Graduate certificates face the axe

Joanna Mather

The proposed axing of graduate certificates as recognised qualifications will make it harder for Australia to address skills shortages and could jeopardise government targets for educational attainment, universities have warned.

Graduate certificates, also known as postgraduate certificates, typically take six months full-time or a year part-time to complete, making them popular with upskillers and career-changers.

But in a consultation paper, the Australian Qualifications Framework Council says shorter certificate courses are “not sufficiently robust as a stand-alone qualification” and it recommends they be replaced with graduate diplomas, which would take one to two years to complete full-time, or two to four years part-time.

Vicki Thomson, executive director of the Australian Technology Network of universities, said that if the change went ahead it would make upskilling and reskilling more costly and time-consuming.

“This could have serious implications for the workforce,” she said. “The graduate certificate is a valuable and well-understood qualification which is used by employers and employees alike to upskill. More than 15,000 graduate certificates were awarded across Australia in 2010.”

Margaret Mazzolini, the pro vice-chancellor of learning and teaching at Victoria University, said certificates provided an important pathway to higher education for those who had never been to university.

Rather than sign up to a three or four year degree or master’s, candidates could use a certificate as a “stepping stone” or exit with a stand-alone qualification recognised in the workplace, Professor Mazzolini said.

“There is a whole population of adult learners here who are first-in-family to go on to higher education or from other countries who really need to have access to qualifications that they view as attainable,” she said.

The federal government has set targets for increasing tertiary education participation, particularly among students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Certificates were helping to reach the targets, Professor Mazzolini said, as well as filling skills gaps with workplace training. “You can imagine an employer who decides they are going to pay for training of staff is going to be a bit reluctant to commit to a longer qualification, given how quickly people move around,” she said.

The qualifications council has been reviewing and “strengthening” the specifications for post-school qualifications in Australia for several years.

There are 10 qualification levels ranging from Certificate I at the bottom to doctoral studies at the top.

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The council’s recommendation is that both be offered by universities and vocational education and training providers, ideally from next year, while certificates could be phased out over a longer period.

“The AQF council will take into account the views of stakeholders before it finalises its review,” a council spokeswoman said.
The facts about state education funding

WHILE much has been written and said about changes to funding for the state's vocational education and training (VET) system, the one fact that has been missed is that the Victorian Coalition government has actually committed more – not less – funding for training over the next four years.

When the former Labor government introduced the current uncapped demand-driven system in 2008, with full implementation beginning in 2011, little did they imagine the massive cost blowout they would trigger and the proliferation in training providers competing with TAFE institutes for government funding.

Labor forecast the cost of funding training would reach $855 million in the 2011-2012 financial year. That figure blew out to more than $1.3 billion – a $400 million black hole. This cost was unfunded and unexpected and largely due to an explosion in courses with low job outcomes.

For example, since 2008, enrolments in courses like fitness trainers grew by 1955 per cent and customer contact by 2234 per cent, while apprenticeships have only increased by 10 per cent.

The changes the government announced in May provide increased hourly subsidies for training in areas of skill shortages and high value to the Victorian economy.

Every apprenticeship course will receive increased funding. At the same time, lower subsidies will be provided for courses that have shown disproportionate increases in enrolments, such as many lifestyle courses including fitness training, customer contact and management, and for courses where there is a comparatively lower return to the Victorian economy, or little likelihood of meaningful long-term employment.

TAFE currently delivers 82 per cent of the highest subsidised courses. With its established industry links from which to promote preferred provider type arrangements, I believe our TAFE institutes have a strong and positive future ahead of them.

PETER HALL
Minister for Higher Education and Skills
Community right to be outraged over TAFE cuts

MOST agree that the Baillieu-Ryan government TAFE cuts are shocking.

These cuts are having a huge impact on jobs and skills in central Victoria.

With last week’s BRIT announcement that 100 jobs will go, courses will be cut and the BRIT Kyneton campus will close, central Victorians have a right to be angry. Yet the effects of this government’s changes go beyond these cuts.

The Baillieu-Ryan government has spoken little about the removal of fee caps, which will allow fees to escalate to cover the shortfall in government funding.

Students by nature have low incomes. They are studying to obtain the skills required for the skilled job they hope to have after completing their studies.

The result of increased fees will be fewer students pursuing vocational education and therefore, fewer skilled workers to drive our local economy.

Furthermore, the government has also spoken little about the equalisation of TAFE funding: they have increased funding to the private sector at the expense of public education.

The vast majority of private training providers are Melbourne based.

Yet another policy decision where state government funding is being cut from regional communities to fund private enterprises in Melbourne.

LISA CHESTERS,
Kyneton
Let’s talk facts about vocational training

ALTHOUGH much has been written and said about changes to funding for the state’s vocational education and training (VET) system, the one fact that has been missed is that the Victorian Coalition Government has actually committed more, not less, funding for training over the next four years.

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In its budget calculations, Labor forecast the cost of funding training would reach $855 million in the 2011-2012 financial year. The fact is this figure blew out to more than $1.3 billion – a $400m black hole.

This cost was unfunded and unexpected and largely due to an explosion in courses with low job outcomes.

For example, since 2008 enrolments in courses like fitness trainers grew by 1,955 per cent and customer contact by 2,234 per cent, while apprenticeships have only increased by 10 per cent.

Anyone who has had to run a household budget, especially during difficult financial times, knows you have to live within your means. And importantly you have to direct your resources to where they are most needed and do the greatest good.

As a consequence, this government has locked in over the next four years about $1.2 billion in annual funding to support Victorians accessing vocational education and training. This is an extra $1 billion over the next four years.

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From next year, all providers will receive the same amount for training, whether they be TAFE, Adult Community Education (ACE), or private providers.

TAFEs, such as Bendigo TAFE, have significant advantages with their exclusive right to the TAFE brand, their long-established reputation and their significant asset base that has been paid for by the government and the Victorian taxpayer.

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PETER HALL MLC, Minister for Higher Education and Skills. Melbourne
ACT vocational education on the rise

The number of vocational education and training students in the ACT reached 29,440 last year, an increase of 0.3 per cent.

The 15 to 19 years age group in the territory jumped by 396 students, a growth rate of 7.1 per cent compared with the national rate of 3.5 per cent.

In the 20 to 24 age group, numbers grew by 6.3 per cent or 397 students.

The figures will be released today in an Australia-wide statistics report from the National Centre for Australian Vocational Education Research.

They will show that while student numbers in the 15 to 24 age group are contracting nationally as a proportion of the total working age population, the ACT has seen considerable increase.

Indigenous VET student numbers grew from 699 in 2010 to 729 last year, an increase of 3.4 per cent. Since 2008 the number of indigenous VET students in the ACT has increased by 66.1 per cent.

The vast majority of students (75.7 per cent) remain enrolled at the Canberra Institute of Technology.

But international full-fee paying VET student numbers dropped in the territory last year by 19.7 per cent from the year before to 1009.

The ACT’s Education and Training Minister Chris Bourke said the statistics show an overall growth in the completion of high-level Australian Qualification Framework qualifications and actual student numbers. He said they show that the VET sector has not been significantly affected by the contraction of the international VET student market.

“Our tertiary education sector continues to be well positioned to cater for the growing numbers of regional domestic students,” Dr Bourke said.

“The growth in disability and youth numbers shows that the extra $3.2 million of funding in the budget for disability and youth support services at CIT has been well-targeted.

“It’s great to see the increasing number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students skilling up in the ACT.”

AQF qualifications completed in the ACT from 2007 and 2010 grew by 15 per cent, from 8000 to 9000.
WAFarmers: No need to reinvent the wheel

THE release of a senate report into higher education and skills training to support agriculture and agribusiness in Australia, recommends the setting up of a new agricultural body to represent farmers and agribusinesses in establishing policy.

But WAFarmers says there is already such a body in existence — the National Farmers Federation — and the committee seems to be reinventing the wheel.

Welcoming the report, WAFarmers President Dale Park said the report support the existing NFF.

“The report correctly highlights the challenges facing agriculture in several areas including education and skills but does not offer any realistic solutions in addressing these challenges,” Mr Park said.

“Certainly, another representative body in an already over-represented sector is not a solution.

“The NFF has been the national voice for agriculture for more than three decades and in this time has established a strong reputation within the corridors of power in Canberra and beyond, and WAFarmers is proud to be a member of the NFF.

“Membership is open to the corporate sector and perhaps some of the protagonists calling for another body would be better served in joining with the NFF, to achieve what are obviously common goals.”
Interpreter shortage concerns

By NIKITA VAZ

HEARING-impaired Gippsland residents may face communication barriers following the closure of Victoria's only Diploma Auslan course.

Central Gippsland Institute of TAFE will follow Melbourne's Kangan Institute's decision to cease enrolments on its Auslan diploma course, on the grounds of "lack of funding".

GippsTAFE announced it would continue to provide the course to its three enrolled students until the end of the year. This has raised concerns with Deaf Access Gippsland, which fears the decision may lead to a shortage of interpreters in the region.

"By cutting the course there's going to be no entry for future interpreters," Mr Reddick said.

"There is the potential for training providers in other states, but there's a difference in dialect between states; some signs can be very different from one state to another," Mr Reddick said.

He said regional hearing impaired communities were "already disadvantaged due to a lack of locally based Auslan interpreters and the prohibitive cost of using Melbourne-based interpreters".

He said Gippsland currently had two employed interpreters, with only one a resident of the region, catering to the needs of about 100 Auslan users.

"People use these services for basic necessities, like going to the bank, parent-teacher interviews or to go to the doctor," he said.

GippsTAFE general manager teaching and learning Carol Elliot said the course was discontinued because of the "loss of full service provider" fee from the State Government.

However, Mr Reddick said the institute announced its decision prior to the release of the State Government's new funding changes to vocational training.

Mr Reddick's comment was acknowledged by Ms Elliot, who said while the course "previously was not viable, we continued to provide it", adding budget changes by the State Government had only hindered the institute further.

"We just cannot afford it under the new funding regime; Auslan is not the only program we have had to discontinue as a result of the budget changes," Ms Elliot said.

"We're not happy that the government is doing this, but we have to try and remain viable."

State Higher Education and Skills Minister Peter Hall's spokesperson James Martin said the subsidies for diploma courses such as Auslan would only reduce "slightly", because these students "have access to an income contingent loan".

He added the government was currently exploring options for the delivery of Auslan courses in the future.
Opportunity knocked

BY MELISSA CUNNINGHAM and BENJAMIN MILLAR

THOUSANDS of Maribyrnong and Hobsons Bay students could miss out on vocational programs designed to prevent them from dropping out of school in the latest fallout from TAFE funding cuts.

The state government decision to reduce 80 per cent of vocational program funding has meant job losses at TAFE campuses, including at least 60 positions at Victoria University.

VU, the western suburbs’ biggest education provider, faces a $32 million funding shortfall.

Schools are finding Vocational Education and Training in Schools courses will also suffer cuts.

TAFE leaders have warned principals they will have to raise fees and reduce the number of courses to cope with the $300 million cuts.

Last year, $48 million of co-ordination funding for the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning was cut.

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

But The Weekly understands VU will no longer be able to cross-subsidise community programs like VET in schools.

VU works with more than 2000 students across 80 schools including Bayside College, Williamstown High School and Laverton College.

VET programs include aero skills, automotive, business, engineering, hairdressing and hospitality. Costs are expected to rise by 30 per cent as VU is forced to recover costs from the programs.

Many principals and co-ordinators have voiced concern and predicted that more students will choose to leave school early.

Higher Education and Skills Minister Peter Hall said the 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 worsen Victoria’s job crisis. “People have already lost their jobs because of these devastating cuts. Callously targeting vocational students has stopping them from starting their careers and the vicious cycle continues.”

Williamstown MP Wade Noonan said the cuts would lead to students leaving school early and not completing year 12. “Helping students complete their year 12 should not be reduced down to whether a school can afford to offer a program such as VET,” he said.
Senator incites student protests on uni funding

JULIE HARE
HIGHER EDUCATION EDITOR

GREENS senator Lee Rhiannon has called on students to engage in a sustained campaign of public agitation to raise awareness of funding shortages in higher education.

Senator Rhiannon said it was a “no-brainer” that removing caps on the number of students who could enrol meant more resources were required. “But the issue of more resources has not been addressed by the Labor government,” she said.

Senator Rhiannon traded verbal blows with ALP stalwart Doug Cameron during a one-hour panel discussion at the National Union of Students conference at the University of Technology, Sydney, yesterday.

She said students needed to have “a strong voice” on funding shortfalls.

They should “not leave it up to the vice-chancellors and finance managers to decide how staff numbers will be allocated” amid decreasing resources.

She pointed to recent student protests at Sydney and La Trobe universities, which had contributed to proposed staff cuts being reviewed or changed.

The two leftist politicians were asked to speak on the topic of university funding and student fees, but they also touched on refugees, a tax on financial services, the social contributions of Gina Rinehart and Clive Palmer, the “evils” of News Limited and the unwillingness of Labor to co-operate with the Greens.

Senator Rhiannon, the Greens spokeswoman for higher education, said the party’s position on supporting free public universal education was unchanged.

But she said higher education was an area that the Greens and Labor could “obviously work together more closely on, especially with the spectre of an Abbott government”.

Her overtures were rebuffed by Senator Cameron, who said he was “sick and tired of the pontification, stupidity and intransigence of the Greens”. “I’m not here to be lectured by you about working together,” he said.

However, Senator Cameron did agree students needed to find a common voice and to oppose a possible Abbott government “which is the biggest threat to the defunding of higher education”.

Senator Rhiannon said despite big funding increases to universities since 2009, funding per student place had “plunged 30 per cent since 2007”. “The increases in skills and knowledge that Julia Gillard talks about can’t be paid for by increasing student fees and eroding staff numbers and conditions,” she said.