Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans has again blasted state governments about the slashing of TAFE budgets. “The states are on notice,” he told Senate question time last week. The Commonwealth would not be paying the $1.75 billion in reward payments on offer under the National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform to states that “rip money” out of TAFE, he said. Senator Evans’ comments came after reports in NSW and Victoria criticised state governments for reducing support for TAFE. In Victoria, a study by the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals says 80 per cent of schools will reduce the range of vocational education and training on offer and half have reduced student places following the government’s decision to remove $300 million from TAFE budgets. In NSW, where 800 TAFE jobs are being axed and student fees will rise, a report commissioned by the NSW Public Service Association says a person who completes TAFE qualifications could increase lifetime earnings by nearly $325,000. PSA general secretary Anne Gardiner accused the government of having no clear plan for TAFE. “If you cut jobs and working conditions for TAFE staff, you will get worse education outcomes and a generation of young people could miss out altogether on tertiary studies,” she said.
NEAS fights for a role in regulation

**Tim Dodd**

The National ELT Accreditation Scheme has written to the federal Minister for Tertiary Education, Chris Evans, proposing a way for it to maintain a key role in regulating English language colleges which teach international students.

In the letter, sent last week, NEAS asked the government to sign an agreement acknowledging that NEAS standards for English language colleges met the requirements for registration on the Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students.

Although NEAS, an industry body owned by its English college members, has successfully regulated English teaching of international students for 22 years, its future role is threatened because, under current plans, quality assurance for the sector will be handled by two new bodies, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agencies and the Australian Skills Quality Authority.

The executive director of NEAS, Anne Holmes, said that an English language college which met NEAS standards should automatically qualify for CRICOS registration, which is necessary to teach courses to international students.

“We have 22 years of an excellent track record of not having shonky providers,” she said.

The federal government is yet to find a clear way of dealing with the regulation of English language colleges teaching international students.

Under its new national scheme for regulating post-school education, TEQSA deals with tertiary education, and ASQA deals with vocational education. As things stand, TEQSA will regulate English colleges which prepare international students for university while AQSA regulates the others. However, some colleges perform both roles.
State funds needed for agribusiness education

The number of graduates in the agriculture industry is not meeting demand as the Muresk era ends, writes Ian Fairnie

The WA Nationals launched their 2013 election campaign in Toodyay recently with leader Brendon Grylls stating that agriculture would be “the next investment boom in regional WA”. Of course he meant investment by someone other than the State Government.

Yet even as he made this prediction WA’s last tertiary agribusiness students were folding their tents at the Muresk Institute of Agriculture, thus closing the doors on the leading tertiary educator for WA farm leaders and managers, doors that were first opened way back in 1926.

There is no doubt that Muresk has been a success story and the reasons for its demise are not simple. However, the cause of its death as a provider of highly sought after agribusiness graduates is government indifference.

“Muresk will be saved,” declared the Premier when he opened the Dowerin Field Days in 2009.

Well, technically it has been, in name only, with its original farm and buildings now vested in the Department of Training and Workforce Development, which has no history, skills or experience managing an adult residential facility, with a focus on developing leaders for the 21st century, or a farm.

It is not the “Centre of Excellence in Agricultural and Agribusiness Education at Muresk” that former training minister and now Education Minister Peter Collier predicted in October last year when he announced that his former department was taking over the campus. This is an issue that is easy to blame on someone else. It’s the Federal Government’s responsibility says the State Government, because “we don’t fund tertiary education”.

It’s the universities’ responsibility says the Federal Government. They decide how to fund courses, so when Curtin University decided it could better use the funds it gets from Canberra to set up another medical school in WA, no one really cared, other than the many thousands of Muresk graduates who work in WA, elsewhere in Australia and around the world.

The official line is that there are not enough WA students wanting to get a degree in agribusiness or agriculture, and this is similar in other Australian States.

But the difference here in WA is that we have five well-funded State Government colleges of agriculture at Morawa, Cunderdin, Narrogin, Harvey and Denmark. In addition, there is the Catholic Agricultural College at Bindoon which recently doubled its student bed numbers and teaches the State approved secondary education agricultural curriculum in Years 11 and 12. All these six schools are full, so there is high demand from junior high school students for agricultural education.

At the other end of the pipeline there is huge unmet demand.

According to data published by the Australian Farm Institute in February, more than 4000 jobs a year are consistently being advertised seeking agricultural professionals, yet the total number of graduates for these jobs is less than 20 per cent of the number needed.

This is great news for the last Muresk graduates but it is a nightmare for employers as they try to fill those 4000 jobs. Poaching from other employers abounds and as a result there are some very good salaries and conditions being offered. There is demand for agricultural education at high school level, and there is demand for agribusiness graduates.
from universities, but no one seems to be willing, able or smart enough to connect the two ends of the supply chain and help meet the demand for graduates.

The best short-term answer has come from the CY O'Connor Institute, which will offer a one-year Certificate IV agribusiness course at its Northam campus next year. But this is not what the employers want — they want three-year-degree graduates who can manage highly complex systems, who have gained their skills in a hands-on learning environment.

What are the solutions?

We need the State Government to modernise the way training and education is managed post-secondary school, and set up a department of higher education that can fund courses up to degree level that are in the interests of WA. Other States have already done this.

For those with short memories, changes occurred in nursing education in the 1970s, when a previous State government funded places at Curtin and Edith Cowan universities to meet the needs of the State. I don’t recall that government telling industry that they needed to fund those places.

Investing State funds in agribusiness education would show overseas investors that our politicians really want to secure the future of WA’s agricultural industry and our food supply chains.

According to a recent ANZ report, Australia’s farming sector could generate an additional $1.7 trillion for the economy by 2050 if new capital was invested, without which Australia will be unable to compete with those in New Zealand and South America.

The report said “capital is needed to adopt modernised farming techniques, improve supply chain efficiency and (for) a greater effort to meeting booming demand for cereals and meat in Asia”.

That cannot happen without more Australian agribusiness graduates.

Dr Ian Fairnie was director of Muresk Institute from 1984-89 and is president of the Agribusiness Alumni Association.