Skills for life
Free training opens so many future paths

By COURTNEY TODD

BATCHelor Institute has seen an increase in the number of indigenous students enrolling in VET programs.

In the NT, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have the opportunity to enrol in free Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses to suit their needs and aspirations.

More students are enrolling in the VET courses at the institute and these qualifications prepare students for employment in a range of industries, including teaching, nursing, construction and mining.

It has long been the aim of the institute to strengthen indigenous identity and help Aboriginal students achieve success by promoting indigenous education in our community.

The institute works closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, employers, industry, government, and other education, training and service providers in the Northern Territory to achieve this goal.

Through these collaborative partnerships, Batchelor Institute continues to support and contribute to indigenous education, qualifications, employment outcomes, community development and fair and equitable community life.

Indigenous lecturer for creative writing, Yvette Holt said these programs are suitable for indigenous employees, customers of an organisation and for those who are looking for opportunities to build their future.

Employers are also encouraged to explore the training options for their workforce.

“Indigenous people can gain many benefits by studying VET courses,” Ms Holt said.

“They have the opportunity to develop the skills in demand to be ready for community employment opportunities, study in a culturally safe environment with other indigenous students, gain qualifications (and) contribute to the development of their community.

“(They can) strengthen their identity, achieve success, and study and learn at state-of-the-art campuses in Alice Springs and Batchelor,” Ms Holt said.

And while they are studying, students are living in a family-like environment.

“There are no course fees, and the Abstudy entitlements cover travel, accommodation and meals while students are at a workshop.”

Batchelor Institute director, Adrian Mitchell said the institute is growing stronger than ever.

“Our Vocational Education courses are closely aligned to key employment opportunities, particularly in rural and remote Australia,” he said.

“Support by employers will be important.”

Mr Mitchell said the institute is growing stronger than ever.

“There are many Vocational Education and Training programs which employers can use for professional development of their indigenous workforce.

The training courses provide an opportunity for employers to work in a partnership with Australia’s only dual sector tertiary education provider for indigenous students.

“We will continue to establish collaborative partnerships with indigenous organisations, communities, industry, government, and other service providers,” he said.

“Support by employers will be important.”

For more information, call 1800 677 095, email enquiries@batchelor.edu.au or visit www.batchelor.edu.au.
VET students learn on the job

Butcher Institute graduates learn skills that they will use their whole lives.
Appeal to Canberra to raise its game over creative arts

David Williamson's funding outburst has stirred up much support, writes Steve Dow.

Australia's "obsession" with sports is overshadowing the arts while governments are taking the "easy" option to cut university and TAFE courses because fine arts is too easily derided as elitist, say arts figures.

The host of ABC1's At the Movies, Margaret Pomeranz, says: "The amount we're spending on sports medals and the amount spent on sports is obscene compared to the amount of money we spend on developing arts in this country."

"It's like a national obsession with sport. I've got kids who play sport and I like watching it, but our obsession is to the detriment of developing poets, artists, filmmakers."

Her comments follow playwright David Williamson's comments on Thursday attacking the "huge" spending on sport while a "pittance" is spent developing the next Cate Blanchett or Geoffrey Rush.

Williamson took aim in his 2012 National Tertiary Education Union lecture at funding being "ripped" from universities and TAFEs.

"Why as a society we think it's legitimate to spend huge amounts on our sportsmen and women, but seemingly don't think the relative pittance we spend on developing a potential Cate Blanchett or Geoffrey Rush is as justifiable, has to say something about our national and political priorities," he said.

Theatre and film director Neil Armfield says the arts have suffered "the curse of generations" relieved only by leaders such as Gough Whitlam and Paul Keating bucking the trend and showing an interest in the arts.

"It's like this hideous default we keep returning to, in spite of the fact it's clear that the country has an absolutely original and hugely productive arts sector," Armfield says.

The TAFE cuts, aimed at 800 teaching positions in NSW and targeting fine arts courses, would hurt many visual artists who rely on teaching to maintain a basic income.

"It's not just killing off opportunities for people learning and growing but cutting off at the roots people who already have a meagre subsistence in maintaining their practice augmented by teaching," Armfield says.

Playwright Jonathan Biggins, director of the year-in-politics Wharf Revue at Sydney Theatre Company, says no national leader has championed the arts since Keating.

"It's not just killing off opportunities for people learning and growing but cutting off at the roots people who already have a meagre subsistence in maintaining their practice augmented by teaching," Armfield says.

"Somehow in the current political environment, the arts will not be taken seriously unless championed by a leader," Biggins says.

Actor and playwright Toby Schmitz says organised sports seems a "fascist idea with one common goal - to be better than someone else. All totalitarian regimes are proud of their sports teams - arts is the first to be thrown in the ditch."

"The team-building arguments of sport could be applied to the arts. "Honing your acting skills in a play or a debating team is going to be far more useful in life when your knees have gone," he says.

Schmitz notes that, at just more than 200 years old, Australia is a young country: "Maybe in another 200 years, when I'm long dead, they'll have more private sector funding of the arts like they do in the United States."
Productive sector ... Geoffrey Rush and Neil Armfield. Photo: Josh Robenstone
TAFE sector under pressure

Joanna Mather and Michaela Whitbourn

The head of the education union in Queensland says unprecedented “attacks” on TAFE by conservative state governments warrant a national inquiry.

Queensland Teachers Union president Kevin Bates has urged the federal government to step into save the public training system amid concern it is headed for privatisation in Victoria, NSW and Queensland.

He said it was increasingly clear that the states were using the federal government’s skills reform process to erode funding for TAFE.

“What we would like to see potentially is a national inquiry,” Mr Bates said.

“Why are we seeing this unprecedented and concerted effort by conservative governments up and down the eastern seaboard to have a go at TAFE?

“If this is about privatising the training market then that’s something every Australian should be concerned about because the very clear evidence is that leads to decreased standards, increasing costs and essentially the whole community is worse off.”

Governments in Victoria and NSW have reduced TAFE funding, leading to job cuts and course closures.

The changes come as the states position their Vocational Education and Training systems to comply with the National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform, as adopted by the Coalition of Australian Governments in April.

The partnership is aimed at lifting quality and providing greater choice by allowing private providers to compete for publicly subsidised students. There is $1.75 billion in commonwealth payments on the table for states that fall into line.

Kerry Schott, who led a commission of audit into the NSW public sector, said TAFE had to adapt to survive.

She recommended in her report that the state’s eight TAFEs be set up as separate corporate entities and the number of commercial “fee for service” courses increased.

Following the report, the O’Farrell government announced TAFE fees would rise by 9.5 per cent from January next year and subsidies for fine arts courses such as sculpture, visual arts and ceramics would be scrapped as part of its bid to rein in education costs.

Dr Schott said to look only at funding by state governments was ignoring the fact that VET was undergoing a complete restructure in response to conditions set down by the commonwealth.

“It’s a new world for TAFE,” she said. “To survive in the commercial space with all the competition around them, they’ve really got to get their act together.”

In Queensland, the government has yet to respond to a review of VET which recommended industrial relations reform and campus closures as key ways to ensure TAFE Queensland is competitive with the private sector.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard was quizzed heavily about education and training when she attended a community cabinet meeting in Brisbane last Wednesday night.

The Australian Education Union’s TAFE division is gearing up for a battle over industrial relations reform, with the states earmarking the removal of rigidity in existing agreements as key to making productivity gains.

TAFE teachers are often paid up to $30,000 more than VET teachers in the private sector, who are covered by the modern award for post-secondary education set down by Fair Work Australia.

Teachers employed by TAFE also enjoy more generous conditions, such as limits on the number of hours they can be required to perform face-to-face teaching each week. This is typically set at 20 to 24 hours a week, with the remainder of their time used for tasks such as curriculum development and assessment.

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KEY POINTS

- Private providers will compete for publicly subsidised students under the National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform.
- There is pressure for TAFEs to become competitive by raising fees and reassessing teacher pay.
TAFE teachers defend pay

The review by the Queensland Skills and Training Taskforce has recommended an overhaul of the “outdated” award for TAFE teachers. The task force's final report said potential productivity loss as a result of terms and conditions in the award was estimated at 30 per cent. It said TAFE was at a financial disadvantage of approximately 15 per cent because of higher base salaries.

“This is due to penalty rates, restrictions on contact time per week [21 hours versus 30 hours or greater] and spread of hours, class size restrictions and mandatory non-attendance time in addition to non-contact time,” the report said.

In some cases so-called non-attendance time has been taken as extra holiday leave, which means some TAFE teachers have had nine weeks off a year.

Queensland Minister for Education, Training and Employment John-Paul Langbroek said TAFE teachers were limited to 21 contact hours a week and work after 6pm incurred time and a half.

“In order to meet the needs of students and industry, industrial arrangements need to allow TAFE to be competitive in the marketplace,” he said.

The Queensland government will respond to the review’s recommendations by the end of November.

New enterprise agreements covering TAFE institutes in Victoria and NSW are up for renegotiation.

AEU federal TAFE secretary Pat Forward said conservative state governments had teacher conditions in their sights as they tried to cut costs.

“There has been no compelling evidence presented by the state and territory governments to justify the arguments contained in their reform proposals,” she said. “Low-quality provision in the private sector is precisely because the employment conditions in this sector are driving providers there to cut corners and to cut costs further, in order to make a profit.”

Victorian TAFE Association president David Williams said although there was already some scope to negotiate additional teaching hours in that state, more flexibility was needed. Adult learners, for example, required different teaching to teenagers doing VET in schools. He said advice given to TAFE executives in Victoria was to offer higher pay for highly qualified and experienced teachers in exchange for more flexibility in terms of hours.
Universities draw up their agenda

Joanna Mather

Universities Australia's first policy paper will include statements about how higher education can contribute more to the national economy and will contain findings of a study which showed the vast majority of Australian parents want their children to get a degree.

The draft paper is strictly under wraps on instructions from Universities Australia chairman Glyn Davis, also the vice-chancellor of The University of Melbourne, following the leaking of an earlier version to The Australian Financial Review.

That version canvassed contentious ideas such as raising student fees and imposing a minimum entry score for certain professional courses.

Professor Davis would not be drawn on details of the latest version of the policy paper but said "we want to get universities up on to the public radar screen and we want the next government, whoever they are, to see [them] as core contributors, not as a problem they have to solve."

"We are pound-for-pound one of the great education nations on the planet so let's build on that and let's do it while we're ahead before the other nations overtake us. Because that's the risk."

There is a perception among politicians that vice-chancellors spend too much time holding their begging bowls out.

Since its inception, Universities Australia (the former Australian Vice-chancellors Council) has been trying to change that reputation.

While Universities Australia has always formed policies on certain issues, the policy paper will be the first to set a unanimously agreed direction for the sector as a whole.

It will be used to lobby politicians in the countdown to the next federal election.

"What the policy will do is first argue about the importance of universities for the nation," Professor Davis said. "So it's not about us but what the nation wants to do and how universities are part of that bigger picture. It's not all about what people should do for us, it's what we'd like to do for others."

Getting 39 vice-chancellors to agree has no doubt been difficult.

"It's unusual for a sector to put out a policy statement," Professor Davis said.

"We've had policy statements on various issues but we've never tried Continued page 25
Unis draw up agenda

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to articulate a vision of what we want to achieve and how we can best go about it.

Professor Davis said survey work conducted for the policy paper showed just how many Australians want their children to go to university.

“Now, overwhelmingly, families aspire for their kids to go to university. That’s a national social shift. They don’t necessarily want their children to go into professions that require a degree but it’s part of the life cycle. People see it as essential to their future.”

One of Labor’s key higher education policies has been a national target for 40 per cent of 25 to 34-year-olds to have a bachelor degree or higher by 2025. In order to achieve the goal, the government has uncapped places, allowing as many students to enrol as universities will accept. The policy has weighed on the federal budget.

When the government announced it would delay research funding increases in October to help return the budget to surplus, Group of Eight chairman and University of New South Wales vice-chancellor Fred Hilmer said it was time to rethink the uncapped places policy: The government “could have saved $1 billion by limiting demand-driven funding to those with the ability to successfully complete and benefit from university education…”

But Professor Davis said there was broad support for the target. “You could imagine a time where some states have pretty much got to the 40 per cent but others are still getting there so I wouldn’t be surprised if the government, any government, contemplated starting to deal with individual institutions,” he said. “It’s not a recapping per say or return to the old system but it would require individual institutions to make their case.”
Williamson calls on government to preserve arts funding

Natalie Gerritsen and Joanna Mather

Australian playwright David Williamson has called for a set percentage of higher education funding to be reserved for the arts so the sector is not the first casualty every time an institution embarks on belt-tightening.

But he concedes that in the current climate of “innate conservatism” from both major political parties, such a measure is unlikely.

“Labor are terrified of proposing anything that would be a target for the Liberals,” he told The Australian Financial Review.

“One hopes the importance of creating training eventually impinges on someone in the political sphere,” he said.

Delivering a National Tertiary Education Union-sponsored lecture at The University of Notre Dame Australia last Thursday, Williamson criticised state and federal governments for failing arts education.

He singled out cuts to TAFE programs in Queensland, NSW and Victoria, as well as at-risk programs at the Victorian College of the Arts, the Australian National University and the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts.

“Queensland has stated that its intention is to fund primarily those courses which are directly relevant to the mining, construction and tourism industries, making the breathtaking assumption that those training to take their places in our entertainment industry will have nothing to offer a future Australia,” he says.

“In NSW some 800 TAFE jobs are slated to go and the casualties, predictably, are fine arts and ceramics.”

The challenge for arts educators in a modern tertiary environment is high cost and a low student-teacher ratios, and produces little traditional research, Williamson says.

“The impact of arts education over the past four decades has been remarkable despite the lack of support from governments, he says.

Williamson writes about politics, loyalty and family in urban Australia.

“Forty years ago, the idea of Australian creativity was almost thought to be an impossibility.

“The arts sector [now] contributes $30 billion a year to gross domestic product, more than agriculture, forestry and fishing combined.”

Williamson says while the online world has created opportunities for artists, particularly writers, to have their work analysed and critiqued by a broad audience, that does not replace a traditional arts education. “It’s like learning a language … you can do so much online, but you still need a living, breathing language teacher.”

The intensive nature of arts education means it is unlikely the private sector will step in if public funding continues to decline, he says.

“It doesn’t fit the corporate mindset, it’s high quality, but there is quite a lot of wastage … for every 30 students at NIDA [the National Institute of Dramatic Arts], about four or five may be employed and make a good living as actors, so there is a wastage in pure terms.”

Williamson says many people who did not rise to the top of their industry still vitally contribute to society, often through teaching.

Queensland University of Technology executive dean of the creative industries faculty Rod Wissler is similarly passionate about arts education.

He says QUT is investing in the creative arts with an $80 million studio for drama, dance and visual arts.

But arts educators cannot stand still in the digital world and Wissler says QUT has been successful in this area because his faculty realised it had to bring traditional arts together with other disciplines.

“I love the traditional arts in their traditional forms,” Wissler says.

“But I’m also trying to look to where the young people who are coming through my faculty are going to find employment in the future.

“The way that we have run our business here for 10 years or more is to place the creative arts alongside the media disciplines and most recently all of the design disciplines including architecture, urban design and industrial design.”

Elsewhere it may be a different story, he adds.

“Universities are not immune from the need for accountability as far as efficiency and productivity are concerned.

“Frankly, some of the institutions that [Williamson] refers to have a long way to go in terms of meeting [quality] benchmarks. You could look at the whole TAFE system and say there are work practices which are simply not sustainable.”
A new British report makes clear the growing importance of philanthropy to the British university sector. Despite the global financial crisis, the number of donors from a diverse range of sources has almost doubled and philanthropic support for higher education in Britain has grown considerably.

So what has made the difference and what might we apply here in an Australian context?

The Review of Philanthropy in UK Higher Education report sets out the evolution and success of English and Welsh universities and colleges in recent years in building philanthropic support.

It was prepared for the Higher Education Funding Council for England, which is chaired by Shirley Pearce, vice-chancellor and president of Loughborough University. It acknowledges that “advancement” in British universities has come of age.

No longer are British eyes peering westwards to the US. Instead, during the past eight years, through considerable focus, energy and commitment, philanthropy has become embedded in British universities. The funds committed have significantly increased, providing a vital income stream to the higher education sector.

At the heart of the review is the “conviction that higher education matters enormously and, in parallel, that philanthropy is a force for good. Giving to higher education makes a partnership of immense power and value”.

Gifts to British universities and colleges have increased, despite the global financial crisis. At the end of the 2006-07 financial year, 131 institutions reported £513 million in total funds raised from 132,000 donors. Five years later, 152 institutions reported £693 million ($1.1 billion) from more than 204,000 donors. This means that there are 16 per cent more institutions, which are reporting an overall rise of 35 per cent in funds raised, and 54 per cent more donors. Active involvement and donor engagement is vital, as is a grasp of why donors choose to support higher education, the review says.

One donor is reported as saying: “If you believe in young people and you want a good planet and community in 20 years, then you give to universities”. Another donor, reflecting the need for universities to genuinely engage with donors, stated: “Organisations have to make up their minds whether they are forming a relationship with a donor or whether they’re simply a raiding party”.

The review emphasises the importance, for successful fundraising, of institutions having a clear identity and a compelling case for charitable support which aligns with institutional mission and with the interests of donors. Leadership has also proven to be vitally important for successful, and sustained fundraising.

The review also reflects upon the critical role that government has played, in promoting philanthropy to higher education in the midst of a radically changing framework for the funding of universities in Britain. The Pearce Review is a successor to the 2004 Increasing Voluntary Giving to Higher Education: Task Force Report to Government, chaired by Eric Thomas, the vice-chancellor of the University of Bristol.

One of the recommendations of the Thomas report was the introduction of government investment in matched funding schemes to support the building of capacity for fund-raising activities in British universities.

It led to an initiative introduced by the government in 2008 which made available up to £200 million for matched funding in England.

In Britain, as a result of the scheme, the government made matched funding payments of over £143 million triggered by about £580 million in philanthropic donations.

I joined the University of Melbourne just over a year ago after working in cultural and university advancement in Britain for more than 20 years. During my final 10 years in Britain, working at the University of Oxford, I saw a transformation take place: donors were providing unprecedented levels of support never experienced in the university sector outside the US.

One of my motivations in coming to Australia was to engage with the sector here and to assist in raising aspirations and building upon the understanding of the impact that philanthropy can have and how vital it is for our universities.

As I meet with donors, alumni and colleagues across Australia, there is evidence of a growing commitment to bringing about this vital transformation here, in our own way.

How will we in Australia respond? What role will government play? How will we embrace the immense impact that philanthropy can have upon all of our futures – through investing in our universities, through investing in bright young minds, through investing in cutting-edge research? The time has come for us to have big aspirations.

Sue Cunningham is vice-principal of advancement at the University of Melbourne.
Gifts to British universities are on the rise.

Photo: ROSS DUNCAN
Welfare policies shouldn’t hit home

For a supposedly classless society, we get surprisingly hot under the collar about the issue of “middle-class welfare”.

The idea that well-off families, living comfortably on two wages, in a house they own in a swanky suburb may be living off the largesse of our taxes through merely deserved benefits and poorly targeted payments from the government makes our blood boil, and politicians recoil.

The Canberra Times highlighted this in a recent piece by Matt Wade (“Household inequality revealed in study”, November 15, page 3), which reports on a paper given at an Economics Society seminar last week by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Wade points out “the most revealing finding was the amount of government assistance being transferred to high-income households.

“The preliminary results showed the richest quintile of households received about 12 per cent of social assistance benefits while the next-highest quintile got 11 per cent, the findings not only highlight big differences across the community but raise questions about the scale of ‘middle-class welfare’ flowing to well-off families.”

These figures are surprising because previous studies show Australia targets the poor more than any other country in the OECD.

The new figures come originally from an ABS report on “Government Benefits, Taxes and Household Income”, published in June this year and refer to the situation in 2009-10.

This report is the most comprehensive study of the distribution and effects of government social spending in Australia, and is invaluable for those developing and analysing government social policies. The survey collects information on the distribution of “social assistance benefits”, the cash payments made by Centrelink such as age pension, disability support pension, family tax benefit, parenting payments, Newstart and so on.

Information is also collected on direct taxes paid by households, and the study models how much households receive in the form of benefits in kind (e.g. Medicare, pharmaceutical benefits, public housing, school and university education and childcare assistance) and how much is paid in indirect taxes.

On top of that, the 2009-10 study collected information on household net worth – or the value of assets held by households minus liabilities, such as mortgages.

The most important benefits in kind – the universal health insurance Australians receive from Medicare and the benefits of public education – are not income-tested, so households at all income levels benefit.

Family tax benefits give some help to a majority of families for reasons of horizontal equity – the presence of children increases household needs not just for the poor.

However, pensions and allowance payments are income-tested, so it appears surprising the richest quintile (20 per cent) of the population get as much as 12 per cent of these benefits. Since income-testing is intended to target assistance to those most in need, surely these new figures show that a lot of our benefit spending is going to households who don’t need help?

Well, maybe not. Underlying these studies are a lot of technical judgments about ways of analysing data and presenting results. One of the most esoteric of these issues is how to rank households when dividing the population into different groups such as quintiles.

Households can be ranked from poorest to richest on a number of different measures, including the private incomes they have before they receive any benefits, the disposable incomes they have after they receive benefits and pay income taxes, the final incomes they have after their receipt of benefits in kind and payment of indirect taxes, or by their net worth.

Ranking by different measures produces widely divergent results. For example, when we rank households by their private incomes – which is what Centrelink uses to calculate people’s benefit entitlements – the richest quintile only get 1.7 per cent of total spending, not 12 per cent.

But if households are ranked by their net worth, then the wealthiest quintile do get more than 10 per cent of all income-tested benefits.

How can this happen? To take an example, a 75-year-old widow might have no other income than her age pension of just over $20,000, but own her home worth $500,000, not counted in the pension assets test.

A 40-year-old couple, with children, earning $130,000 or more could be buying a house worth $1 million, but have a $500,000 mortgage. These two households would have the same net worth in housing, so when households are ranked by net worth they would be placed in the same wealth quintile, but would be in completely different income quintiles.

In Australia we have many older people with low incomes and high net worth, because of high levels of home ownership among older people, while younger people with much higher incomes are still paying mortgages. In fact, there are twice as many over-65s in the highest wealth quintile than in the lowest wealth quintile. So does this mean we should more tightly target pensions on the basis of people’s assets?

It would certainly be possible to target more by including the family home in the assets test, and raising the threshold so that people with low incomes do not need to sell their homes to have enough to live on.

Including homes in welfare assessments is not what we, or our politicians, should want to see, PETER WHITEFORD writes.
Alternatively, the value of housing above a high threshold could be counted as assets if we thought people in houses worth $1 million or more should receive lower pensions. Any government that wanted to include the family home in the pension assets test would be, in the words of Sir Humphrey, “courageous”.

But more importantly, would it be good public policy to have a system that denied public pensions to older people because they owned their own home? I suspect that’s not the kind of attack on “middle-class welfare” anyone would want to see, especially our politicians.

Professor Peter Whiteford works in the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University.