Talk facts

Sir, - 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 in its budget calculations, forecast the cost of funding training would reach $855 million in the 2011-12 financial year.

The fact is this figure blew out to more than $1.3 billion – a $400 million blackhole. 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.

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 around $1.2 billion: support Victorians accessing vocational education and training. This is an extra $1 billion over the next four years.

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.

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

TAFEs 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.

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.

Yours etc.,

Peter Hall MLC,
Minister for Higher Education and Skills.
Trade Training Centre opens in Bendigo

New pathways to TAFE

MORE than 4000 students across nine Bendigo schools will have access to new hospitality training facilities through a new Trade Training Centre.

Bendigo Federal MP Steve Gibbons yesterday opened the new centre based at Bendigo TAFE on behalf of Minister for School Education Peter Garrett.

The hospitality training facility is the third and final centre to be opened in Bendigo, with an additional two facilities located at Bendigo Senior Secondary College and Catholic College Bendigo.

Speaking from the new facility yesterday, Mr Gibbons said the opening was “timely” given the state government’s recent budget cuts to the TAFE system, which saw 100 Bendigo TAFE jobs axed and the closure of its Kyneton campus.

“Obviously TAFE is experiencing considerable pressures at the moment,” he said. “(But) facilities like this will help to better prepare TAFE for that and make sure it continues.”

The Bendigo Trade Training Centre received more than $10 million from the federal government’s $2.3 billion, 10-year Trade Training Centres in Schools Program to enable all secondary students to access vocational education.

Bendigo TAFE chief executive Maria Simpson said despite funding pressures the Bendigo campus was still running, but she urged the community to take advantage of the opportunities a trade training centre could provide. Bendigo Secondary Trade Training Centre chairman and Bendigo TAFE board member Ken McCulloch said local industry had to engage in training centres.

“This engagement will give students real-life industry experience and at the same time showcase the next generation of potential employees to local industry,” he said.

Member for Bendigo West Maree Edwards said the facilities could potentially revive the now-defunct hospitality and tourism TAFE training courses in the region but without government funding it would be a struggle.

NEW SKILLS: From left, Jess Walker, Renzo Panozzo and Zac Allen cook up a storm in the kitchen.

Picture: RAMON CAREY
$1.2bn vocational funds locked in

While much has been written about changes to funding for the state’s vocational education and training (VET) system, the one fact that has been missed is that the Coalition government has actually committed more funding for training over the next four years.

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Higher Education and Skills Minister Peter Hall
Monash to lead new synchrotron program

By Antonia Maiolo

The Australian Synchrotron in Victoria will continue to conduct important research thanks to a new program led by Monash University to control research access to the facility.

Professor Andrew Peele, head of science at the facility, said it is a critical tool in modern 21st century research. He said the synchrotron, which produces extremely powerful light, is a “world-class science and research facility”.

The light, stronger than that used in conventional X-ray technology and a million times brighter than the sun, is used by scientists to look at the structure and behaviour of all types of objects: everything from a human cell or grain of rice to something man-made, such as a painting.

Science and Research Minister Chris Evans said that under the Synchrotron Initiative, Monash will implement a peer-reviewed, merit-based program to ensure Australian and overseas universities and medical research institutions benefit from access over the next four years.

A multi-agency funding program was announced in March to keep the Australian Synchrotron operating, as funds were due to expire on June 30.

The federal government has provided $30 million in support through the Australian Research Council (ARC), while an additional $26 million pledge was made by the Victorian government. Australian universities were also expected to pledge a total of $25 million, to be matched by the ARC.

Senator Evans, who announced the funding, said that without proper financial support, the ongoing operation of the facility would be in doubt, despite the fact that “research conducted at the Australian Synchrotron is cutting edge and spans the science spectrum from medicine to manufacturing”.

Evans said the unique properties of synchrotron light provide experimental research results that are more accurate and clear than those obtained using traditional laboratory equipment. “That is why it is vital Australian researchers have access to a synchrotron in their own backyard.”

The synchrotron assists universities and researchers in a wide variety of research into areas including agriculture, biomedicine, environmental technologies, forensics, nanotechnology and microtechnology, pharmaceuticals and scientific instruments.

Peele said from a public perspective, the synchrotron and its scientists are involved in working on solutions to some of the world’s most pressing questions. “Questions like ‘How do we sequester CO2 which as a gas contributes to global warming?’ Or ‘How do we create new non-polluting energy sources that will allow man to sever his ties with polluting fossil fuels?’ ” Peele said.

With more than 3000 scientists using the Australian facility every year, Peele said it was very important that the facility received funding so it can remain open. “The synchrotron costs approximately $25 million a year to operate,” he said, adding that the joint funding agreement by the federal and Victorian governments will help to secure its future.

The funding, along with the ARC, which co-ordinated more than 30 universities and investment from the National Health and Medical Research Council, has also been crucial. Peele said.
Campus Review, National
10 Jul 2012, by Antonia Maiolo

Dr Danielle Martin, Scientific Support Officer – Infrared beamline

Dr Bernt Johannessen, Scientist – X-ray Absorption Spectroscopy beamline

Dr Rachel Williamson, Scientist – Macromolecular and Micro-Crystallography beamlines

Dr Tom Caradoc-Davies, Principal Scientist – Macromolecular and Micro-Crystallography beamlines

LEFT: Dr Rachel Williamson, Scientist – Macromolecular and Micro-Crystallography beamlines

BELOW: Dr Tom Caradoc-Davies, Principal Scientist – Macromolecular and Micro-Crystallography beamlines

ABOVE: Dr Bernt Johannessen, Scientist – X-ray Absorption Spectroscopy beamline
The Australian Synchrotron in Victoria.
SA moves in right direction

Victoria’s mistakes with vocational education and training can be a lesson for other states, especially for older workers.

By Malcolm King.

When one looks at what is happening in vocational education in Victoria, it’s hard not to picture a dog’s breakfast.

In South Australia, the scene is more hopeful as the state government has linked outcomes from the SA Skills for All initiative with achieving employment targets in specific industries. TAFE SA will still play a major part in delivering training and education.

This is a major step forward. Compared with the national average, South Australia has an older and more rapidly ageing population. It has a lower workforce participation rate (historically 2 to 3 per cent below the national average) and a lower proportion of the population with post-school qualifications.

It also has an under-developed training culture where employers have traditionally not made the most of vocational education for their staff.

Latest Census data shows the average South Australian is aged 39 and earns just $534 a week.

Nationally those figures are 37 years and $577 a week. That’s $2000 that didn’t go in to the pay packet of South Australians in that year. The higher level of education one has, on average, the greater the return in salary.

We know that the Australian manufacturing industry is going to be hit hard by early retirement with about 260,000 workers leaving the industry before they reach 65, with an average retirement age of 56.4
and most especially in the Iron Triangle towns of Whyalla, Port Pirie and Port Augusta.

While the fee-free Certificate I and II qualifications probably won’t get students a job initially, they hopefully will drive them on to learn more and undertake a Certificate IV and a diploma. These are the hiring qualifications of the future.

Training and education is not only important to state productivity but acts as a magnet for workers to stay within South Australia.

According to the ABS, people in the 20-39 year-old age group have accounted for 44 per cent of all South Australian departures over the past 40 years. This is a major loss to the state labour force and to the growth of its population, as these people are of child-bearing age.

We know that the Australian manufacturing industry is going to be hit hard by early retirement with about 260,000 workers leaving the industry before they reach 65, with an average retirement age of 56.4.

There is also concern that a fourth navy destroyer won’t be built in Adelaide, potentially throwing hundreds of people out of work. Healthcare, social assistance workers, including aged care workers, and construction workers are also more likely to move out of the labour force before reaching the pension age (ABS 2010).

My only reservation with the SA Skills for All initiative is ensuring that the explosion of private RTOs – many come from recruitment backgrounds and have no prior experience in training – satisfy the quality audits as determined by the state government and the AQTF.

There needs to be ongoing and close monitoring of what qualifications are being accessed and caps or incentives only considered after close consultation with relevant industries.

Already in Victoria there has been an astounding leap of people who want to become fitness instructors, masseuses or aromatherapists. According to DEEWR, there were 8000 fitness instructors operating in Australia in 1999. In the past five years, that number has grown by 36.7 per cent, compared with 13.1 per cent for all other occupations.

In South Australia, the local economy is crying out for agricultural and forestry scientists, architects, chemists, database specialists and electrical engineers. It has a plethora of fitness instructors.

Consider what the Reserve Bank governor Glenn Stevens told the Prime Minister’s Economic Forum in Brisbane recently. While the high exchange rate was not necessarily a bad thing, it did mean that businesses and governments must look at how workplaces can become more efficient.

“Better productivity is the imperative to survive,” Stevens said. Education provides the know-how to achieve better productivity, especially in manufacturing.

The call for increased quality in a market system will work as long as the state governments monitor RTO’s performance with an eagle eye.

Malcolm King is director at Republic Media in Adelaide. He was an associate director in the DEEWR Mature Age Programs in Canberra.
The danger of losing scientists and historians

Australia faces a national skills crisis as students abandon unpopular subjects such as maths, science and humanities in response to tertiary deregulation.

Student choice rather than quota systems has led to a glut of graduate skills in certain areas and a shortage in others, undermining key industries, including engineering and agriculture, and threatening our international standing as a leader in research and innovation.

In fact, fears deregulation will reduce university standards are better turned to the preservation of these essential disciplines. Australia’s chief scientist Professor Ian Chubb recognises these trends in his report, *The Health of Australian Science*, identifying agricultural sciences, physics, maths and chemistry, as “vulnerable”.

Professor Elizabeth Blackburn, the only Australian woman to have been awarded a Nobel Prize, has also called for government assistance to stop the decline of students studying tertiary-level science. The nation’s future prosperity is dependent on having a strong supply of graduates in the right areas moving through the education system, and at the moment, there are not enough students in key areas to meet future demand. If Australia continues to lose skill sets, it risks losing capacity.

Deregulation, part of the Bradley review’s target to lift the country’s current university participation rates from 17 per cent to 40 per cent by 2025, has created a new subject battleground, with the student demand-driven system resulting in the rise of popular subjects and the demise of others.

And, as funding follows students — also part of the Bradley Review – this inevitably creates a funding shortfall for “untrendy” subjects. Of course; as student numbers drop in particular areas, so too do staff numbers, and as staffing levels dry up so too does research and innovation.

The Bradley reforms need to be more than just a numbers game. For example, how sensible is it to raise university participation rates in order to be internationally competitive, but then fail to produce sufficient graduates with the mathematics and science skills it needs to be a player on the international stage?

And how do we ensure that student demand now will equate to graduate employment and skills needed three to five years down the track in a deregulated system? The deregulated sector heightens the risk of student demand failing to match employment needs.

This year, Australia’s oldest Agricultural College in Richmond, NSW, suspended its first-year offering because of insufficient enrolments – just 10 people applied. Australia, as a major food producing nation, cannot do without its own professional skills base in agriculture. We as a nation cannot allow this to occur.

The question is not whether ‘unpopular’ disciplines need to be supported and nourished for the national interest; but rather how this can be achieved in a free-market system?

How we respond to the challenges this creates is critical to the future success of our community and our culture; and to our economic viability, sustainability and competitiveness, as I cannot contemplate a successful Australian economy without, say, the historians that provide us with the wisdom of
The nation’s future prosperity is dependent on having a strong supply of graduates in the right areas moving through the education system, and at the moment, there are not enough students in key areas to meet future demand.

Yet there has been no serious attempt to date to deal with this question. We must ask ourselves whether the closing of a faculty or school should be more than a business decision by a particular university executive.

If not, how do we persuade and support a university for making decisions that may not be in their best economic interests – or may, in fact, be detrimental to these interests? These issues have a particular resonance when one considers the likelihood in the future of private providers entering the higher education sector and cherry-picking students in the more profitable and popular disciplines.

Public universities therefore face the prospect of feeling obligated to maintain unpopular disciplines while at the same time competing with private institutions with no such commitments.

And what happens when commercial decisions work against public interest or when the public interest cannot be supported by sound economic arguments? Who decides, who pays and who picks up the pieces if the wrong decisions are made?

Extensive public debate is needed to deal with these challenges before the popularity game sees Australia importing knowledge, skills and innovation rather than creating and embracing its own.

Professor Jan Thomas is vice-chancellor and president of the University of Southern Queensland.
VET reform risks the loss of economic benefits

Who loses out if governments only fund apprenticeships and diplomas, asks John Mitchell.

There is often an interest in photos of graduates in hard hats and fluorescent vests. However it is the work done at our local-college level that prepares the young people for those hard hats and provides the government with a return of $8.92 in benefits for every $1 spent at the college.

Should VET drop all other programs except apprenticeships and feeder programs for higher education? A focus on apprenticeships was promoted recently by politicians in both Victoria and Queensland, when they suggested that VET providers had lost their way and should concentrate on skills needed right now in the workforce, such as trades for the mining industry in Queensland.

An increase in feeder programs for higher education, meanwhile, is being driven by universities thirsty for new students following the uncapping of enrolment numbers. An innovative marketing slogan directed at potential TAFE students at one dual-sector university in Victoria reads “Diploma into Degree Guarantee”.

Which VET providers would hit the wall first if all the other programs were cut? While a significant number of the 5,000 registered training organisations would probably shut down, a leader in the field of adult and community education (ACE) believes that his field would suffer more than others – but the big losers will be not only ACE colleges and their students but also Australia’s economy and society.

Unusually, he has concrete evidence to back up this claim. He has published both qualitative evidence, including documented case studies, and quantitative evidence, including dollar figures derived from a formal cost benefit analysis.

Economics graduate Ron Maxwell is the CEO of the not-for-profit Western College at Dubbo, 400km from Sydney. He is passionate about the role of ACE, and champions its cause on the NSW Executive Committee of the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET).

Western College sets high standards: it is the current holder of the National Training Awards’ Community Pathways to VET award and one of its senior staff members, Kate Davis, was included in the NSW government’s Hidden Treasures honour roll for 2011, in recognition of her dedication to disadvantaged youth through her ground-breaking program, Links to Learning.

In pursuit of documented evidence of the economic and social benefits of the college’s programs, in late 2011 Maxwell commissioned me to prepare a short publication on the work of Kate Davis and her colleagues, and 11 of the programs offered by the college that have a strong element of social inclusion. These programs cater, for instance, for students who didn’t fit into normal secondary schooling, and for young Aboriginal youths recently released from jail.

Maxwell is concerned about recent statements by political leaders advocating a focus on apprenticeships and pathway programs to higher education, as neither area is a focus of his college. He also is concerned that funding seems to be drifting away from small providers like Western College and towards large organisations.

In an interview with Campus Review, he pointed out that a Skills Australia report, Skills for Prosperity: a roadmap for vocational education and training, recommended adequately resourcing the ACE sector. Yet this recommendation, he said, “seems to have been forgotten in the climate of VET reform, which seems to be aimed at imposing a template
[for] securing government funding for vocational training, based on a large institute approach”. He said he believed new or proposed funding requirements disadvantage small providers like his college.

He also believed that smaller providers like his are being tainted by association with a minority of small, dodgy providers exposed in Victoria in recent months. Small now means potentially corrupt in some people’s eyes. “The climate of VET reform seems to be born out of a belief that all small RTOs are greedy rent seekers and rip off the participant and the governments that fund them. This is not the case.”

To prove that his college delivers value for money and has also clearly delivered a strong return on all government investment in his operation, he commissioned a cost-benefit analysis of social inclusion programs at his college from the independent group of economists at Western Research Institute (WRI), an organisation with strong links to (and based within the grounds of) Charles Sturt University in Orange.

Maxwell said that the resultant WRI study “shows a very good ROI [return on investment] for governments when they fund programs at the college. The findings are important, considering governments seem to be redirecting funds into higher-level qualifications, and cutting back in many other areas.

“The study outlines our work with disadvantaged people, following on from your case-study publication for us last year, and shows a clear economic benefit – for instance, through reduced incarceration costs, additional taxes received by government when the young people are placed in employment, and the reduction of crime investigation costs.

“These benefits are invisible to the powers that be. There is often an interest in photos of graduates in hard hats and fluorescent vests. However, it is the work done at our local-college level that prepares the young people for those hard hats and provides the government with a return of $8.92 in benefits for every $1 spent at the college.

“Despite this positive economic return, and despite the Skills Australia recommendations, policy bodies overlook the ACE sector and continue to reduce funds to this field.”

The cost-benefit analysis undertaken by WRI scrutinised government funding for Western College for the 2011 calendar year, including $75,938 from the NSW Department of Education and Communities for the Links to Learning Program, $51,600 from the NSW Adult and Community Education Unit for the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program, and $57,300 from NSW Adult and Community Education Unit for the Partnering Education Program.

In return for this government investment of $184,838, the quantifiable benefits identified by WRI included a reduction in unemployment benefits, increased taxation revenue and a reduction in costs associated with the juvenile justice system. For example, the projected reduction in unemployment benefits over five years was $567,160.

The study’s major finding was that, when analysed over a five-year period, using a discount rate of seven per cent, “the programs generate a net present value of $1,368,507 and a benefit-cost ratio of 8.92. As the net present value of the programs exceeds zero, the programs can be considered an efficient use of funds”.

The programs also have “other benefits which are less easy to quantify but are nonetheless real. These include lowering the costs to the community associated with crime, and the education of future health and social workers”.

Health and social workers may not wear hard hats and fluorescent vests, “but they are in short supply in western NSW”, said Maxwell. And he has figures to prove it.

Awards set to inspire young scientists

Children fascinated by science have the chance to share in thousands of dollars for their school as part of the Young Scientist of the Year Award.

Science and Research Minister Senator Chris Evans said Australia’s young scientists were vital to the future prosperity of the nation. “Our young scientists could one day help perfect the use of solar energy, cure diseases or even find ways to help protect our communities,” Senator Evans said.

“The future of Australia’s world-class reputation in science depends on finding opportunities to spark the interest of this new generation.”

Students from schools across the country are invited to submit reports of science projects relating to this year’s Energy and the Environment award theme which recognises that 2012 is the International Year of Sustainable Energy for All.

“This competition is a great opportunity for young minds to explore and share the excitement of science and research,” Senator Evans said. “We want more students taking up science at university - but we need to foster that engagement early on.

“Opening the maths and science door to today’s students early in their education will help us meet the growing demand for skills in the changing economy.”

The NATA Young Scientists of the Year Award is open to three primary school age groups: seven and eight years, nine and 10 years and 11 and 12 years.

The winner’s school in each age group will receive a $3000 donation, with an extra $500 cash prize for each winning student or group.

Invitations have been sent to all primary schools in Australia. Entries must be received by 21 September and will be judged by a team of NATA scientists, with the winners announced in mid-October.

Doubts on class numbers

THE Federal Opposition says too much has been spent on reducing school class sizes and not enough on lifting the quality of teachers.

Opposition education spokesman Christopher Pyne says Australia’s education system is not attracting the best people.

“We have in Australia a straightjacket over how teachers are remunerated, what career progression they can expect and, as a consequence, we are not attracting the highest calibre people to the teaching profession that we should be,” he said.

He has criticised Liberal and Labor state governments for their obsession with smaller class sizes.

“There is no evidence that smaller class sizes somehow produce better student outcomes,” he said. “In spite of Australia having small class sizes for 10 years ... their outcomes have gone backwards.”

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority chairman Professor Barry McGaw said teaching standards needed to improve. He agreed that money had been wasted on reducing class sizes.

“It’s a very expensive thing to do,” Professor McGaw said. “The range in which we’ve reduced it has almost no impact on student learning.”

Greens leader Christine Milne said Australia’s education standards had slipped because of a lack of investment in the sector. She disagreed with Mr Pyne’s criticism of class sizes.

“As a former classroom teacher, I would say to you that class sizes matter,” she said.

Acting School Education Minister Chris Evans said Mr Pyne’s comments revealed the Opposition was planning to cut teacher numbers and increase class sizes.

“After months of deafening silence on education policy, this is all he can come up with — sacking teachers and squeezing more students into our classrooms,” he said.

— AAP
Let's talk facts

WHILE much has been written and said about changes to funding for the state's Vocational Education and Training 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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Peter Hall, Higher Education and Skills Minister.
Let’s talk ‘real’ facts

MR Hall, thank you for your letter in *The Express*, 9 July.

There are statistics and then there are the real statistics for your constituents.

I would like to respectfully respond noting the facts for Gippsland’s TAFEs (Advance TAFE and GippsTAFE) - not the broad statistics stated for Victoria, as detailed in your letter to the editor.

The Gippsland trends for TAFEs are at odds with the state-wide figures and appear to misrepresent the actual reality for Gippsland’s TAFEs and the VET sector.

The facts for Gippsland are that 90 courses will no longer be available for the people of Gippsland and over 60 people are now unemployed.

You responded to me some weeks ago saying that “training enrolments increased by 44 per cent, but not always in areas of economic need or with good prospective job outcomes, e.g. courses to train fitness instructors have increased 1955 per cent since 2008”.

I have reviewed the Victorian Training Market Quarterly Report Q1 2012 from 2008 to 2011, and there was a decline in enrolments for Gippsland TAFEs of five per cent, this was also mirrored for private RTOs in our region.

And more importantly in the past 12 months, Gippsland’s TAFE student enrolments grew by two per cent (Table 2.16, p26) - thus the quoted increases or blowouts to enrolments have not taken place in the Gippsland region.

There are also the added impacts to secondary school students across our region.

As quoted by the president of the peak body representing Victorian Secondary School Principals (VSSPA) “Victorian principals are deeply concerned about the cuts to TAFE funding in this year’s State Government budget. “Not only will these cuts impact severely on those who have chosen a TAFE pathway to further education but will also have significant ramifications for government secondary schools and their students.

“These cuts will mean the disappearance of many programs, and with them the resources (including teachers) required to deliver those programs. To suggest that at the moment there are skill shortages in one area rather than another and therefore that extensive cuts can be made, shows deep disdain for those most in need of education and reflects an ignorance of how training programs work.”

“... It is naive to think that those enrolled in or currently interested in, for example, catering or personal training courses will switch to carpentry or plumbing in the short to medium term, even assuming the providers could cater for an influx of students into such courses. A more likely result is that the students will drop out of education.”

You also wrote about “providers engaging in practices that appear more profit-driven than focused on the genuine skills needs of learners and industry.”

This was also quoted by State Member for East Gippsland Tim Bull. He said “some of the situations occurring were courses increasing by 5000 per cent in enrolments with some trainers offering iPads to students who enrolled, some offering $500 debit cards and some donating $1000 to a sports club each time they enrolled a member”.

I have seen no evidence of this type of behaviour by our TAFEs, quite the opposite, they are highly ethical and highly regulated (by your government via AVETMISS compliance reporting and auditing), and they serve their publics for the greater good of their communities.

You also stated in your correspondence that “substantial evidence that this uncontrolled market driven system has put the quality of the training delivered at risk”.

Elected State Governments set policy and should be monitoring outcomes and such behaviour for all RTOs.

Do not punish those that adhere to the rules, act ethically and who positively serve their communities.

The VET budget cuts to Gippsland’s TAFEs are punishing not only these institutes and their employees, but the communities they serve.

The 30 per cent reduction in Government Recurrent Funding for these TAFEs will have lasting effects for many years to come.

It will disadvantage and marginalise your regional community - that is classified as a low socio-economy, which has poor telecommunications networks, poor public transport and very limited choice in alternative VET providers.

This decision will hinder the development of a vibrant and prosperous regional community and particularly a community that is transitioning to a carbon tax environment.

Would your politics rather people are gaining an education and increasing their chances of employment, or supporting a welfare state; individuals and families
living in poverty?
As we are all aware, this avenue delivers many downsides.
I implore you make concessions for this essential service, for the future of our region.
Please reinstate funding for Gippsland’s TAFEs and give our youth and our whole community the opportunity of physically and financially accessing quality vocational education.
S. Bardsley, Heyfield.

Fact and fiction

PETER Hall makes a defence of cuts to TAFE by suggesting that the cuts are indeed increased spending.
He also says that resources should be directed to where they are needed and do the most good. Can he explain why public education had funding cut while private education received an extra $240 million?
At present the government is having consultation regarding public housing. This consultation is conducted under the forgone conclusion that in four years public housing will be in the red. No reference to addressing the present to avoid what may happen in four years but a push to privatisation or similar.

Like the TAFE argument it is conducted from a ideological viewpoint with the result already having been framed.

Does TAFE provide not only skilled training but jobs, yes.

Does public housing provide a level of security and alleviate housing shortages for low income people, yes.

If government funding is to be based solely on economic terms and not embrace the social and long term benefits as well why are we paying $50 million for a few days of P1 racing?

G. McQuinn, Morwell.

Cuts tragic

I AM appalled and deeply saddened by the State Budget cuts to TAFE, particularly the regional TAFEs.
I have been a business administration teacher for 32 years of which 26 have been at GippsTAFE.

GippsTAFE has been the “life blood” of the Latrobe Valley and greater Gippsland for over 80 years, training thousands of students in all trades and professions.
These graduates have made, and continue to make, a significant contribution to the economic development of the region, Victoria and Australia.

GippsTAFE faces a 25 per cent budget cut which translates to a loss of dedicated and talented staff together with first-class facilities.
This is a tragedy of epic proportions.
As the immediate past staff-elected director on the board of GippsTAFE, I have been stunned at the severity and depth of the cuts.

This has put the board and management in the invidious position of re-aligning the strategic direction with drastically reduced funding, staffing and programs.

Is the State Government agenda to decimate a vibrant TAFE sector and replace it with publicly-funded, profit-driven private providers delivering many programs of dubious quality?
How can we continue to “grow Victoria” when quality TAFE training is being stashed?

Anne Huggins, Yinnar South.

Options cut

PETER Hall makes no mention of the total eradication of the long established visual arts, graphic design, multimedia and music courses from the GippsTAFE and Advance TAFE campuses in his letter (The Express, 9 July).

Dick Bishop would turn in his grave if he could see what the Liberal National State Government’s TAFE cuts have done to art and design education in Gippsland.

The Latrobe Regional Gallery runs a Memorial Prize for Dick Bishop who established TAFE Applied Art Courses in the early 1980s, offering training in the traditional arts and more recently courses in multimedia, teaching students skills in graphic and web design.

The loss of these highly skilled and relevant courses means young creatives, and mature age professionals wishing to update skills, will no longer have these options available.

The regional areas are further disadvantaged, and it is a joke that Higher Education and Skills Minister Peter Hall hasn’t resigned his position in protest.

This manoeuvre is sending the Latrobe Valley further into the Dark Ages.

The only light at the end of the tunnel is The Greens announcement on 3 July that it will restore TAFE funding and put TAFE back at the centre of vocational education and training.

Irene Proebsting, Tyers.
Kangan explores options in Sunbury

KANGAN Institute has not ruled out running classes in Sunbury, despite the state government’s funding cuts to TAFE courses in Victoria.

As reported in the Weekly earlier this year, Kangan had been in discussions with the government and other education providers about offering classes in Sunbury.

This followed Victoria University’s decision to sell its Jacksons Hill site.

Higher Education and Skills Minister Peter Hall said at the time the discussions were a “major step forward” for the community.

Since then the government has announced $300 million budget funding cuts to the TAFE sector. Kangan announced that 52 courses, including 33 at the Broadmeadows campus, would be cut.

A Kangan spokesman said last week that the institute was still looking at options in Sunbury.

“There are 250 courses with great employment outcomes [which] will continue and Kangan Institute will continue to work with Hume City to scope what might be of value in the Sunbury area.”

A Victoria University spokeswoman said the cuts wouldn’t affect any decisions it made about education in Sunbury.
UP TO 2000 AMERICANS NEEDED TO PLUG GAPS ON RESOURCES PROJECTS

Union bid to import US workers

EXCLUSIVE

EWIN HANNAN
INDUSTRIAL EDITOR

ONE of the nation’s biggest unions is negotiating to import up to 2000 skilled workers from the US on temporary visas, declaring unions will be unable to “hold back the tide” of foreigners needed to plug skill shortages on multi-billion-dollar resources projects.

The Australian can reveal that a company directly related to the union has been approved by the federal government to assess the overseas workers and is setting up facilities in Las Vegas and the states of Maine and Pennsylvania for offshore testing from October.

The stand taken by the Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union is likely to come under attack from rival union leaders who have spearheaded a campaign against increased foreign labour.

Peter Tighe, the union’s national secretary, said he had held talks with employers in the US in May about bringing between 1000 to 2000 electrical workers to Australia to work on local resource projects.

“...the ballpark figure Bechtel was talking about was somewhere between 1000 to 2000 workers, depending on their needs,” Mr Tighe said.

Ms King said Future Skills International had “discussions with Bechtel in the States...about the recruitment of unemployed (electrical workers) from the States”.

Mr Tighe and Ms King said they were also involved in negotiations with Queensland electricity retailer Ergon Energy about assessing between 80 and 150 electrical workers in Ireland before bringing them to Australia to fill skill shortages in regional Queensland.

Mr Tighe acknowledged that the union’s Queensland branch “deso have an interest” in Future Skills International.

Continued on Page 6
Union bid to import American workers

“Continued from Page 1

“It is a commercial venture,” he said. “I don’t know if they have actually run at a profit as yet.

“If the company makes some money, the Queensland ETU (Electrical Trades Union) state-registered organisation would be entitled to any profits or to any dividends that would come out of the company. But they may not get a profit.”

Ms King said Future Skills International proposed to charge $2100 to foreign workers to conduct individual assessments, but fees charged for the assessment of workers in three US facilities would be by negotiation.

She said the organisation faced substantial upfront costs from conducting offshore assessments, including flights, accommodation and the establishment of training facilities.

Mr Tighe said he would support companies bringing overseas workers provided they could demonstrate they had made a “bona fide attempt to source labour in Australia first”.

“We have told (companies) we’re prepared to talk to you about it, but be aware that what we want is for any labour that comes in from the US, we want them assessed offshore to make sure they meet our criteria. And then we want the same sort of arrangement that (Gina Rinehart’s) Roy Hill has got, where you have got to go to the jobs board to make sure that you try to source your labour in Australia first,” he said.

“Once all our members have got jobs in the resources sector that want to be employed there, what do we do about the shortfall? Where do we get them from?

“Isn’t it better for the union to sit down with companies and make sure that there are skilled workers coming in here, that come in during the peak periods, that are paid properly, and that work in a manner you would expect in relation to electrical safety? Our view is, to an extent, we won’t be able to hold back the tide. From our perspective, if we can’t hold back the tide, we at least ought to be in the game to try and control it to make sure it’s a genuine process.”

The government promised the “jobs board” after a union backlash in May over the decision to allow Mrs Rinehart to import 1700 foreign workers using an “enterprise migration agreement”.

Australian Workers Union national secretary Paul Howes questioned what “political genius” had made the decision, and how it fitted with Wayne Swan’s recent attack on vested interests and mining magnates. Unions also targeted Special Minister of State Gary Gray and demanded the jobs board, which will advertise available jobs, be compulsory for companies looking for workers.

A spokesman for Immigration Minister Chris Bowen said yesterday that the jobs board applied only to EMAs and would not apply to workers coming to Australia on 457 visas. “The 457 visa program is an uncapped, demand-driven program designed to address genuine skills gaps that cannot be filled locally,” he said.

“The government has implemented a series of reforms to ensure employers only sponsor overseas workers when they are unable to fill the position locally.

“Firstly, the sponsoring employer must demonstrate a commitment to training Australians, and attest in writing that they have a strong record of, or a demonstrated commitment to, the employment of Australian citizens and permanent residents.

“Importantly, the employer must also provide overseas workers with the same terms and conditions of employment as those provided to Australians performing the same work.

“This means overseas workers are only hired where there is a genuine skills vacancy and that they cannot be used to undercut local wages or labour costs.”
Non-unis ‘vital’ to bridging skills gap

JOHN ROSS

AS it prepares to confer its first bachelor of nursing degrees next Monday, Holmesglen Institute has called for courses in other skill-shortage occupations to be funded outside universities.

Chief executive Bruce Mackenzie said the government could not tackle skill shortages or achieve its social inclusion objectives if government-funded higher education places remained exclusive to universities.

He said non-universities should be able to deliver subsidised programs in areas such as building, accounting, health sciences and early childhood education, as long as professional accreditation bodies endorsed their courses.

Mr Mackenzie said most of Holmesglen’s first graduating class of 29 nursing students would have struggled to gain entry into university because they lacked Australian Tertiary Admission Rank scores. Just four had higher school qualifications in a class stacked with mature-age students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

“They’re a classic case study of how, if you give Commonwealth-supported places to non-universities in skill shortage areas, you get a very different group of students coming through and into the workforce,” he said.

“You start to develop a much more inclusive, fairer society.”

He said the profile of the nursing students matched other degree classes at Holmesglen.

“There’s a whole cohort of people, whatever reason, are staying outside the university system.

“The opening up of CSPs would give those students a chance to complete their undergraduate qualifications under the same financial arrangements we give to other people, for no good reason other than that they’re mainly 18 years of age and have just completed Year 12.”

Holmesglen fought a 30-month battle and academic and union opposition to get its course approved, before obtaining funded places in 2009. As a non-university, it needed endorsement from the state’s education and training regulator as well as the Nurses Board of Victoria.

It faced another challenge after the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council took over in mid-2010. Its standards specified a “university-based bachelor degree” as the minimum qualification for registered nurses.

However, under new standards likely to be approved late this month, non-university nursing courses are acceptable as long as the providers have the appropriate accreditation from the higher education regulator TEQSA.

Mr Mackenzie described the change as a “crumbling of the edifice”.

Nevertheless, Holmesglen’s nursing places remain capped at 40 a year, while universities are free to enrol as many nursing students as they can. Mr Mackenzie said the government had offered no justification for this “arbitrary arrangement”.

Holmesglen Institute
TAFE colleges, with their "master and apprentice" model of teaching, are better suited to developing skills of students seeking careers in the arts than institutions run by cash-strapped and theory-focused universities, one of the nation's most respected arts festivals director says.

"If schools of music or conservatoriums are having problems with their host universities because of budget issues, is there a better way to do it?" Robyn Archer said after delivering the keynote address at the National Vocational Education and Training Research Conference in Adelaide last Friday.

"A cellist will get the history of music, I guess, but what else would they get in a university that they wouldn't get if serious music training became a part of vocational training?"

Archer, the creative director of the Centenary of Canberra, used her speech to rally against the perceptions that the arts do not require skills training and a university degree is the only ticket to a job.

She said the recent drama at the Australian National University, which has proposed job cuts and slashed funding to its School of Music, should be a wake-up call.

"The prestige associated with the words "conservatorium" or "school of music" is almost unassailable," she said. "Yet, the current case of the School of Music at the ANU should send a warning.

"While students, parents and particularly staff who have degrees at universities would surely laugh at what they’d consider the ludicrous proposition that serious classical music could be taught through vocational training systems, one just has to look at how very vulnerable the music school or conservatorium relationship is with its host university at any number of Australian states."

**MARK SCHLIEBS**
HECS not enough to ensure equal access

THE record $23 billion debt owed on university student loans has been a topic of conversation recently. But every year is a historic year and every year the debt increases by about $2bn.

In historical terms, the debt is unremarkable. It is also expected. Its increase is driven by two main components: the rise in the amount the government charges and the rise in the number of university students. Given the current policy trajectory, the debt will balloon out even further.

But that’s where the historic debt alarm fizzes out. The rest of the scheme’s particulars have been stable over time. Since HECS was introduced in the late 1980s, about 1.1 million students have paid off their debt; that’s just under half of all students who have accessed the scheme to date.

In 2010, 17 per cent of these students paid the debt upfront and received a 20 per cent discount. (The discount has since been reduced to 10 per cent).

Taking into account those still in the system or still paying it off — which takes an average of eight years — about 78 per cent of all students will eventually pay off their HECS debt. So 22 per cent of the $23bn is doubtful debt or unlikely ever to be repaid.

This is not the same as the bad debts that have been the demise of overseas banks. Doubtful debt is primarily a function of the conditions under which graduates are required to repay their loans. Currently, a graduate needs to earn just under $50,000 a year before they are required to start paying off the debt. Some don’t meet this income threshold, such as the unemployed, those starting families, who have moved overseas or who have died.

One story, seldom explored in public and academic arenas, is the impact of HECS debts on students, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

All the research to date — and there has been a bit of it — says that HECS has no deleterious effect on low SES students accessing higher education.

Missed in this account is what low SES students gain access to. The distribution of students shows that low SES students are overrepresented in courses with the lowest HECS fees (about $5500 a year) in courses such as humanities, social sciences, visual and performing arts, education and so on.

Whereas high-SES students are over-represented in high-fee courses (about $9500 a year) such as law, dentistry, medicine, accounting and economics. We could make the same comparisons in relation to university types.

In assigning levels of debt, these HECS bands — introduced by the Howard government — have the effect of reproducing the socioeconomic stratification of Australian society. The debt levels that students are able or willing to bear has considerable impact on their lives after graduation, for example, in what employment and income they can secure.

But the impact doesn’t stop there. Carrying a HECS debt diminishes the size of the mortgage a couple can afford, including the debt of a partner who may not be working, with flow-on effects on the quality of the house or area in which they are able to purchase. The research also shows that the debt delays the timing of when couples choose to start a family.

The real story about HECS is that funding access to higher education is not enough. HECS may be assisting more Australians to access university. But simply having a degree will not guarantee the good life that many claim it will. The real story, the real equity question to ask, is what kind of higher education different kinds of students are able to access.

Trevor Gale is professor of education policy and social justice at Deakin University
Aboriginal enrolments on an upwards trend

JOHN ROSS

WHEN Blake Tatafu was growing up in Penrith, in Sydney’s west, most of his Aboriginal friends didn’t share his plans for higher education.

“They saw university as some sort of institution of segregation and discrimination,” the 19-year-old social development student at the University of Western Sydney says. “They thought there was no support for the cultural aspects of Aboriginal life, and it was very much a controlled environment.”

Going into his second year, Tatafu noticed a change. “I saw a lot of my friends and I thought, ‘They must be working here.’”

“A lot of the people who had no intention to enrol are now my peers at uni.”

With the gap starting to contract in indigenous attendance, Tatafu tried to tackle a gap in indigenous representation, founding the Indigenous Student Collective this year. UWS rules required at least 10 members but the group started with 40 and is now “touching on” 100.

Last year’s higher education student statistics, which have been released unusually early by the federal tertiary education department, tell a similar story of growing indigenous involvement.

The number of Aborigines starting undergraduate degrees has risen 37 percent since 2007, after barely changing for six years. Postgraduate commencements are also resurgent after falling in the first half of last decade.

The figures suggest indigenous students are also persisting with their studies. Degree completions exceeded 1000 for the first time after increasing 22 percent last year. Masters, honours and graduate certificate completions are also at record levels, while the number of doctorates awarded to indigenous students has doubled in the past three years to 37.

Peter Buckskin, dean of indigenous scholarship, engagement and research at the University of South Australia, says universities are nurturing promising Aboriginal undergraduates and encouraging them to apply for postgraduate places. He says some universities also have professorial places dedicated to indigenous research, ensuring supervisors understand the context of indigenous students’ research.

National Indigenous Postgraduate Association president Adrian Hepi says completion is the key. “Ten years ago enrolments were fantastic, but in second and third year the completion rate was abysmal. It’s great to see universities finally (offering) extra support.”

Hepi, who’s studying for his masters in public health, stresses the importance of tuition assistance, “away-from-base learning”, scholarships and employer support. “I wouldn’t be in the position I am today without the support of my employer.”

Tatafu says UWS’s Badanami Centre for Indigenous Education had “helped me with my transition. I felt very cautious as well as excited because I thought, how am I going to be this independent person? But the staff there helped me along as well as all the other students. That reputation rolled off.”

Buckskin says he expects to see continuing improvements in indigenous participation. “More and more we’re seeing higher education becoming a destination for our people,” he says.
Blake Tatafu, a student at University of Western Sydney, says more of his peers are attending uni
'DRIFT DOWN' SENDS A WARNING SIGNAL ABOUT ADMISSION POLICIES

Retention rates slump at fast five

JOHN ROSS

THE five fastest-growing universities recorded their lowest progress rates last year, as more students struggled in an expanding university system. Macquarie, Swinburne, Canberra, Western Sydney and the Australian Catholic universities saw student progress rates retreat after recruiting aggressively in 2010 and last year.

The five had over-enrolled by between 25 per cent and 40 per cent in the two years, taking advantage of the doubling of the over-enrolment buffer to 10 per cent in the lead-up to this year’s uncapping of higher education places.

The progress rates of their domestic undergraduates declined by between 1.5 and five percentage points over the period. Progress rates, or the proportion of units completed successfully, are considered by some academics to be the gold-standard measure of the success of teaching programs.

The five universities said retention was a sector-wide issue, and variations to progress rates should not be considered in isolation of financial pressures and labour market conditions.

A University of Canberra spokesman said higher education expansion should be celebrated. “If this results in a slightly lower progress rate, despite a university’s best efforts at support, it may be viewed as one part of a generally progressive policy.”

The average progress rate at the 38 public universities reached a historic low, sliding to 84 per cent last year after ranging between 85 per cent and 87 per cent over the previous decade.

Vin Massaro, an honorary professorial fellow at the University of Melbourne’s L H Martin Institute, cautioned against reading too much into what was traditionally a variable figure, although he said the “drift down” in progress rates did send a warning signal about admission policies and support for underprivileged students.

He said universities with progress rates below 80 — typically outer suburban and regional universities — needed to take particular note of the trend. “They tend to take more students from low socio-economic status backgrounds as well as students with lower Australian Tertiary Admission Rank scores.

“Both groups need a lot more support to succeed. It may be that the amount of support that’s funded isn’t sufficient to cater for the policy direction.”

Professor Massaro said low-SES students attracted a 10 per cent loading from a finite pool of extra funding. There was no extra loading for low-ATAR students.

The 2011 student statistics, released by the Tertiary Education Department last week, show that low-SES enrolments have jumped about 26 per cent in three years after barely changing over the previous eight years. Professor Massaro said the government’s policy
of widening access to university was “obviously working”, but it would not achieve much unless retention could be maintained.

“That problem of getting them through first year has always been the big issue,” he said. “If you start losing them in that first year, it’s difficult to get them back again.”

While the decline in retention tended to be pronounced in universities that had expanded most aggressively, the University of NSW bucked the trend. It recorded its highest progress rate of 92 despite over-enrolling by 23 per cent. Melbourne and the Australian National University, which have avoided rapid expansion, also maintained their progress rates at about 92 per cent.

Pro-Vice-Chancellor (students) Wai Fong Chua credited “a series of unobtrusive engagement strategies” with helping to improve retention at UNSW, including transition programs, stress counselling, mentoring and peer support and newly recruited early intervention advisers.

He said UNSW had been able to maintain its international student numbers and this had helped alleviate budgetary pressures on domestic courses.

### Course progression (%) 2011 2009

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Source: Department of Innovation
ASYLUM PLAN

Unis do a backflip

By CHRIS McLENNAN

THE State Government admits attempts to convert several of Victoria's imposing old asylums into universities have failed.

A 1990s government initiative, only Ararat is still operating after being converted into a TAFE wine training centre.

La Trobe University is in a fight with the Beechworth community over the sale of its campus, the former Mayday Hills Lunatic Asylum.

Mayday Hills Heritage Oval group secretary Harvey Anderssen said the university had withdrawn from the site and the “experiment” was over.

“The maintenance costs on those old buildings are enormous and ongoing,” Mr Anderssen said. “That was the final straw.”

Victoria University is deciding how to extricate itself from involvement with the former Sunbury Lunatic Asylum.

Former campus advisory group member and local historian Peter Free said the Government had promised not to sell the building until another solution to provide tertiary education in the region was found.

“So much money has been spent there and it’s such a wonderful facility we hope someone else can make use of it,” he said.

Aside from community groups, ghost tours, a radio station at Sunbury and healing spa at Beechworth, two ex-asylums are empty.

Beechworth, Ararat and Kew were all built to look elegant and civilised and to avoid other asylums’ jail-like appearance.

Victoria University, gifted the Sunbury asylum by the Government in the 1990s, poured $40 million into its restoration only to abandon it a decade later.

Locals, still desperate for a tertiary school, say time is running out before it falls into disrepair.

Higher Education Minister Peter Hall said he had taken “a personal interest” in the Sunbury and Beechworth sites.

Beechworth residents and Indigo Shire ratepayers oppose La Trobe University’s plan for the Mayday Hills asylum project.

Low student numbers and a $1 million-a-year maintenance cost forced Beechworth’s hospitality campus to close last year.

It is believed residential lots are planned for the 100ha site.
Opportunities are diverse in Australian agriculture, writes JOE LUDWIG

The forecast for Australian agriculture is positive and our whole country is out of drought for the first time in a decade.

Now is the right time to promote the job opportunities in agriculture.

We need to improve education and skills to ensure our industry remains competitive and profitable into the future.

Victorian Nationals Senator Bridget McKenzie said there was work to be done in agriculture skills (Weekly Times, June 27).

I agree and encourage her to get on board and promote the work the government and industry are doing in this area.

The agricultural industry employs about 320,000 across a wide range of occupations and with varying skill levels.

This diversity makes training and educating the workforce a challenging and complex responsibility.

As well, years of drought and competition from the mining sectors have made careers in agriculture less appealing.

The Government and industry bodies are actively working to address these challenges.

We want to ensure agriculture is front and centre as we build a highly skilled and innovative workforce.

There is a clear trend towards the development of a unified and coherent industry approach to identifying the challenges, priorities and strategies to deal with many of the existing workforce issues.

The Government announced $1.75 billion funding over five years to assist people in accessing the skills and qualifications they need.

This is good news for agriculture. Students studying diplomas and advanced diplomas in areas such as agriculture, agribusiness management, aquaculture, animal technology, forest and forest products will be able to access a HECS-style loan to reduce upfront costs while gaining entitlement to Certificate III courses.

We have also increased the number of agriculture course places this year and given them the highest rate of government funding for higher education students.

The number of government-funded places in regional universities has also been increased.

Through the National Workforce Development Fund, the Government has, so far, agreed to support 23 agriculture industry driven projects to support the training of 1205 new and existing workers.

We will contribute $3.7 million towards these projects, with industry contributing $2.9 million. This is a partnership model that puts industry at the heart of training, ensuring it is delivered and driven by the needs and demands of business and industry.

State governments are responsible for the allocation of funding for particular courses under their training budgets.

It is disappointing that in some areas, such as Victoria, cuts to TAFE funding are making accessing skills education close to home more difficult.

Too often we hear agriculture being talked down.

Drought and difficult years for our farmers have hardly made agriculture an appealing choice to those hearing about the wealth of the mining sector.

We all need to play a role in explaining the vast array of jobs in the sector and the rewards which come with them.

The work we do now to invest in skills, training and to promoting agricultural industries is vital.

- Senator Joe Ludwig is the federal Minister for Agriculture
Bright future: The Government is committed to agriculture courses and building up skills
Gen F for a future

WHEN the Victorian Farmers Federation decided to focus on the youngsters in agriculture, it formed the Young Agribusiness Professionals or YAPs.

This gave farmers aged 18 to 35 involved in agriculture and agribusiness a chance to further their skills and follow their passion.

With the average age of farmers sitting at 57, the YFP was keen to get young people involved by giving them a voice.

Dubbed Generation F (for food and fibre), the group has its work cut out.

This year’s YAPs committee was announced two weeks ago, with grains and wool producer Aaron Sanderson named chair.

Aaron works on the family farm at St Arnaud and couldn’t be more passionate about what he does.

The Sandersons have farmed “Bromley Park” for about 120 years, making the 26-year-old the fifth generation to do so.

Aaron had to take over the farm when he was just a 20-year-old apprentice, after his father died in a car accident.

Aaron crops 1400ha sown to wheat, barley, milling oats, lupins, peas, beans and canola and runs 5000 Merinos on the balance of the 2400ha property.

Aaron said he was always going to be a farmer.

“I never considered anything else,” he said.

During shearing he employs three shearers and two rouseabouts.

They are nearly all young, which is the way Aaron likes it.

“I always employ young guys around my age or younger,” Aaron said.

“I feel that in order to attract and retain young people you’ve got to start young and show them there’s a future in it.”

He is also keen to use his role in the YAPs to attract more women to the industry.

“I think there is an unfortunate perception out there that women aren’t physically as capable for farming — but farming has changed,” he said.

“I’ve had female friends who have come home to the farm and encountered that stigma, but now they’re kicking goals.

“I hate it whenever I hear people say there’s not a place for women on farms because there is.

“We need more women in agriculture, there’s no doubt about that.”

With the recent announcement the State Government will cut $300 million from TAFE funding, the YAPs committee is worried agriculture courses will be the first to suffer.

YAPs put in a submission to the higher education sector six months ago to provide feedback on the farming skills shortage.

“You do get scared when you hear a figure like that,” he said.

“At the moment the tertiary education system is producing 700 graduates a year and the industry needs 4000.

“It’s a massive shortfall and we’re screaming out.

“Victoria is a powerhouse, but without skilled labour we’re not going to be able to keep up with demand.

“The Government needs to prove it values agriculture as an industry and understands its role in food security.”

For these reasons, Aaron said YAPs is one of the most important things he’s done.

“We’re going to be the next ones at the forefront of innovation, growth and technology,” he said.

“We’re so lucky to be the forerunners of the agricultural market and we have to make the most of that.”

The new YAPs committee will meet for the first time on July 17, where they’ll set the agenda for the year ahead.

Hot topics will include improving the image of agriculture, getting agriculture on to the curriculum, the high entry costs of starting out, the effects of foreign investment and increasing the number of graduates.

“Generation F will encourage young people in agriculture to come up with practical solutions to improve the future of their industry,” Aaron said.

“We have a talented bunch of people in the industry, and it’s time we start listening to them.”

Aaron believes the best way to attract and retain people in agriculture is school-based education, starting at kindergarten.

“It is by making sure kids know where their milk, eggs, bread and meat come from, and that farmers are doing everything in an environmentally-friendly, sustainable way, that we might bridge that rural versus city divide,” he said.

“It’s about letting kids know it’s a viable career option.

“It’s financially rewarding and I don’t think young people realise they can generate a higher income than many town jobs.

“There’s also the perception that to be involved in agriculture you have to be working hands on, but you can be working in Collins St and you can be a financial planner or consultant or agribusiness professional.”

Now, the work begins.

With Victoria exporting $8.7 billion of food and fibre last year alone, (27 per cent of the Australian total) and Agriculture Minister Peter Walsh hoping to double this by 2032, the industry has its work cut out.

Gen F will present its strategy to the Victorian Government next year.
Challenge on: Fifth-generation sheep and grain farmer Aaron Sanderson is helping to give young farmers a voice.