rural areas.

“I’d also like to congratulate the Federal Government and the Health Minister, Tanya Plibersek, for listening and taking such a keen interest in addressing this crisis,” Mr Windsor said.
Minister rejects talk of plan to limit students

ANDREW TROUNSON

The federal government has dismissed rumours some vice-chancellors have been leaned on to constrain student growth amid talks on 2013 funding agreements.

“The government is committed to the demand-driven system,” a spokesman for Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans told the HES, noting there had been no funding cuts to student places in the recent budget.

He said any talks between government and universities were about the annual funding agreements.

Under the demand-driven system the government has uncapped the supply of government-supported undergraduate places. In the legislation, it has retained power to slow growth if and where it seems fit. There has long been speculation over how long the government would keep places uncapped, given upward trajectory in enrolments and the subsequent strain on the budget.

Meetings between the government and universities to finalise funding agreements are scheduled to be completed next month.

“The meeting will focus on student load issues for 2013 and may include discussions on how the university has been tracking against its mission-based compact,” the department wrote in its April newsletter.

The government has retained the caps on the supply of commonwealth-funded sub-degree and postgraduate places. However, the supply of postgraduate places is under review.

One option canvassed in a discussion paper would allow a university to trade off undergraduate places for more postgraduate places. But a university would need to limit the undergraduate places it offered under the demand-driven system.
Public policy on open access should be free from commerce

GAVIN MOODIE

OPEN access to research papers and study materials has great benefits for the public, scholars, universities and governments. Yet while all Australian universities have a digital repository, many don’t use them fully.

We need a coherent public policy on open access, which should be led by universities, CSIRO, the National Library of Australia, the Australian Research Council, the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Innovation Department.

Following Britain’s Southampton University’s School of Electronics and Computer Science, which was the first school to require its authors to deposit their papers in a digital repository, Queensland University of Technology was the first institution to adopt this requirement.

QUT now has more than 37,000 works in its repository, of which half have full text accessible to the public.

QUT authors deposit an average of 12 papers a day, while there are about 6000 downloads a day.

Some repository staff take the initiative in soliciting publications for lodgment while others provide the service but leave it to authors’ initiative. These typically have rather fewer papers available to the public.

But there are about 190,000 open-access items in university repositories, according to Danny Kingsley, Australian National University’s manager of scholarly communication and ePublishing.

In 2005 the National Library enabled a single web search across the contents of university repositories and in 2009 it released Trove, a greatly expanded site and service.

Stevan Harnad, an open-access advocate who holds a Canada research chair in cognitive sciences at the Universite du Quebec a Montreal, argues for institutional deposit followed by central harvesting.

In other words, universities should include all their staff’s publications in their repositories, which are harvested by the Innovation Department for the purposes of the higher education research data collection.

The same institutional repositories should also be harvested by the Australian Research Council for the purposes of the Excellence in Research for Australia assessments.

This would match the Higher Education Funding Council for England, which is expected to require all submissions to future research excellence frameworks to be open access.

Metadata should be used to identify the material harvested for each purpose and when papers should be accessible to the public.

The NHMRC is following other international medical research funding bodies, such as the US National Institutes of Health, the Wellcome Trust and the British Medical Research Council, in requiring all publications arising from its funding to be deposited in an open-access institutional repository within a year of publication.

As Harnad observes, open-access mandates by institutions and funding bodies work best when they are convergent and collaborative, rather than divergent and competitive.

These should be based on so-called green open access that makes papers available without charge.

Public policy on open access should not get entangled with commercial publishers’ charges, costs and profits.

Britain’s Finch group on expanding access to published research findings fell into this trap, which led it to support so-called gold open access that shifts from readers to authors the cost of access to commercial journals.

The group said this would cost about $84 million a year.

This would result in taxpayers funding open access to British publications for the whole world.

While that seems a commendable service to the world, it might distort publishers’ commercial responses to information and communication technologies at a likely cost to research funding.

Gavin Moodie is a tertiary education policy analyst at RMIT.
Navitas FEE-HELP claims ‘just not correct’

BERNARD LANE

FEE-HELP loans represent 18 per cent of revenue for Navitas, the publicly listed pathway college company.

Last week, the HES reported analysis by researcher Peter Ryan showing that Navitas accounted for 25 per cent of $291 million in loan funds last year supporting the non-university higher-education sector.

The article quoted the University of Melbourne’s Simon Marginson, professor of higher education, as saying: “FEE-HELP has had the predicted consequence of fostering a significant private sector.

“Navitas are running a large government-subsidised business.”

A spokesman for Navitas said this was “just not correct (because we) only generate about 18 per cent of our revenues from FEE-HELP”.

He would not give a dollar figure, saying this was “material information as it’s based on current revenue”. Last year, Navitas reported revenues of $643.8m. An 18 per cent share of this figure suggests FEE-HELP funds of $115.8m, significantly larger than the $72.6m reported by Dr Ryan. However, Navitas said the 18 per cent applied to revenue figures yet to be made public.

Professor Marginson responded: “Navitas have a successful model. It is partly on the government drip, perhaps a sensitive point, but the company has used the opportunity provided by subsidised tuition better than their competitors — to their credit. Let’s hope that they are also responsive and flexible (and) able to handle any future changes to the subsidy arrangements.”

Dr Ryan, whose paper led the first edition of the ACPET Journal for Private Higher Education, said: “Navitas have done extremely well in the current system.” He managed the Australian College of Applied Psychology in Sydney before it was bought by Navitas in 2006. ACAP was one of the first non-university providers to apply for the FEE-HELP system. Under Navitas, ACAP had beefed up its credentials, appointing professors and offering a clinical masters program.

Navitas recently called on the government to “reconsider its decision to break the nexus between education and permanent migration in areas of skills shortages”.

The old system allowed overseas students to parlay low-value qualifications into migration but weak English prevented many taking skilled jobs.
Student safety-net funding fears

JOHN ROSS

The federal government has left international students on thin ice in its efforts to improve their consumer protection arrangements.

Four days into its operations, the new Tuition Protection Service has no service provider and just a fifth of the safety-net funds available to its predecessor, while colleges still do not know how much they will be charged.

The TPS, which began on Sunday, places students of collapsed colleges with alternative providers. If that cannot be done it refunds unexpended fees.

"It will deliver a timely service, choice and control for students (and) one set of fees for providers," Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans said.

In March 2010, international education reviewer Bruce Baird recommended rolling the five industry-run tuition assurance schemes and the government’s backup fund into a single service to reduce complexity and keep costs down while providing seamless student placement. But although industry groups support the approach they say its implementation has disadvantaged them and put students at risk.

The new scheme has seed funds of just $5 million. The previous ESOS Assurance Fund had been given access to $25m after claims snowballed to about $10m a year.

And, while the private college peak body ACPET said it supported the appointment of international education bureaucrat Vipan Mahajan to oversee the scheme’s establishment and operation, it was “very concerned” that an administrator had not been appointed to take care of day-to-day operations.

ACPET has warned students could be left in the lurch if significant college closures occur before the former arrangements are fully replaced. It said its members were also “grappling” with the new scheme because they did not know how much their fees would be.

While inaugural director Mr Mahajan has the job of setting the fees, he will have to take advice from an advisory board that is yet to be appointed.

Senator Evans’s office said advisory board appointments were expected in time for its first meeting in August. It said the government had waited for the new scheme to begin before appointing an administrator.

But ACPET said education agents were already “looking to recommend students to other countries” because of impacts on their commissions.

“The department’s advice on how providers and their agents can manage the changes shows a startling naivety and jeopardises efforts to rebuild the sector following earlier policy changes,” chief executive Claire Field said.

The English college peak group said overseas providers were reporting difficulties doing business in Australia.

“As usual, what looks good on paper is an absolute mess of unintended consequences when it comes to (our sector),” English Australia’s Sue Blundell said.
Hard knocks for adult schooling

A serious rethink is needed on public education, writes BARRY GOLDING

The recent TAFE cuts announced by the Victorian Government will have a disproportionately high impact on regional communities.

TAFE and its important smaller cousin ACE (Adult and Community Education) have been the most diverse, effective, valuable and widely accessible forms of public adult education and training outside Australia’s capital cities.

Research shows that regional TAFEs, their outreach campuses and ACE centres, such as the University of Ballarat, have been spectacularly successful at giving country people the option for successful lives, work, families, lifestyles and education.

They have also provided a place where some of the more marginalised members of our society can positively engage, keep well, keep learning and working. The specialist industry skills and community support services built up over many years have kept rural industries and communities strong.

The public provision of vocational education and training is now under threat in Victoria — under threat at a time of a slowdown in the state’s economy and in the context of a national skills shortage.

That these cuts will impact most heavily on the most vulnerable learners at the lower rungs on the ladder of opportunity is alarming and unconscionable.

So why is this happening?

Over the past decade governments on both sides of state and federal politics have moved towards “market” models of vocational education and training and away from public TAFE provision. The assumption has been that “markets” provide competition, save public expense and lead to better quality provision.

Last year, by simultaneously opening up TAFE to a market that includes private providers, “uncapping” levels of provision, and lowering the quality bar to new providers, the Victorian Government created an unprecedented demand for education and training.

At the same time it created a private provider boom, arguably a rotting issue and a budgetary problem.

This unprecedented growth in demand included a 64 per cent increase in enrolments in foundation courses covering language, literacy, numeracy and basic education, with most of the growth in private providers.

What was the State Government’s draconian solution?

Despite the fact that over a third of the adult population is functionally illiterate and half of the current workforce has no post-school qualifications, it has suddenly reduced funding to 80 per cent of the mainly lower-level access and pathways courses, as well as removing the base level of funding to TAFEs for provision of support services and equity functions.

This has led to savage cuts to programs for the most vulnerable adults across all TAFE providers and a loss of up to 100 staff from many TAFEs across Victoria. The Victorian TAFE Association estimates that up to 2000 TAFE redundancies may be necessary by 2013.

In the case of the remotest East Gippsland communities, many small and extremely valuable TAFE Outreach campuses will be totally wiped out. Even before the cuts, most regional TAFEs were struggling.

In my home town, virtually all of the TAFE programs in the Ballarat Arts Academy, which has been a cultural hub for some 150 years, will be lost.

Welcome to the new status quo. No regional TAFE in Victoria is viable without cuts or further government support. The latter isn’t going to happen. The former is inevitable.

Adult Learning Australia believes that learning is essential and valuable for diverse reasons for all adults.

Learning provided publicly through ACE and TAFE should be seen as an investment in people, industries and the community, rather than a service for which the most vulnerable pay.

There must soon be a serious rethink about the obvious impact of these cuts and policies on rural communities across Victoria.

*Prof Barry Golding is president of Adult Learning Australia and associate dean at the University of Ballarat*
Talking TAFE: A Ballarat crowd protests during a recent visit by Premier Ted Baillieu.