TAFE cuts advice to be kept secret

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The state government has refused to release the advice it commissioned before slashing the TAFE sector's budget, forcing institutes to cut courses and make thousands of workers redundant.

A freedom of information request by the opposition, obtained by The Sunday Age, shows the government spent about $150,000 on advice from consulting firm KPMG before cutting funding to TAFEs.

But the response to the FOI request said information prepared by KPMG on the “project objectives, scope and approach” had been withheld.

The response shows the Education Department also sought an exemption from normal tendering processes, excluding other consulting firms from applying for the contract.

TAFE institute directors have condemned the government’s refusal to release the full KPMG modelling.

Holmesglen TAFE chief executive Bruce Mackenzie said the community would appreciate knowing why the government decided to make major changes to TAFE funding.

“It’s really quite important for the community perception that they do release that information unless they’ve taken it further than the modelling suggested,” he said. “I can’t see why they’d keep it secret otherwise.”

A spokeswoman for the state government said it would not release cabinet-in-confidence documents.

Opposition spokesman on higher education and skills Steve Herbert said the government had a responsibility to release the modelling.

“It’s central to the government’s decision-making, which has resulted in devastation in TAFEs right across Victoria,” he said.

“This is information that TAFEs themselves should have got.”

Victorian TAFE Association executive director David Williams said all TAFE directors had asked the government to see the KPMG advice.

“We would expect this whole process to be made clear and transparent and the only way it can be is for the modelling to be made public,” he said.

In May the government announced plans to slash an estimated $290 million from the TAFE sector.

The cuts have prompted more than 30 protests across the state, including a strike on Thursday in which teachers poured into Treasury Gardens to rally against the cuts.

The TAFE Association estimated the funding cuts would lead to about 2000 redundancies at TAFE institutes.

But the government has defended TAFE funding, saying it is spending an extra $1 billion over four years on apprenticeships and areas of skills training.

This comes amid widespread fears in the TAFE sector that institutes will have to merge in response to the cuts.

A letter from the TAFE Reform Panel to local councils reinforced those concerns by outlining the panel’s responsibility to provide advice to government on college amalgamations. The panel asked councils how TAFE education could be improved despite many of them publicly attacking the funding cuts.

Confidential documents released to the media earlier this month show plans for potential campus sales and closures, fee increases and further course cuts.

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TAFE cuts a study in how to lose voters

The Baillieu government may regret slashing so much, writes Farrah Tomazin.

TALK about bad timing. The day before he left for his trade mission to China, which was partly designed to boost investment in Victoria's education sector, Ted Baillieu was forced to defend his own record on TAFE.

Less than a day earlier, a cabinet-in-confidence report had been leaked to the media, revealing the devastating impact of the government's $300 million cuts.

Most people knew the changes were going to hurt. But the 86-page document — based on "transition plans" showing how each institute might offset losses — revealed the damage would be much deeper than first thought.

Some TAFEs had told the government they wanted to sell assets, merge or close key sites; proposals that would affect dozens of communities, from Prahran and Preston to Swifts Creek, Castlemaine and Ararat. Others would simply scrap courses or increase fees — in some cases, by more than 100 per cent — or stop offering vocational programs to secondary school students.

And almost all institutes would be forced to sack staff, because many programs were no longer viable.

Asking if he was surprised by the effect his cuts were having, Baillieueraseended with a familiar mantra.

"The changes are absolutely essential if we are to have vocational education and training on a sustainable footing," he said.

But while there's no doubt the vocational system had become a haemorrhaging mess due to the previous Labor government's flawed "open market" policy, the Coalition's defence about putting the sector on a sustainable footing conveniently underplays a key fact.

Between 2008 and 2011, Victorian public TAFE enrolments grew by just 4 per cent. Meanwhile, private training providers — many offering shaky courses at cutthroat prices — grew by a whopping 308 per cent.

In other words, TAFE did not blow out the vocational budget, yet it is bearing the brunt of the cuts. As a result, thousands of people who need the system to find a decent job, upskill or counter entrenched disadvantage could suffer.

The transition plans (leaked to the ABC 48 hours after they were lodged with the education department) paint a worrying picture.

If approved, Swinburne, for instance, would scrap at least a dozen courses, increase fees by up to 26 per cent and sell its Prahran and Lilydale sites to prop up facilities at Hawthorn, Croydon and Wantirna.

Victoria University would cut 99 of its 550 teaching staff, increase fees for vocational training in schools, and scrap courses in tourism, animal studies and veterinary nursing.

Holmesglen would try to acquire Swinburne's Prahran campus and impose fee rises of 102 per cent, while Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE may sell sites in Preston and Ararat.

And in country Victoria, where TAFE is the heart of many communities, GippsTAFE wants to merge with Chisholm and Advance TAFE. Bendigo has closed its Kyneton campus and will sell off its Castlemaine campus, and Ballarat will reduce its number of schools from seven to four. And that's not even scratching the surface.

It's not surprising Skills Minister Peter Hall was reportedly close to tears when he broke the news of the cuts to industry bosses earlier this year. Yet even Hall tried to remain upbeat as fears mounted back in May, telling The Sunday Age at the time: "At the moment, what we're hearing about is the worst-case scenarios ... and [those scenarios] I think will not materialise."

So much for that prediction. No one denies the vocational system had to be reined in. Let's face it: the former Brumby government's decision to introduce a demand-driven model (whereby public TAFEs compete against private providers, and anyone who wanted to "upskill" was guaranteed a subsidised place) resulted in an explosion of often questionable courses with comparatively low returns.

But what is now also apparent is that the government's solution — cutting 80 per cent of courses while pumping in an extra $1 billion over four years to subsidise apprenticeships, skill-shortage areas and programs such as nursing and aged care — isn't striking the right balance either.
Not surprisingly, the government doesn't agree. Asked if it was time for a rethink, one insider told The Sunday Age: "No. Some TAFEs are actually getting on with it — they're quite excited about the opportunities, it's given them a chance to shake up their business model, it's given them a chance to shake up their staffing. Sitting still is not an option."

Nonetheless, it's a dicey predicament for a government with a one-seat majority, especially since many of the institutes under threat are in Liberal/National seats, or marginal Labor-held seats the Coalition wants to win at the 2014 election.

There's also a bigger issue at stake. In less than two years, the government has not just cut the TAFE system, it has also slugged the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, scrapped the School Start Bonus, reduced the education maintenance allowance for disadvantaged families, and removed Koori specialists, literacy coaches, and regional support in schools. These decisions not only erode public education, they hit the very people who are most at risk of not getting an education.

It's a disturbing trend for a government that came to office promising a "stronger, fairer" Victoria.

Farrah Tomazin is state politics editor. Twitter: @farrahtomazin
Hits and memories come to the aid of the party, but it’s over — really!

They were the days, my friend, we thought they’d never end. But here’s a news flash…

AN we please, PLEASE declare some sort of federal amnesty on embarrassing university behaviour? I don’t think I can bear to pick up one more newspaper and read one more dispute over what so-and-so is alleged to have done to such-and-such after a heated meeting of the student representative council back in nineteen-seventy-something.

Or have one more otherwise intelligent columnist weigh in with some mad-eyed conspiracy theory about the post-Cold War world view of the entire ABC, based on his teenage experiences?

They were the days, my friend, we thought they’d never end. But here’s a news flash…

Tony Abbott roamed the landscape seeking to get elected to the student representative body so he could dismantle it, thus rescuing the student population from Trots, Maoists and leftists. Peter Costello got thumped by anarchists. Joe Hockey got thumped by Belinda Neal.

The Victorian left wing fought incessantly among themselves. Julia Gillard and Lindsay Tanner commenced their inexplicable lifelong love affair, drinking cask red and reminiscing about the time they changed the locks on the faculty doors, or totally crushed the Trots with a canny deployment of the little-used Standing Order 86(d) during the late stages of the debate on the Palestine question.

All of this would be fine, if they would just do it in private.

But they don’t. They use Parliament or their newspapers to bang on about it all endlessly, making turns to whine about personal attacks while feeding keenly off the perceived electoral advantages or disadvantages to be derived from the fact that Julia Gillard used to be a member of the Socialist Forum and had execrable taste in boyfriends, or that Tony Abbott was a nigger-bugger and general dickhead, which seems to be the main issue arising from David Man’s much broader Quarterly Essay on Abbott, a genuinely fascinating figure. Newsflash, grown-up student politicians: Nobody cares as much as you do.

When I arrived to work in the Sunday Age, Melbourne

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Why am I so exercised by all this: yes, well, all right: as you may already have intuited, I did just miss out on the free education lark. My otherwise rather undistinguished arts and law degrees were among the first to be acquired under Professor Bruce Chapman’s innovative HECS system.

And I, too, got involved in student politics for a bit. I was the women’s officer at my students association, and then I ran for student president, on a sprawling ticket full of leftist types, against a conservative-ish fellow law student whom — inconvenietly — I thought was rather a good chap.

He won, in a result that proved the foundation of my lifelong conviction that Australian electorates generally get it right.

The memories of my brief time in student politics fill me with awkwardness and shame, because, like most of my contemporaries, I was an under-informed, over-opinionated little prat at university. I suspected this deeply at the time, and adult hindsight confirms the impression.

When I arrived to work in the federal parliament, I was at a drinks function one night when a South Australian parliamentarian invited me back to his office, saying he had something to show me.

From a drawer in his desk, he unfurled one of my old campaign posters (in which I appear, resplendent, in a paisley skivvy and vintage catsuit — WHY did I not win?) and blinked at me triumphantly. I am still not entirely sure what point he was trying to make, but if it was “Lordy, weren’t you an idiot?”, I couldn’t agree more. So was just about everyone.

Hence my general plea: Let’s just get over it, eh? It’s embarrassing. And boring. And over.
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I don’t think I can bear to pick up one more newspaper and read one more dispute over what so-and-so is alleged to have done to such-and-such after a heated meeting of the student representative council back in 1970-something.

Or have one more otherwise intelligent columnist weigh in with some mad-eyed conspiracy theory about the post-Cold War world view of the entire ABC, based on his teenage experiences around the uni bar.

In the 1970s and 1980s – a halcyon and very much temporary interlude during which tertiary education came free of charge, thanks to the Australian federal taxpayer – campus life appears to have been a non-stop playpit for baby politicians.

Tony Abbott roamed the landscape seeking to get elected to the student representative body so he could dismantle it, thus rescuing the student population from Trots, Maoists and lesbians. Peter Costello got thumped by anarchists. Joe Hockey got thumped by Tony Abbott. Anthony Albanese got thumped by Belinda Neal. The Victorian left wing fought incessantly among themselves. Julia Gillard and Lindsay Tanner commenced their inexplicable lifelong exercise in mutual loathing. On the right, Nicola Roxon and Bill Shorten formed a romantic power couple. In South Australia, Penny Wong ruled the Labor Club with her boyfriend Jay Weatherill (now SA’s premier). In Tasmania, Eric Abetz argued with Nick Sherry about compulsory unionism. In Sydney, by day, Malcolm Turnbull developed a precocious writing style. By night, he went carousing with Bob Ellis. Oh, to be young, to be federally-funded, to be alive!

No wonder so many politicians and commentators of a certain age can’t let go of this period; for them, the prospect of a good old wingding about the real extent of B. A. Santamaria’s influence, or who said what about the Sandinistas, really sets the blood coursing.

Propose a debate about compulsory student unionism among these people, and it brings the place alive faster than playing Dancing Queen at a 50th. Before you know it, they’re locked in each other’s arms, drinking cask red and reminiscing about the time they changed the locks on the faculty doors, or totally crushed the Trots with a canny deployment of the little-used Standing Order 96(d) during the late stages of the debate on the Palestine question.

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Newsflash, grown-up student politicians: nobody cares as much as you do.

Not today’s students, who are too busy getting second and third jobs to cope with the fees and conditions you lot legislated when you had finished enjoying your own free educations. (Back then, a Sydney University law degree could be had for nix. These days, it’ll cost about $40,000.)

And certainly not the vast class of Australians who never went to university at all.

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