Gillard seeks school funds from states

PRIME Minister Julia Gillard has challenged the states to boost spending on schools and training for the sake of jobs and economic growth.

Ms Gillard used a speech to the Victoria at the Crossroads conference in Melbourne yesterday to outline the economic benefits of greater education investment.

The speech comes just weeks ahead of the federal government’s expected response to the Gonski review of schools funding and talks with the states on their contribution to an extra $5 billion a year in spending.

Ms Gillard said that while business chiefs and the coalition often mentioned workplace reform as a “magic bullet” to improve productivity, it was education and training that would transform the economy.

“If the states and territories fully implement our COAG education reforms, we stand to increase GDP by 6.2 per cent, a national average of $10 billion by 2040,” Ms Gillard said.

“To put it another way, meeting the COAG goal to increase the number of young people who complete Year 12 could generate an average annual gain of around $11 billion.

“The benefit not only flows to the economy but to individuals as they lead more prosperous and purposeful lives.”

She said the Commonwealth had put $18 billion into vocational education and training since 2007, with a $1.75 billion reform plan under way over the next five years.

It “defies belief” that states such as Victoria would cut spending on training in their most recent budgets, she said.

With the federal government seeking savings in the mid-year budget review to cover revenue shortfalls and spending promises, Ms Gillard said she would adopt the mantra of “not bigger government but smarter government”.

She said public spending needed to focus on the drivers of growth and productivity such as education and skills, innovation, infrastructure and clean energy as well as regulatory and tax reform.

The benefit not only flows to the economy but to individuals as they lead more prosperous and purposeful lives.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard
SKILLS WEEK
TIME TO ACT

Talent breeds success

Sarah Sharples

BETTER skills equal a better life for individuals and a better nation for us all.

That's the equation the federal government hopes to hammer home during National Skills Week 2012.

Tertiary Education and Skills Minister Chris Evans said the week aims to show-the many career opportunities that are out there and inspire Australians to take up training and get the skills they need for jobs.

In its second year, National Skills Week will run from August 27 to September 2.

With Australia continuing to see an increased demand for skilled labour, Senator Evans said job-seekers will need to be increasingly better qualified to compete for the jobs of tomorrow.

“Better skills not only lead to better pay and employment outcomes for the individual, but an investment in skills is also an investment in higher productivity and a sustainable economy.”

A certificate III or IV is estimated to increase lifetime earnings by more than $324,000 while a person with a diploma or advanced diploma can earn around $400,000 more over their working life than those with a Year 12 certificate.

Senator Evans said the federal government had established the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency to directly engage with industry on current and future skills demands and how best to meet them.

He said the government was partnering with employers through the National Workforce Development Fund to help train new employees and upskill existing workers.

“For individuals, skills are the passport to a better job, a higher pay packet and a more rewarding working life,” he said.

“You want to make sure Australians from all walks of life are able to maximise their potential to participate in the workforce and share directly in our continuing prosperity. “The opportunities are endless,” he said.

Tertiary Education and Skills Minister Chris Evans is urging people to train today for the jobs of tomorrow.

Picture: KYM SMITH
Jobs passport

Vocational education and training is the start to a successful career path, National CareerOne Editor Cara Jenkin reports

SKILLS are the passport to a better job, higher pay packet and more rewarding working life. Australians increasingly need to be better qualified to get work, with a vocational Certificate III the minimum qualification that many employers now seek before they hire staff.

Federal Skills Minister Senator Chris Evans says for businesses, skilled workers are the critical ingredient for sustained success.

“But for workers, their payoff for gaining skills is better wages and more rewarding and interesting work.”

“To compete for the jobs of tomorrow, jobseekers will need to be increasingly more qualified,” he says.

“An Australian with a Certificate III or IV will have improved earnings of more than $324,000 over their working life.

“A person with a Diploma or Advanced Diploma can earn around $400,000 more over their working life than those with a Year 12 certificate.”

To compete for the jobs of tomorrow, jobseekers will need to be increasingly more qualified

CONTINUED | 60

Training the passport to the future

FROM | 59

National Skills Week is an annual showcase of the career diversity available through vocational education and training.

Hundreds of events are being held across Australia to showcase careers available, what qualifications are required to get them and the employment possibilities.

Examples include cooks who work for cruise ships and can see the world as they work and hairdressers who are employed on movie sets to tend to famous actors.

SkillsOne chief executive Brian Wexham says apprenticeships, traineeships and vocational education are not just options for young people, with mature-age workers having many options and better opportunities by increasing their skills or becoming qualified.

“Trades and traditional areas are very important and always will be,” he says.

“(In an apprenticeship or a traineeship,) you’re being paid to learn something that will be of great value.”

“National Skills Week is about dispelling some of these negative myths that exist in the markets. We’ve got quality providers in the private sector and public sector. They should be respected in the way people respect universities.”

Evans and Wexham encourage workers to take advantage of the week’s events to learn more about the opportunities.

“National Skills Week is the best place to start.”
PRIME Minister Julia Gillard has challenged the states to boost spending on schools and training for the sake of jobs and economic growth.

Ms Gillard used a speech to the Victoria at the Crossroads conference in Melbourne yesterday to outline the economic benefits of greater education investment.

The speech came weeks ahead of the federal government’s expected response to the Gonski review of schools funding and talks with the states on their contribution to an extra $5 billion a year in spending.

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“To put it another way, meeting the COAG goal to increase the number of young people who complete Year 12 could generate an average annual gain of around $11 billion.

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She said the Commonwealth had put $18 billion into vocational education and training since 2007, with a $1.75 billion reform plan under way over the next five years.

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With the federal government seeking savings in the mid-year budget review to cover revenue shortfalls and spending promises, Ms Gillard said she would adopt the mantra of “not bigger government but smarter government”.

AAP
Choose a trainer to best suit your needs

Students can be overwhelmed with the variety and number of training organisations at which they can obtain their vocational education qualifications.

National CareerOne Editor CARA JENKIN defines the main players:

**REGISTERED TRAINING ORGANISATION**

A registered training organisation (RTO) is an enterprise that provides vocational education and training to students so they can obtain a qualification that is recognised in any state of Australia.

They are registered with authorities to ensure they provide quality training to their students. An RTO can be any enterprise, such as a private or public education provider, a business or a government department, which has met guidelines for training. It can offer a range of qualifications from Certificate I to Graduate Diploma.

Private RTOs set their own tuition fees but also can offer government-funded courses.

**TRAINING AND FURTHER EDUCATION**

Training and Further Education (TAFE) is Australia’s largest registered training provider with campuses located in major cities and towns.

TAFEs are government-funded and fees are set by the government. Subsidised courses are available.

Qualifications offered range from Certificate I to Bachelor degree, with many pathways between courses and degrees.

Qualifications in technical, creative, para-professional and mid-level administrative subjects are offered.

Curriculum are developed in partnership with industry.

**ADULT/COMMUNITY EDUCATION**

An Adult or Community Education (ACE) provider offers many entry-level or short courses to help workers get the basic skills they need for work.

Language, literacy, numeracy, computing and personal skills are among the key skills offered.

Some courses may not lead to a qualification and only recognise or improve a competency, while others are formal, nationally recognised qualification.

Most providers are not-for-profit, community-based groups and colleges that provide low or no-cost training subsidised by government or industry.
YOUR VOICE IN THE TERRITORY

Promising future

STORY >>P4-5
SKILLS are the passport to a better job and a bigger pay packet, as well as a more rewarding working life.

Australians increasingly need to be better qualified to get work, and a vocational Certificate III is becoming the minimum qualification many employers now seek before they hire staff.

Skills Minister Senator Chris Evans said for businesses, skilled workers are the critical ingredient for sustained success.

But for workers, the pay-off for gaining skills is better wages and more rewarding and interesting work.

“To compete for the jobs of tomorrow, jobseekers will need to be increasingly more qualified,” Mr Evans said.

“An Australian who has a Certificate III or IV will have improved earnings of more than $32,400 over their working life.

“A person with a Diploma or Advanced Diploma can earn around $400,000 more over a working life than those with a Year 12 certificate."

National Skills Week is an annual showcase of the career diversity available through undertaking vocational education and training.

Hundreds of events are being held across Australia to showcase careers available, what qualifications are required to enter them, and the employment possibilities.

Examples include cooks who work for cruise ships and can see the world as they work and hairdressers who are employed on movie sets to attend to famous actors.

SkillsOne chief executive Brian Wexham said that apprenticeships, traineeships and vocational education are not just for young people.

Mature-age workers also broaden their options and have better opportunities if they expand their skills.

And he pointed out that university was not the only option for career success.

“Trades and traditional areas are very important and always will be,” Mr Wexham emphasised.

“(In an apprenticeship or a traineeship), you’re being paid to learn something that will be of great value."

“National Skills Week is about dispelling some of these negative myths that exist in the markets.

“We’ve got quality providers in both the private sector and the public sector. They should be respected in the way that people respect universities,” he said.

Mr Evans and Mr Wexham encourage workers to take advantage of the week’s events to learn more about the opportunities that are out there.

“Look at some of the developments that are taking place in rural areas and in manufacturing,” Mr Wexham said.

“There are lots of new technologies coming into it that are making these areas very attractive and a lot of people don’t much have knowledge about them.

“In trades, you’re getting paid to learn and by going to university, you have to pay to learn.

“Through university you may have a $30,000 HECS debt at the end of it and you don’t have a job.”

Government agencies are funding training for employers as well as workers so that staff can upskill. “Training both young and old can make a huge contribution to the Australian economy,” Mr Wexham said.

“We want to make sure that Australians from all walks of life are able to maximise their potential to participate in the workforce and to share directly in our continuing prosperity.”

Mr Evans said that the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency has been set up to liaise with industry on the skill demands now and in the future and how to best meet them.

“We are putting industry at the heart of the training system to ensure the skills that are being delivered are the skills that employees need,” he said.

“The opportunities are endless — you just need to know what’s out there and where to look. National Skills Week is the best place to start.”
Tony Abbott's Budget razor gang is considering plans to charge students more for university degrees and introduce a new cap on places in unis.

As the Coalition searches for Budget savings, sources have confirmed “all options” are on the table, including calls for a 25 per cent increase in HECS fees.

The price tag for a medicine degree would rise to $73,000 under an increase of that magnitude and a law degree would rise to $48,936.

Coalition sources said deep concerns had arisen that the 150,000 extra students who had flooded the system since the Gillard Government removed the cap on university places in 2007 were affecting the quality of degrees offered.

Reintroducing a cap would mean up to 200,000 fewer places over five years, but some experts believe demand cannot grow much further.

The plan to increase HECS fees and the value of student loans is attractive to the Coalition’s economic team because the loans are not counted towards the Budget deficit.

But the big savings measure the Coalition is considering is reintroducing a cap on university places, which could deliver $2.6 billion in savings over five years.

Coalition sources said the last time they raised fees by 25 per cent it had no effect on enrolments, but logic tells us there must be a maximum price after which people don’t enrol. My point is we don’t know what that is,” Prof Davis said.

“The Coalition’s great concern is the maintenance of quality and standards.”

Even the architect of Labor’s original HECS loans scheme, Bruce Chapman, predicted big HECS increases would not scare students away.

“The evidence is universities could increase the cost of degrees by 25 per cent and there would be no impact on student enrolments,” Prof Chapman said.

Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans said poor students could miss out.

Students would have to take out larger loans and go into more debt if fees increased, he warned.
Online study fears

Childcare workers graduate with no experience of kids

SUE DUNLEVY

CHILD CARE staff have been dismissed after turning up to work with only a few weeks' training and without ever having had contact with children.

The workers are obtaining express certificates within weeks, as the Federal Government moves to increase quality in the sector by requiring all workers to be qualified by 2014.

The Community Child Care Association of Victoria, representing 1500 not-for-profit childhood services, told a Productivity Commission inquiry that graduates “sometimes have not had any experience in a children’s service as part of their training”.

Community Child Care Cooperative NSW, representing 1300 children’s services, claimed that some childcare graduates had not had any practical experience.

“Complaints of teachers whose courses demand little or no practical work, and diploma-qualified staff who have gone through shortened courses, are common,” it told the commission.

Childcare centre operators and unions are demanding improvements in training, warning there are no regulations requiring a person to study for a set period of time to get the base-grade Certificate III qualification in childcare.

“I have heard of someone doing it in two weeks,” childcare union United Voice assistant secretary Sue Lines said.

Some providers have told the Sunday Herald Sun they have had to lay off staff who have qualified after only eight weeks of training and with no face-to-face time with children.

At least five childcare providers and service providers raised the issue of poor-quality training with the commission inquiry.

The Victorian Children’s Services Association told the commission the quality of Certificate III and diploma graduates was “so bad many children’s services centres have fewer staff than they would like, rather than employing someone who is so poorly trained as to be a danger to the children”.

It said dangers included incidents such as leaving a baby unattended on a change bench.

Community Connections Solutions Australia, which provides information, training and support to 600 childcare services in NSW and the ACT, says some private registered training organisations were “fast-track” training.

“We have reports of people getting through their certificate and having no assessment of their practice — they are just assessed on their written work,” spokeswoman Samantha Edwards said.

“It undermines the whole idea of having the qualification.”

The Productivity Commission says one researcher found it was possible to complete a Certificate III “in as little as two weeks, or in some cases a few hours if undertaken completely online”.

Some state governments recommend that training involve between 500 and 880 hours of theory and practical work. However, one provider advertises on the internet that a Certificate III in childcare requires only full-time study one to two days a week for 20 weeks.

The Productivity Commission recommended last year that the Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council should update the community services training package. It also called for practical skills be demonstrated in the workplace.

A spokesman for Training Minister Senator Chris Evans said the new Australian Skills and Quality Association would work to improve quality in the sector.

The Government had also established a $700 million fund to help fund training courses.
HECS hike on cards

Coalition eyes lift, cap on places

Samantha Maiden
National political editor

A TONY Abbott Coalition government would consider plans to charge students more for university degrees and introduce a new cap on university places.

As the Coalition searches for budget savings, sources have confirmed “all options” are on the table, including calls for a 25 per cent increase to university HECS fees.

The price tag for a degree in medicine would rise to $73,494 under a 25 per cent increase. A law degree would rise to $48,936.

But experts argue it would have little impact on student enrolments because students know they would not be forced to begin HECS loan repayments until their salary exceeded $50,000.

The plan to increase HECS fees and the value of student loans is attractive to the Coalition’s economic team because they are not counted towards the budget deficit.

The big savings measure being considered by the Coalition is a cap on university places that could deliver $2.6 billion in savings over five years.

Coalition sources said deep concerns had arisen that the 150,000 extra students that had flooded the system since the Gillard Government removed the cap on university places in 2007 were impacting on the quality of degrees offered. Reintroducing a cap would result in up to 200,000 fewer places over five years but some experts believe demand cannot grow much further.

Chairman of Universities Australia and Melbourne University vice-chancellor Glyn Davis said the Coalition had made it clear to university chiefs that all options were on the table.

“The last time they raised fees by 25 per cent it had no effect on enrolments. But logic tells us there must be a maximum price after which people don’t enrol ... we don’t know what that is.”

Opposition higher education spokesman Brett Mason said he welcomed the debate but would not be drawn on the options under consideration.

Even the architect of Labor’s original HECS loans scheme, Bruce Chapman, predicted big HECS increases would not scare students away.

But University of Western Sydney vice-chancellor Janice Reid said she feared it was also an invitation to future governments to withdraw university funding and shift the financial burden to students, as was happening in the UK where fees tripled under a conservative government.

Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans said poor students could miss out.

“If fees increase, students will have to take out larger loans and go into more debt,” he warned.

National Union of Students president Donherra Walmsley said the Coalition should come clean with students.

COST OF DEGREES

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Faceless child care

Express certificates under fire

Sue Dunleavy

CHILDCARE staff have had to be dismissed after turning up to work with just a few weeks training and without having contact with a child.

The workers are obtaining express certification within weeks as the Government moves to increase quality in the sector by requiring all workers are qualified by 2014.

Childcare centre operators and unions are demanding improvements to training, warning there are no regulations requiring a person to study for a set period of time to get the base grade Certificate III qualification in child care.

“I have heard of someone doing it in two weeks, I’ve heard of that,” childcare union United Voice assistant secretary Sue Lines said.

Some providers have told The Sunday Mail they have had to lay off staff who obtained their qualifications after just eight weeks’ training and with no face-to-face time with children. At least five childcare and service providers raised the issue of poor-quality training with a Productivity Commission inquiry.

The commission says one researcher found it was possible to complete a Certificate III “in as little as two weeks, or in some cases a few hours if undertaken completely online”.

Some state governments recommend training involve between 500 and 880 hours of theory and practice work. But one provider advertises on the internet a Certificate III in child care requires only full-time study one to two days per week for 20 weeks.

The commission last year recommended the “Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council should as a priority update the community services training package” and called for rigorous assessment and a requirement that “practical skills be demonstrated in a workplace environment”.

Training Minister Senator Chris Evans says the new Australian Skills and Quality Association will be working to improve quality in the sector.

The Government had also established a $700 million fund that is being used to help fund training courses nominated by employers who must also put up part of the funding, a spokesman said.
Abbott eyes uni charges

25 pc price hike a Budget option

By SAMANTHA MAIDEN

TONY Abbott’s Budget razor gang is considering plans to charge students more for university degrees and introduce a new cap on places.

As the Coalition searches for Budget savings, sources have confirmed “all options” are on the table, including calls for a 25 per cent increase to university HECS fees.

The price tag for a medicine degree would rise to $73,000 under a 25 per cent increase and a law degree would rise to $48,936.

But experts argue it would have little impact on student enrolments because students know they would not be forced to commence HECS loan repayments until their salary exceeded $50,000.

Crucially, the plan to increase HECS fees and student loans is attractive to the Coalition’s economic team because student loans are not counted towards the Budget deficit.

The big savings measure the Coalition is considering is reintroducing a cap on university places that could deliver $2.6 billion in savings over five years.

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“The last time they raised fees by 25 per cent it had no effect on enrolments. But logic tells us there must be a maximum price after which people don’t enrol. My point is we don’t know what that is,” he said.

Opposition higher education spokesman Brett Mason said he welcomed the debate but would not be drawn on the options.

“The exact policy will depend on many factors including the Commonwealth’s fiscal position,” Senator Mason said. “The Coalition’s great concern is the maintenance of quality and standards.”

National Union of Students president Donherra Walmsley said the Coalition should come clean with university students.
Students get higher degree of debt pain

TONY Abbott’s budget razor gang is considering plans to charge students more for university degrees and introduce a new cap on university places.

As the Coalition searches for budget savings, sources have confirmed “all options” are on the table including calls for a 25 per cent increase to university HECS fees.

The price of a medical degree would rise to over $73,000 under a 25 per cent increase while a law degree would rise to $48,936.

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Crucially, the plan to increase HECS fees and the value of student loans is attractive to the Coalition’s economic team because student loans are not counted towards the budget deficit.

But the big savings measure the Coalition is considering is reintroducing a cap on university places that could deliver $2.6 billion in savings over five years.

Coalition sources said deep concerns had arisen over the quality of degrees because of the impact of 150,000 extra students on the system since the Gillard government removed the cap on university places in 2007. Reintroducing a cap would see 200,000 fewer places over five years but some experts believe demand cannot grow much further.

Other radical options in the mix include allowing teaching-only universities which would not have the same demands for academics to undertake research to qualify for the title of university.

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“The evidence is universities could increase the cost of degrees by 25 per cent and there would be no impact on student enrolments,” he said.
But University of Western Sydney vice-chancellor Janice Reid said she feared it was also an invitation to future governments to withdraw university funding and shift the financial burden to students, as was happening in Britain where fees had tripled.

“My view is that giving universities the discretion to increase student fees is a slippery slope to escalating graduate debt,” she warned.

Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans said poor students could miss out.

“If fees increase, students will have to take out larger loans and go into more debt.”

When universities were last allowed to impose HECS fee increases of up to 25 per cent, a majority of universities lifted fees to the maximum allowed but enrolments grew.

The Grattan Institute’s higher education expert Andrew Norton said his recent report, Graduate Winners, showed students should pay more because of the value of a degree over a lifetime in higher wages. He said: “So I don’t think 25 per cent, 50 per cent or even 100 per cent increases would have a big impact on school leaver demand.”

National Union of Students president Donherra Walmsley said the Coalition should come clean with students. She said: “We suspect (the Coalition) are going to deregulate fees and that’s what we’ve been hearing from vice-chancellors as well.”

“Logic tells us there must be a maximum price after which people don’t enrol”
All Dam lies and pollie porkies

LET'S not beat about the bush. Tony Abbott tells lies. So what? Is there anything surprising about that? After all, he's a politician.

But it needs to be pointed out, because the central message from Abbott supporters is that the Prime Minister is the liar – Ju-liar, in fact, according to Sydney radio king Alan Jones.

The Opposition Leader is portrayed – and portrays himself – as the epitome of honesty. A man whose word can always be trusted.

Abbott's lieutenants were even pleased when he was tossed out of Parliament on Monday because it got his offending comment accusing Julia Gillard of lying into the headlines.

Abbott's own truthfulness came under the microscope, however, after a blundering performance in an interview on ABC TV's 730 program on Wednesday.

Earlier that day he had claimed BHP's decision to put the Olympic Dam mining project in South Australia on hold was partly due to the Federal Government's carbon and mining taxes.

That was porkie No.1. BHP chief executive officer Marius Kloppers had blamed such factors as the eurozone financial crisis, the slowdown of growth in China and commodity markets weakness.

He had not mentioned the mining tax or carbon price in his statement to the Stock Exchange.

Kloppers told journalists: “The tax environment for this particular project has not changed at all since we started working on it six or seven years ago.”

The mining tax, he explained, only covered coal and iron ore – not copper, gold and uranium, which Olympic Dam would produce.

When Abbott stuck to his claim despite what Kloppers had said, interviewer Leigh Sales asked: “Have you actually read BHP’s statements?”

Abbott replied: “No.”

Sales’ meaning could hardly have been clearer. Just in case there was any doubt, she had gone on to say in her next question: “You haven’t read their statements today, but you’re commenting about what they’ve announced.”

The conclusion is inescapable that, in trying to explain away a dreadful gaffe, Abbott resorted to another falsehood.

Gillard will never live down her broken “no carbon tax” election promise, and nor should she. And there are plenty of other examples of her being economical with the truth.

Is Abbott, though, any better? He has made a string of false claims about the impact of the carbon tax, in particular the bodgie Olympic Dam allegation being just the latest.

The Opposition Leader has largely got away with being shamelessly loose with the truth, if only because attention has been focused on his opponent, but perhaps now it is starting to catch up with him.

Gillard had her problems this week, too – most notably in her handling of allegations about the circumstances...
surrounding her departure from law firm Slater and Gordon 17 years ago.

But in a marathon news conference on Thursday she answered every question on the matter that members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery could throw at her. It was a strong and competent performance, in stark contrast to Abbott’s embarrassing TV appearance the night before. A few more weeks like this would certainly worry the Coalition.

Abbott’s most serious error came at an education forum, after he’d accused Gillard – despite her denials – of having a hit list of private schools that would lose funding under a proposed Government blueprint.

He pointed out that more state and federal funding goes to public school pupils than to those in the private education sector and said: “There is no question of injustice to public schools here. If anything, the injustice is the other way.”

In case anyone missed it, Abbott repeated the line about private schools possibly suffering an injustice. He had left himself wide open.

But he squealed with outrage when Gillard used the comment to accuse him of believing public schools got too much money.

Significantly, the education minister in the New South Wales Liberal Government, Adrian Piccoli, immediately responded that “most of the proposed funding increases should be directed to public-sector schools because most disadvantaged students are concentrated in this sector”.

That was quite a whack at the federal Liberal leader from his own side.

Abbott’s bad week continued with his response to the PM’s press conference on the Slater and Gordon issue.

Abbott had claimed for days that this was an important matter and Gillard had questions to answer. Then he had to admit he had not bothered to watch the news conference right through or even to read the transcript.

Being less than obsessive in his approach to the truth is not Abbott’s only shortcoming. His strength is the sweeping statement and going for the political jugular not getting into the detail of issues and doing the hard yards.

Laurie Oakes is political editor for the Nine Network
Find a choice of routes to move in for the skill

Today’s VET system may offer more opportunities to learn than many realise, writes Sue White.

Our vocational education and training (VET) system finally seems to have the numbers behind it. About 1.7 million Australians a year take a vocational education course; 449,000 apprentices and trainees were mid-qualification last December, and recent figures show graduate trades hold their own against tertiary graduates in terms of salary.

However, according to the director of National Skills Week, Brian Wexham, VET is not without its challenges.

“One of the biggest difficulties lies in getting people to understand what vocational education is all about,” he says. The answer, according to Wexham, is diversity.

“People understand that trades are learnt through apprenticeships, but there is incredible diversity available in VET,” he says.

From horticulturists to health workers, Wexham says many areas of skill shortage can be addressed by encouraging Australians to undertake VET training.

“Health is one example,” he says. “We need a lot more health workers, as the average age of our health workers is about 50.

“As well as the skills gap created by these retiring workers, the ageing population means we will need more people to look after us all.”

Though the federal government is behind National Skills Week – with the Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Science and Research, Chris Evans, officiating at the recent launch – for those in Victoria at least, encouraging students to choose VET training is difficult given recent significant state-based budget cuts.

“From a federal government point of view, they’ve provided more money into the VET sector… but [state-based cuts affecting Victorian TAFEs] are a very difficult situation,” Wexham says.

“I do empathise with them.”

While the final fallout from the cuts to Victoria’s TAFE funding is to come, those in the system remain convinced that VET is worth the investment.

Colin Wilson is one example: at 35, he re-entered the VET system to retrain as a chef after a diverse career spanning fitting and turning, engineering and even cycling.

Now, the 2011 apprentice of the year is happily running the Sweetwater Cafe at the Yarra Valley’s Chateau Yering, a job he scored within a year of graduating.

“I think the combination of on-the-job training and study works really well,” he says of the VET system.

“You are paid while you learn and, while going to school gives you the ‘why’, work gives you the ‘how’.”

Heading back to TAFE in his 30s worked well for Wilson.

“Coming to it a bit older, I found it easier knowing what needed to be done, and what’s required, sooner,” he says.

“I was also more focused.”

Wilson wasn’t the oldest in his group. Today’s VET demographic goes well beyond school-leavers preparing for traditional apprenticeships and diplomas.

In NSW, more employers are sought to take on school-based teens in programs such as the state government’s Bright Future Campaign.

Across the country, partnerships between TAFE institutions and universities are trending in everything from retailing to architecture, and registered training organisations (RTOs) fill the gaps.

“RTOs tend to specialise in a certain area – some specialise in media or commercial cookery and do only that,” Wexham says.

But the boom in RTOs means that both they and TAFEs have to work increasingly hard to attract students. “I always think choice is a good thing,” Wexham says.

“But from a TAFE point of view, they have to compete with the private sector in a way they perhaps didn’t have to before. They’ve always provided quality outcomes [but] they’ve not necessarily had to promote it before.”

While cuts to TAFE funding in Victoria are making RTOs even more of a threat, those within the RTO space point out it’s also a competitive market in and of itself.

“It’s hugely competitive,” says the managing director of the RTO Leadership Success, Anthony Nash. “The challenge is separating the good from the bad.”

His business focuses on leadership and uses a VET framework to train middle managers, usually within their own work environment.

“We work mainly with employees who’ve been promoted from the shop floor into a middle-management role,” he says. “They may have a lot of expertise in their particular skill, but not in leadership. The VET framework allows us to provide practical, work-based experience and qualifications, and to take that training internally so the assignments, tasks and learnings are all relevant.”

A new focus on compliance for RTOs means staying registered is becoming more difficult.

Despite the challenges, it’s a move Nash welcomes. “Higher compliance standards are helping weed out those organisations who may have been delivering substandard outcomes,” he says.

National Skills Week runs from August 27 to September 2. See nationskillsweek.com.au. NSW employers interested in the Bright Future program should phone 1800 009 310.
Change of art … Colin Wilson re-entered the VET system at 35 to re-train as a chef.