Rural punishment

THIS week I felt the impact of the state government’s agenda to privatise and downgrade the TAFE system. As well as teaching apprentices in a skills shortage area, I also assess people who have no formal qualifications for RPL (recognised prior learning). Until July 1, this service was free and benefited local community and employers alike, as their workforces were upskilled. Now anyone eligible for assessment must pay approximately $2500 or more.

Most National Party members will struggle to retain their seats as the impact of savage cuts and enforced fees take hold and the community finds it has nowhere to send their children for vocational education. Why are Ted Baillieu and Peter Hall punishing TAFE and rural Victoria?

Alan Long, Moe
Greens backtrack on school funding

By JOSH GORDON
STATE POLITICAL EDITOR

THE Greens have been forced to back away from a policy to scale back Commonwealth funding for private schools after the Catholic education system urged voters to back Labor in the Melbourne byelection.

In a scramble to minimise damage ahead of tomorrow's poll, Greens federal deputy leader Adam Bandt has written to parents promoting the Greens do not support funding cuts for Catholic education.

It follows a report this week in The Age that Catholic Education has written to hundreds of parents across the electorate warning that the Greens are planning to slash funding for Catholic education and restrict local decision making in Catholic schools.

The letter, sent by Catholic Education chief executive Stephen Elder, appears to endorse Labor candidate Jennifer Kanis over Greens candidate Cathy Oke, saying “only the ALP has committed to fair funding for Catholic schools”.

Mr Bandt, who holds the federal seat of Melbourne, was yesterday forced into damage control, writing to parents saying the Greens wanted to increase not cut private school funding and pointing out that the party supported the recommendations of the Gonski review of higher education.

“The federal government and Gonski have said that no sector — including Catholic education — would have its funding cut if the Gonski recommendations were funded and implemented,” Mr Bandt says in the letter.

But Greens education policy published on its national website says the party supports “the maintenance of the total level of Commonwealth funding for private schools at 2003-04 levels”. That suggests an annual cut of up to $200 million.

Mr Bandt said the Greens’ “consistent position” for some time now is for the full funding and implementation of the Gonski review, delivering a $5 billion injection into government and non-government schools.

Labor, which will face a battle to retain the seat, yesterday leapt on the apparent discrepancy. State Opposition Leader Daniel Andrews said: “From AM to PM we have seen an extraordinary about-turn from a Greens Party that is clearly in panic mode. Isolating Catholic education for funding cuts is based more on ideology rather than a clear understanding about the important role the Catholic education system plays in educating our children.”

The Greens yesterday pledged to introduce legislation to make it easier for firefighters with cancer to access compensation.
Real skills for real jobs

Australian governments spend billions of dollars a year training people in various vocational and further education courses. “Who can argue with the theory of investing in a better skilled workforce? In providing school leavers or the unemployed with improved qualifications? In raising the general education level to better match the economy of the future?” Yet so much of this money is misdirected towards the wrong courses, ineffective in improving skills and inadequate in meeting employer needs. Good intentions, and good money, count for little.

Only about 30 per cent of students doing vocational education courses even complete them. A large proportion of the extra funding over the past few years went on low-level, cut-price, short-term courses that did little beyond provide jobs and easy money for trainers offering programs of dodgy quality.

This seems even more of a waste — and politically highly sensitive — given Australia is suffering from a massive skills shortage that can only be addressed by importing skilled workers on temporary visas. Only 20 per cent of people on these 457 visas work as tradies. The rest fill gaps in areas ranging from engineering to medicine. But unions are still complaining.

So Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans has announced a revamped government body, the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, to try to alter the whole dynamic. The idea is to give industry a stronger voice to ensure the investment “delivers the skills that industry and the economy need, in the right place at the right time”.

The move has been welcomed by the various employer associations. The chief executive of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Peter Anderson, said yesterday that matching skills to available jobs and increasing participation was a crucial part of the productivity puzzle.

“Active input from industry will help keep the agency and the sector on its toes, and make sure training is directed at real jobs and real careers, not just training for training’s sake,” he said.

But the fiasco of Victoria’s move to a supposedly more market-based, demand-driven system demonstrates how the private sector’s role can be distorted without strict controls.

Three years ago, the then Brumby government offered a form of voucher that guaranteed access to training. The federal government got the agreement of other states last April to offer a similar version through a national training entitlement as part of a new funding package.

The Baillieu government is now warning of the costs and potential for mismanagement. It has just announced big cutbacks to the scheme. That includes reductions for the state-run technical and further education sector as well as the private colleges that proliferated under the voucher system.

Canberra’s discussion paper yesterday noted the number of taxpayer-funded students in creative arts in Victorian VET increased by one-third between 2008 and 2010 even though only a tiny proportion ended up employed in these areas.

“The oversupply of fitness instructor training in Victoria is now almost legendary,” it said.

The federal government is, of course, blaming the Baillieu government for not regulating private providers adequately and reining in low-quality courses. It insists its version will be much better managed and targeted.

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CANBERRA – Federal Skills Minister Chris Evans says low-skilled jobs are disappearing from the economy and the workforce will need to adapt quickly.

A new government agency, launched yesterday by the minister, will work with industry to lift the level of skills among Australia’s workforce.

“We have enormous opportunities in Australia as a result of the growth in the economy,” Senator Evans said. That economic growth would create enormous opportunities for people to move into high-skilled and well-paid jobs.

“Low-skilled jobs are disappearing from the economy as a result of technology (and) structural changes,” he said.

The new Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency replaces Skills Australia and will work to identify and close skills shortages within Australia’s workforce.

The agency will be led by Philip Bullock, who is the former managing director of IBM Australia.

Its board will include serving RBA board member Heather Ridout and Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief Peter Anderson.

— AAP
Jobs ‘will be skilled and will pay more’

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That growth would create opportunities for people to move into high-skilled and well-paid jobs.

“Low-skilled jobs are disappearing from the economy as a result of technology and structural changes,” he said.

While industry should always offer jobs to Australians first, there would still be a place for skilled foreign workers, particularly in the health sector.

“If it wasn’t for Indian doctors and Irish nurses we would be closing wards in Australia,” Senator Evans said.
It's a tough job getting workers to relocate

By DANIEL BURDON, APN

GETTING people to relocate for work is one of the biggest drivers of skills shortages in regional Australia, a Federal Government discussion paper released yesterday has confirmed.

The paper, on Australia’s skills and workforce needs, is looking to industry to fill the gaps on what could be done to battle skills shortages across a range of sectors.

In launching the paper, Skills Minister Chris Evans (pictured) outlined a future where lower-skilled workers would be in less demand while highly skilled workers with tertiary qualifications will continue to be in high demand. A major challenge in regional areas was labour mobility with the report revealing that only 8% of applicants were willing to move from the east to Western Australia, and just 8% willing to move for jobs in mining.

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A desperate skilled workforce shortage in agribusiness could put Australia’s food security at risk unless it is urgently addressed, according to Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Education Senator Fiona Nash.

The Nationals Deputy Senate Leader raised the concerns in the wake of a damning Senate Committee report on Higher Education and Skills Training in Agriculture and Agribusiness in Australia tabled last week.

“The inquiry heard that the agriculture industry needs 4000 graduates a year to fill vacancies, yet there are currently only 700,” Senator Nash said.

“The reasons for the long term decline of agriculture and agribusiness education in Australia are complex but they do include an ageing workforce, competition from the mining industry and the high cost of this type of education from both the students’ and the tertiary education institutions’ perspectives.

“What we do know is that the government needs to act now or face a much more serious crisis in the near future.”

Sen Nash said a key committee recommendation the government must implement is the facilitation of a new national peak industry representative body for the agricultural and agribusiness sectors.

She said the ‘paddock to plate’ peak body would represent the entire food chain including finance, educators, farmers and the transport sector.

“The Government ignored the reports of its 2010 Higher Education Base Funding Review which identified agriculture-related courses as in need of additional Government funding,” Sen Nash said.

“The Government has also cut research funding at a time when half of all agricultural researchers are expected to retire by 2018 and just one in five agricultural graduates are in further study one year after graduation.”

NSW Farmers rural affairs committee chair Sarah Thompson said Federal and state governments must take a long term view of the issues around agricultural education.

“You can’t just address university numbers without looking at the curriculum for primary and secondary levels,” she said.

“Studies show that the greatest return on human capital investment occurs in the preschool and schooling years.

“If we don’t get the curriculum right now we will continue chasing our tail.”
Welcome to the land down under

The Federal Government has announced a plan to attract more skilled workers from America, to remedy the skills shortage we have in Australia, writes Paul Skelton.

With the demand for skilled construction workers likely to peak over the next three to five years as a number of resource projects are due to commence, the government has recognised the potential to match that demand with a growing supply of workers in the US.

In fact, unemployment figures from the US indicate there are more unemployed Americans than there are people in Australia.

Now, new measures will allow workers from the US in licensed occupations, such as electricians, to be granted immediate access to provisional Australian licences upon arrival in our country. And a skills assessment process will assure Australian employers that the skills of US workers will align with their needs.

"The current temporary migration program has attracted reasonable numbers of US citizens with particular skills, but mainly in the professional areas," says Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Science and Research, Senator Chris Evans.

"But there's been some interest for a while now among American companies and large Australian employers in attracting some skilled labour from the US."

Senator Evans says government projections show the Australian workforce growing from about 30,000 currently to 75,000 or more workers required in the construction industries.

"There's going to be a spike in our civil construction workforce that we're going to have to meet. We're obviously very committed to training more Australians in the first instance, and we've invested heavily in training and giving opportunities to Australians to pick up skills. But the reality is we will have a peak in the workforce demands.

"You don't want to train for the peak because that will just leave you with people who will be unable to find work when the peak subsides. So the Minister for Immigration and I have been working on plans to allow us to meet the skills needs of the Australian economy during that peak period."

In the past, Australia hasn't had strong recognition arrangements with the US. Tradespeople needed to be assessed onshore, which could mean waiting months between entry and starting work. Under the new skills assessment process, US workers will be assessed against Australian regulatory requirements before entering Australia, providing certainty to applicants and employers.

"We already have these sorts of arrangements in place with places like the Philippines and India," Senator Evans says.

"These arrangements were first implemented as a sort of risk management technique when employers were complaining that perhaps we had people arriving who didn't have the skill set that was required. So we put in place these overseas assessments to make sure that when an employer brought someone into Australia they were confident they had the right skills."

The Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Senator Chris Bowen, says the plan is actually a measure to create Australian jobs.

"In Australia we have no trouble attracting skilled migrants. The real challenge is ensuring we attract the skills needed in Australia with our booming economy," he says.

"There are economies in countries around the world which are facing very difficult, and different, circumstances to ours and we need to work together to ensure that skilled workers who are looking for work have the capacity to fill some of the gaps that we are facing here."

Australia is currently home to approximately 80,000 457 Visa workers,
across all sectors, from around the world. The US is our third largest source of 457 migration, with workers in the country for between one and four years.

“The biggest risk to some of our resources projects being completed in Australia is actually getting the necessary skills, the highly specialised skills in many cases, to ensure that we have the right mix of skills available.

“When you have economic activity and such big projects being undertaken, it is vital that we have the access to the labour necessary to ensure that those projects proceed and to ensure that jobs are created, in the best interest of the Australian economy and Australian workers.

“Because of this need, we are not setting a target, or a cap, or a limit. The important thing is the fit, making sure that the people we bring to Australia actually fit the skills required in Australia.”

Interestingly, the peak industry body, the National Electrical and Communications Association (NECA), was not consulted by the government on their plans.

NECA chief executive James Tinslay says the electrical industry would need convincing that any program to assess electricians overseas on their suitability for an Australian licence and their suitability for working in Australian conditions had very strong control measures in place.

“NECA represents electrical contractors across Australia and it is these contractors who would eventually employ electricians from the US, so it is surprising that we have not been consulted on plans to assess their suitability for work in Australia,” he says.

“Employers in our industry would need to be satisfied that a robust assessment process has been developed to assess electricians in the US, or any other country for that matter, before they agreed to employ a worker from overseas that has been granted an Australian licence under the new government program.”

James says NECA welcomes any program that aims to address skill shortages in the industry, but believes closer consultation with industry is key in implementing programs that are viable for the industry.

“Australia's wiring and electrical standards vary markedly from many parts of the world, including the US. Although electricians from the US also have high electrical safety standards, they need to study and be assessed against the relevant Australian standards.

“This process may take up to 12 months, during which time they may be able to access a provisional licence, but this means they would not be able to undertake electrical work without constant supervision of a licensed electrician.”

NECA is calling on the government to discuss this program with the electrical industry before it is rolled out.

In May, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship held its first Skills Expo in Houston, Texas to put potential employers in touch with skilled workers who are interested in exploring the opportunity of working in Australia.
A word from the CEO

As we approach the end of the financial year and reflect on the challenges of doing business in this two-speed economy, where a large majority of contractors are enduring a prolonged period of slow trading, NECA is busy advocating and working with industry to not only ensure business does not get any tougher, but hopefully that we can remove some of the risks associated with running a business in these uncertain times.

Firstly, NECA has been watching with great interest the claims by the unions regarding apprentices living below the poverty line. It is a difficult issue for the employer to enter into discussions about and undoubtedly the Award wage rates for apprentice electricians are not high, but the work these unlicensed apprentice electricians can undertake is strictly limited, too. The decision of the Fair Work Australia review will be announced late this year, and NECA has provided comprehensive submissions outlining the economic and practical reasons for maintaining apprentice wage rates that are affordable for small businesses.

Completion rates for apprentices and trainees across all industry sectors in Australia certainly need improvement. Completion rates for electrical apprentices on average are in the low 60% range but those figures are somewhat distorted by apprentices changing employers or colleges and being issued with a number which results in some double counting. However, completion rates can be higher.

NECA and the group training schemes in which it is involved employ some 2,000 apprentices. Completion rates in these group training schemes are hovering over 90% because of quality advice to potential apprentices, their parents and vocational advisers. Mix this with a targeted and a smart selection process and continuous mentoring and pastoral care and the completion rates will improve across the board.

Research has shown that increasing wages won’t necessarily lead to significant improvements in completion rates. Most apprentice electricians have their eye on the ‘end game’ where they know that as licensed electricians they will be very well paid and there is the opportunity, if they want, for a career in management. Interestingly, after a radio interview that I did recently regarding apprentice wages where a number of callers supported the union push, one caller complained about having to pay for an apprentice coming to their home with an electrician because the apprentice just stood around carrying things. That’s the nub, apprentices are in training but as they are being paid need to be charged out as would other material or labour cost to the business.

NECA will be taking up these issues with the relevant MPs to ensure that both sides of government understand employer concerns and that our voice is heard.

By now most electricians and electrical contractors will know that the National Occupational Licensing Scheme has had its implementation date deferred. NECA is disappointed that this initiative to have single criteria for electrical contractor licenses and electricians licenses throughout every state and territory in Australia has been delayed but understands there are now barriers to this becoming a reality. NECA is part of an advisory committee that has been working through the harmonisation and whilst this has been detailed and at times difficult all parties have worked for a common goal. The real danger now lies at the state government level where the support for a harmonised system has dropped since COAG has made the decision some three years ago.

During March a number of electricians may have heard significant media references to “fast tracking” of American electricians into Australia to help with skills shortages. NECA heard the announcement by the American Ambassador to Australia and the Training Minister, Minister Evans and was initially surprised by the lack of consultation with the employers on this issue.

NECA was concerned that fast tracking meant cutting corners and immediately began to question government about this “out of the blue” announcement. When pressed, the government announced that incoming US electricians would be subject to the same offshore assessment that currently applies to electricians in the Philippines, the UK and other selected countries. This offshore assessment has been working for some years and it appears to be successful in bringing into Australia competent electricians who need gap training to become familiar with Australian standards, work and safety practices.

As the peak national industry association for electrical and communication contractors, NECA is proud to update the industry on the big issues in Electrical Connection. If you would like to know more about these issues or how NECA can strengthen your business please get in touch with the NECA office in your state.

Kind regards,
James Tinsley
NECA CEO
It's a tough job getting workers to relocate

By DANIEL BURDON, APN

GETTING people to relocate for work is one of the biggest drivers of skills shortages in regional Australia, a Federal Government discussion paper released yesterday has confirmed.

The paper, on Australia's skills and workforce needs, is looking to industry to fill the gaps on what could be done to battle skills shortages across a range of sectors.

In launching the paper, Skills Minister Chris Evans (pictured) outlined a future where lower-skilled workers would be in less demand while highly skilled workers with tertiary qualifications will continue to be in high demand. A major challenge in regional areas was labour mobility with the report revealing that only 8% of applicants were willing to move from the east to Western Australia, and just 8% willing to move for jobs in mining.

Senator Evans said health and community services were likely to create the biggest challenges.
Job training boost

MUCH has been written and said about changes to funding for the state’s vocational education and training (VET) system but the fact that has been missed is that the Victorian Government has actually committed more funding for training over the next four years.

When the former Labor government introduced the existing uncapped, demand-driven system little did Labor imagine the massive cost blowout it would trigger and the proliferation of training providers competing with TAFE institutes for funding.

Labor forecast the cost of funding training would reach $855 million in 2011/2012 but this figure blew out to more than $1.3 billion.

The unfunded, unexpected blowout was largely due to an explosion in courses with low job outcomes. For example, enrolments in courses like fitness trainers grew 1955 per cent and customer contact 2234 per cent but apprenticeships only increased 10 per cent.

As a consequence, this State Government has locked in over the next four years around $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.

The Government will also provide increased subsidies for training in areas of skill shortages and of high value to Victoria’s economy. Every apprenticeship course will receive increased funding.

I believe our TAFE institutes have a strong and positive future.

Peter Hall MLC
Minister for Higher Education and Skills
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New agency to lift skills

FEDERAL Skills Minister Chris Evans says low-skilled jobs are disappearing from the economy and the workforce will need to adapt quickly.

A new government agency will work with industry to lift the level of skills among Australia’s workforce.

“We have enormous opportunities in Australia as a result of the growth in the economy,” Senator Evans said.

That economic growth would create enormous opportunities for people to move into high-skilled and well-paid jobs.

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The new Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency replaces Skills Australia and will work to identify and close skills shortages within Australia’s workforce.

While industry should always offer jobs to Australians first, there will still be a place for skilled foreign workers, particularly in the health sector.

The agency will be led by Philip Bullock, the former managing director of IBM Australia. AAP
It's a Lucke win for uni

THE University of the Sunshine Coast has won a $150,000 Federal Government grant into a pavement structure to promote water harvesting and urban tree growth.

USC senior lecturer in civil engineering Dr Terry Lucke will receive the competitive Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project grant for his work in designing a permeable paving bed with an underlying reservoir.

“We are trying to develop pavers that are basically self-sufficient tree pods that can store water in times of drought – sort of like an underwater tank system under the pavement,” Dr Luck said.

“The added bonus of this design is that pavement damage will be reduced because the trees roots won’t go up to the top of the pavement seeking water.”

The Government’s ARC Linkage Project scheme supports collaborative research projects between higher education researchers and partner organisations. The partner organisation for Dr Lucke’s research is the Sunshine Coast Council.

The ARC Linkage Project grants were announced on Saturday, June 30, by Federal Minister for Science and Research, Senator Chris Evans.

USC’s Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research Professor Roland De Marco said the research grant was a fantastic outcome and testimony of the excellence of Dr Lucke’s research.
Listen to the message

I REFER to Higher Education and Skills Minister Peter Hall’s letter (The Express, 9 July).

Yes Peter Hall, let’s talk facts.

You are right, funding for the training of apprentices has increased but why don’t you state that increase is by little over one per cent while pre-apprentice training has reduced by up to 40 per cent across some trades?

Your money is safe as with the current climate, not many local firms are committing to hiring apprentices.

Peter, it’s obvious you are missing the whole point here.

You can sell it by using the “committing extra funds for vocational training” line all you like however what the public want, and deserve, is a public education system.

You are part of a Coalition that has been responsible for privatising the State Electricity Commission of Victoria, public hospitals and prisons.

And isn’t it fact Minister Hall that the SECV delivered affordable electricity to consumers while making a healthy profit?

In 1992/3, the year before it was broken up, it paid $995 million in interest, a $191 million dividend to the State Government, and had a profit of $207 million.

And the coalition then blamed the previous government, privatised it, and now cries poor?

What’s disturbing in your letter is that you blame the former Labor government for the education “blowout”.

Logic would tell you the system in place pre the 2008 contestable market worked well, was capped and provided real outcomes to the community.

All you had to do was re-introduce a similar model. Rather, you are asking TAFEs to build on established industry links and a long established reputation, while stripping it of $300 million and giving that difference (plus a bit more) to profit-driven private providers.

Is there anything else you would like for nothing Minister?

Stop the smoke and mirrors political game, a private education system just won’t work, Mr Hall, and you know it so stop trying to sell us a lemon.

Listen to the public who don’t want it. If you’re not getting the message now, I’m very sure you will at the next state election.

Alex Terranova, Traralgon.
Thanks for the facts

It was pleasing to see that Peter Hall, Minister for Higher Education and Skills, has finally introduced some facts into the TAFE funding issue.

It would have been more pleasing if he did not leave out the most important facts of the argument.

The real issue behind these funding cuts is not entirely economic but ideological. The aim of these cuts is to further erode the viability of the public TAFE system in favour of the “market” driven privatised education and for the provision of skills training by private providers.

All governments are determined to rid themselves of the responsibility of the provision of essential services. Education is such an essential service.

Those figures that Peter Hall quoted in his letter (The Express, 9 July) were terribly accurate.

He indicated the massive increase in the provision of totally useless and unnecessary training facilities where percentage increases range in the hundred and indeed in some instances increases of over 1000 per cent.

The vast majority of these increases and the provision of these services were provided by the private institutions and in some cases by bogus ones.

This is the result of allowing the market to dictate.

If Peter Hall is serious about rectifying the problem of over servicing, he should be having a greater look at some of these private providers especially those that have come on the scene to get that quick buck and run.

This has actually happened. That is what the market is especially good at.

Allowing unscrupulous operators to cash in on the opportunities provided by an unfettered policy at the taxpayer’s expense.

**Gilio Barbara**, Jeeralang Junction.
Workforce skills:
Federal Skills Minister Chris Evans says low-skilled jobs are disappearing from the economy and the workforce will need to adapt quickly. A new government agency, launched yesterday by the minister, will work with industry to lift the level of skills among Australia’s workforce.
Low-skilled jobs out, skilled workforce in

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“If it wasn’t for Indian doctors and Irish nurses we would be closing wards in Australia,” Senator Evans said.

AAP
About one-third of the workforce will need a bachelor’s degree or higher in coming years, says Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans.

The Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, which was launched yesterday, released a report showing highly skilled jobs would grow at about 160 per cent of the rate of low-skilled jobs over the next decade.

By 2025, demand for post-school qualifications would increase from 60 per cent to between 65 and 75 per cent.
Low-skill jobs on way out

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Aussies can’t fill all the jobs

THERE will not be enough Australians to fill jobs at the peak of the resources boom in Queensland, Skills Minister Chris Evans said yesterday.

Senator Evans said the government and industry knew it couldn’t fill all the jobs, so it would train Australians for the longer term to prevent mass job losses as demand fell from construction to operations.

He was speaking at the release by the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency of a paper on Australia’s workforce needs.

While he would not comment on when the workforce would turn from training locals to importing foreign workers, he did say only qualified workers, such as American engineers, would be imported.

“We know the construction workforce is going to peak around 2015-16 for the LNG industry, and then the number of workers will fall,” he said.

“We’ve spoken to companies like Bechtel and we don’t want to be training workers here who will then be out of a job when the downturn comes. So we will look to qualified foreign workers to fill those jobs.”
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Tough job to get workers to move

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In launching the paper, Skills Minister Chris Evans (pictured) outlined a future where lower-skilled workers would be in less demand while highly skilled workers with tertiary qualifications will continue to be in high demand.

A major challenge in regional areas was labour mobility with the report revealing that only 8% of applicants were willing to move from the east to Western Australia, and just 8% willing to move for jobs in mining.
Farming courses to stay

VICTORIAN agricultural courses have been spared the axe despite cuts being made to the TAFE sector across Victoria.

It follows an agreement yesterday between the Office of the Minister for Higher Education and Skills and Victorian Farmers' Federation.

VFF president Peter Tuohey said agricultural courses were here to stay with many courses in regional areas receiving a five per cent loading.

The VFF had earlier expressed concerns that as enrolments dropped for these courses, cuts to TAFE funding could see agricultural courses disappear, causing a continuing employment problem for the agricultural sector.

"It is therefore reassuring that the government intends to provide greater funding for students wishing to undertake study in certificate 3 and 4 agriculture courses," Mr Tuohey said.

He said unfortunately funding for the entry course into agriculture would be reduced.

Mr Tuohey reinforced to government at the meeting the need to have ongoing regional training providers offer agricultural courses, to ensure a skilled work force for the future.

He also called on students to consider a career in agriculture where there were many opportunities for employment.

The VFF will monitor the future funding of TAFEs to ensure agriculture courses continue to be provided at acceptable funding levels.
It’s a tough job getting workers to relocate

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Senator Evans said health and community services were likely to create the biggest challenges.
MIND the GAP

Why the rising inequality of our schools is dangerous

By Carmen Lawrence

One of the really annoying features of Australian politics is its derivative character, its mindless reflection of American political controversies and emotional tones. Commentators and participants alike seem unable to find a way of thinking and talking about Australia that does not explicitly - or covertly - genuflect to American fashions and sensibilities. While it may be that 'we're all international citizens now', this is also a unique place with a particular history - and there are parts of the world, other than the United States, worth looking to for ideas. The way we approach inequality is a case in point; it seems now that every time the issue of the uneven spread of wealth and economic opportunity in Australia is raised, the immediate accusation is that even to put the question of what it means and how to respond to it is to engage in 'class warfare' or 'the politics of envy'. The explicit message to those with the temerity to point to the obvious gaps in our society is "shut the f... up", the typical bullying response of the reactionary American media who slap down any complaints about their country's own stark inequalities.

In slavish imitation, the Australian's headline after the release of the recent federal budget trumpeted, 'Budget Reform Agenda Lost in Class War', a somewhat implausible accusation given the modest increases in payments to low- and middle-income earners (not to mention the corresponding cuts to single parent benefits). In his budget reply, Abbott repeated the fiction, accusing the government of inciting a "class war" and claiming "our country has normally been free from the class struggle that's waged elsewhere to other countries' terrible cost". Apart from anything else, he needs a history lesson. It's a matter of record that more than a few of our national institutions were crafted out of a realisation that government action was needed to reduce the glaring inequalities that faced Australians at Federation, and to share the wealth and the benefits of productivity - the "wage earners' welfare state". Perhaps as a result of this history, many Australians hold the view that ours is an egalitarian society. This remains more a hope than a reality, not least because, in imitation of our American cousins, and in the interests of the unfettered operation of individual choice in the marketplace, we've neutered many of the instruments that were designed to spread our wealth.

While deliberate government policies in the postwar period produced steady increases in economic equality, here and elsewhere, the momentum stalled and then reversed under the influence of the neo-liberal experiment. Today, the wealthiest 20% of Australians own 61% of the nation's wealth; the poorest 20% own just 1%. Although the income disparities are less marked, they too have been growing. While we are collectively wealthier than we have ever been, that wealth is spread less evenly than in the '60s and '70s and we are now a good deal less equal than countries such as Japan, Sweden and Norway. We are one of the most unequal developed countries, keeping company with the US and Britain.

Not everyone regards this as a problem - for some it is simply the way the system works; to suggest otherwise is heretical, marking the critic as a class warrior, at the very least. However, we once understood - on both sides of politics - that allowing big gaps in income, wealth and opportunity to open up was inherently risky and potentially socially corrosive. Whatever the political motivation for seeking to reduce inequality in the years following World War II - and fear of the pulling power of communism was implicated - today's concern with growing inequality, when expressed at all, is more likely to draw on the international evidence that in developed countries economic inequality - rather than absolute levels of income - is associated with more than a few social and personal ills. The list is long and includes reduced life expectancy, higher rates of mental illness, alcohol and drug abuse, increased obesity, higher crime and imprisonment rates, more school dropouts and lower levels of educational performance. And for those looking for hints about what's behind Australians' cynicism
As economic inequality has risen, so has educational inequality; each feeds off the other in a cycle of ever-decreasing social mobility. It’s no accident that the most unequal developed nations spend less on education, and have the most segregated education systems and the poorest educational results. Recognition of the marked and increasing underperformance of children from disadvantaged backgrounds in Australia prompted the current government to establish a panel for the review of school funding, of which I was a member; the six-member panel, chaired by David Gonski, delivered its final report in December 2011 (known as the ‘Gonski review’). The explicit brief was to devise a fairer funding framework for education that would ensure that differences in children’s achievements are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions. To some extent, the task was restorative, to find a way to reignite the earlier momentum toward reducing the impact of social position on how well children do at school. One of the foundations of Australia’s egalitarian project was, after all, a demand for high-quality, publicly funded education for all, regardless of means.

Until relatively recently, Australian governments of all stripes exhibited a strong commitment to a superior public education system, open to all and good enough to inspire the confidence of all parents and citizens, regardless of their wealth. The choice to send a child to a non-government school was generally not made because government schooling was judged inadequate. In the last 20 years, this commitment has looked increasingly fragile and the system more fragmented. Governments have had a role in this deterioration - withholding the funds needed to repair flaking paint and down-at-heel, outdated school facilities; orchestrating phony debates about ‘values’ and fingering government schools as deficient; elevating ‘choice’ above equality; and failing to repudiate even the most extravagant media claims about school failure. Many of us watched with dismay - and objected - as teachers and government schools were pilloried by the Howard government. As a result, more parents have withdrawn their children from government schools and the schooling system has become more segregated, especially on the basis of parents’ wealth and occupation. By international standards, Australia still has average to high standards of educational performance (although there are recent signs this is falling off), but there are now much bigger differences between the top and bottom performers.

Finding a way to arrest - and reverse - this deterioration was never going to be easy. The Australian education system is awash with special interests and fixed positions, and most of us are fiercely protective of our own children’s welfare. When I became Western Australia’s education...
Australia is one of the most unequal developed countries, keeping company with the US and Britain

A recent study by education researcher Ming Ming Chiu of the performance of 15 year olds from 41 countries forcefully demonstrates this point. Students scored higher on various achievement tests not only when they had access to more resources (money and qualified teachers) but also when there was a more equal distribution and less of what Chiu called “privileged student bias”. There were diminishing marginal returns; extra money spent on the already well off produced less improvement overall than the same money delivered to those with little. An extra dollar to a poor school makes a big difference.

In Australia, almost 80% of students from the lowest quarter of socioeconomic disadvantage attend government schools. The drift of students and resources from government to non-government schools has accelerated here in the last decade or so and further concentrated wealthier students in the private sector. As a result, there are more schools with very high proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds - mainly in the government system - and more with high concentrations of the most advantaged - mainly in private schools. An education system that siphons off the children of wealthier and better educated parents weakens both the energy and the funding base for the government system. Resources that might be used to provide for improved facilities and teacher support in existing schools are diverted into setting up new school places. In one country town in Western Australia,
the local government high school lost ground dramatically after four private schools were opened; the most disadvantaged children were left behind with fewer teachers per student than in the new private schools. The total cost of education in the community skyrocketed, without any aggregate improvement in children's scores on routine tests.

As state governments are largely responsible for government schools and the Commonwealth for independent and Catholic schools, such decisions are often made without reference to the cumulative impact on all schools. Without decrying parents' individual decisions about their own children, it seems inevitable that the more those who have the means exit the public system and send their children to private schools, the more likely it is that the public education system will be seen as a residual one for those parents who cannot afford to 'choose' private education for their children, especially since a lot of the recent drift has been in the less well-off suburbs of Australia.

Due to the pattern of drift to private education, striking gaps have emerged between public schools with high and low socioeconomic profiles; children in the poorest schools are effectively two years behind those in wealthier suburbs. Despite the fact government schools actually perform as well as private schools when initial disadvantage is taken into account, knowledge of these gaps gives further impetus to parents' anxieties about government schools.

Just how important education is for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and how schools 'can compensate for limited means at home is vividly illustrated by sociology professor Karl Alexander's work in the US. Over five years, he tracked the academic progress of primary school age children from different social backgrounds. The first-graders from the wealthiest homes started with modest advantages in knowledge and ability over those from the poorest; by the end of the fifth grade, this gap had more than doubled. In probing the reasons for this expanding gap, Alexander measured the difference between the students' test scores at the beginning and the end of the school year to see how much they had learned at school. He then calculated the difference between the end of one school year and the beginning of the next to see how much they learned over the summer holidays. The poorest children actually 'out-learned' the wealthiest children during term time and were only slightly behind the middle group. But after the holidays, wealthier children's scores jumped and the poorest children's dropped. It seems that, in the US public school system at least, much of the advantage wealthier students have stems from the experiences they have when they are not in school - the excursions to the countryside, the visits to libraries, museums and science exhibitions. A system that provides more money to schools catering for poorer students can try to compensate for this difference, offering some of the enriching experiences taken for granted by the better off. It makes sense to front-end load the schools who deal with the most disadvantaged; instead, the reverse has happened in Australia.

The twin propositions that 'more education is better' and 'the more people who are educated the better' appear uncontentious. However, how 'better' is defined is crucial. When you ask people why they think education is important, most, including educators and a lot of parents, point immediately to its personal, instrumental value in ensuring a high-paid and rewarding job. After all, that's been the predominant public story for decades now. And such thinking is almost certainly partly responsible for the push for greater 'choice' in education and the shift by the children of the well off into the private system. Such thinking appears to inform the contemporary discussion about economic growth and productivity; education, especially 'skills-based' education, is seen as a panacea.

The contribution of education to individual creativity, health and wellbeing or to wider social objectives like reducing prejudice and improving our democracy might be tossed in as an afterthought. And, God forbid we should even hint at woolly ideas like the sheer glorious excitement of learning, the delight of mastery, of bright curiosity satisfied and of play. Even when these more expansive, less
readily measured effects of a good education are mentioned, they are often a cover for a tight focus on test results and school exit performance, a mandatory nod on the school website or in the glossy prospectus, but not a real test of worth. There was a time when it was not considered naive to talk about education in expansive terms; there was a time when teachers were generally revered and the idea that learning could be 'for its own sake' was not considered quaintly old-fashioned. Of course, education was particularly valued because it offered the less well off a path to improvement, but such improvement was not thought to be limited to the material; what my parents wanted, at least, was for me and my brother and sisters to experience and know more about the world than they did and to transcend what they saw as the intellectual limitations of a country upbringing.

There are many educators and parents who believe that the way we now think about education and measure achievement dismally fails to capture all the facets of young people's lives. The fear is that the restricted focus on vocational preparation and testing may result in young people being denied opportunities for genuine intellectual discovery and creativity. Correspondingly, the nation may be starved of the ingenuity and problem-solving needed to respond to pressing social and economic dilemmas.

As behavioural economist Dan Ariely, one of the authors of a recent evaluation of a decade of test-based education in the US by the American National Academy of Sciences, warned:

"The mission of teaching, and its evaluation, is incredibly intricate and complex. In addition to being able to read, write, and do some math and science, we want students to be knowledgeable, broad-minded, creative, lifelong learners. On top of that, we can all readily agree that education is a long-term process that sometimes takes many years to come to fruition. ... Now, imagine that in this very complex system we introduce a measurement of just one, relatively simple, criterion: the success of students on standardized tests. And say, on top of that, we make this particular measurement the focal point of all evaluation and compensation. Under such conditions we should expect teachers to over-emphasize the activity that is being measured and neglect all other aspects of teaching, and we have evidence ... that this has been the case ... teachers teach to the test, which helps the results for that test go up but leaves all other areas of education and instruction ... to fall by the wayside."

This echoes the worries that some have expressed about Australia's mandatory NAPLAN testing. If we're not attentive (especially if the rewards to students and teachers all flow from test success), these measures become proxies for educational worth. It's a bit like using GDP growth as a proxy for our standard of living. Still, it's all we've got, and these numbers may just give us some clues about how we can do better for all our children.

A look around the globe shows that the US does not have a lot to offer us, despite the hype surrounding the government-sponsored visit in 2008 of Joel Klein, the then chancellor of New York schools. Now an adviser to Rupert Murdoch, he achieved guru status for his promotion of a test-based model of schooling, which has now been comprehensively canned. However, the global fetish for educational league tables did produce a boom in international visits to Finland, a country whose policies are far more worthy of inspection. In 2009, over 100 foreign delegations and governments visited Helsinki, apparently hoping to ferret out the secret of the Finns' success in international tests and transport it to their own schools. Finnish students have reliably scored in the top two or three nations in reading, maths and science in the developed world's exams for 15 year olds, according to PISA results. What visitors learn about the Finnish system, however, often challenges the very foundations of their educational practice, not least because of the Finns' strong emphasis on ensuring that those who are having problems in learning, for whatever reason, are not left behind.

The history of Finnish education is instructive. Some 40 years ago the Finns effected a revolution in their approach to schooling in an attempt to stimulate economic recovery after decades of war and conflict. At that time their education system was fragmented and, by all accounts, something of a lottery. As a result of several decades of targeted reform, the Finnish school system is now a unitary one and all schools are publicly funded. Primary and secondary schooling are combined and local schools cater for each child from the time they enter school until they are 16, after which they attend a senior school. This means that staff can get to know students well and are able to better tailor programs to...
their needs; students largely avoid the potentially disruptive effects of shifting from one school to another.

While there is a good deal of local autonomy, the schools’ programs are guided by broad national goals and schools draw from a pool of teachers who have been selected from the top 10% of the nation’s graduates and are required to complete a master’s degree in education. There is tough competition for entry into teaching because it is such a prestigious career in Finland. Once employed, teachers spend fewer hours at school and less time in classrooms than teachers in most comparable developed countries. The extra time is spent on curriculum development, exploring new teaching techniques and assessing their students’ progress - Finnish teachers are treated as competent professionals.

Children do not begin formal schooling until they are seven and there is no streaming by ability. In virtually every classroom, an additional teacher is provided to help those who are struggling and nearly 30% of children get some kind of special help during their schooling. Classes are conducted in a relaxed and informal atmosphere. There are no compulsory standardised tests, like Australia’s NAPLAN, apart from one exam at the end of the senior year in high school, and there are no rankings or formal comparisons between students and schools.

Despite their success in the league tables, Finnish teachers, unlike their visitors, are not much interested in the PISA results. “We prepare children to learn how to learn, not how to take a test,” Pasi Sahlberg, a former maths and physics teacher who is now in Finland’s Ministry of Education and Culture, said recently. Finnish educators apparently have some difficulty understanding the fetish for standardised tests - the bar graphs and coloured charts. ‘It’s nonsense,” said another of the teachers interviewed, ‘we know much more about the children than these tests can tell us.”

It’s hard to imagine any Australian education minister or official daring to endorse such a seditious statement. Instead, we’ve headed down the low road constructed by our American cousins - highly competitive, test-based teacher and school assessment - despite these policies having failed comprehensively in the US, where overall performance and equity are far worse than in Australia.

Although it’s not possible to identify precisely the elements of the education system responsible for producing Finland’s impressive results, it is clear that Finnish children can expect a high-quality education no matter what their circumstances (which are taken into account in the allocation of funds) and it’s clear that their educational programs are less regimented and test-oriented than ours. As well as performing well in aggregate, the differences between the weakest and strongest students are the smallest in the world and are much less strongly associated with the socio-economic background of parents than in Australia. Some critics (mainly American) of the Finnish system have argued that the relative homogeneity of Finnish society makes their education task much easier. There may be some truth in this, but as a result of recent increases in immigration from non-Nordic countries, particularly in Africa and South-East Asia, there are now schools where many nationalities and language groups are mixed and these too achieve good results, often by the creative use of extra funds provided to assist those students who need more help.

While some of its virtues may be exaggerated, there is much to be gleaned from the Finnish experience, rather than looking to systems such as those in the US and the UK, which are conspicuously failing the least well off. In the past, our inclusive public school system helped reduce inequality; now education appears to be reinforcing privilege and making it even harder for the kids of poorer Australians. The effects of income inequality are being amplified by our education policies, particularly the allocation of funding. Yet schools can redress disadvantage, if given the resources and support to do so.

The entire nation’s wellbeing is compromised when young people are not able to participate fully in education, or when their schooling is narrow and unsatisfying. For the individual, the costs of a poor education are enormous. For the nation, the costs of a divided society are even greater.
Low-skilled jobs vanishing

FEDERAL Skills Minister Chris Evans said low-skilled jobs are disappearing from the economy and the workforce will need to adapt quickly.

A new government agency, launched yesterday by the minister, will work with industry to lift the level of skills among Australia's workforce.

The new Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency replaces Skills Australia and will work to identify and close skills shortages within Australia’s workforce. The agency will be led by Philip Bullock, former managing director of IBM Australia. Its board will include RBA board member Heather Ridout and Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief Peter Anderson.
Boom or bust, WA faces a skills crisis

Andrew Tillett
Canberra

WA will be short of 21,000 highly skilled workers by 2025, research on future needs suggests.

Despite a recent union backlash against importing labour, Federal Skills Minister Chris Evans said Australia would continue to rely on foreign workers to build projects as part of the resources boom.

Senator Evans said the Government’s focus was ensuring enough Australians were trained to work on projects once they were operating instead of trying to meet peak demand during construction.

His view was backed by the chairman of the newly created Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, Philip Bullock.

“When you look at the growth around the construction phase, it’s always going to be a tension to get as many workers domestically,” Mr Bullock said.

The agency’s discussion paper, released yesterday by Senator Evans, warned low-skilled jobs were disappearing because of technological and structural changes.

Under a “long boom”, the paper said that by 2025 WA would be short of 21,093 workers with university degrees or diplomas. Even if the boom went bust, WA would lack 18,968 skilled workers.