ACCI fears skills fix won’t work

The nationwide patchwork of changes in vocational training is confusing for employers and students, writes Joanna Mather.

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry is losing faith that national skills reform will deliver a simpler, higher quality system for employers and students after NSW became the latest state to announce its plans.

The NSW government last week outlined a cautious approach to deregulating the vocational education and training sector, insisting the state had learned from the Victorian experience and consulted heavily with industry.

NSW Education Minister Adrian Piccoli said government-subsidised training would only be available in skills shortage areas and through approved private providers.

This would allow NSW to avoid a budget blowout similar to that which occurred in Victoria, where students flocked to personal fitness and other low-level courses that were not aligned to labour market needs.

“We are determined that we will not make the same mistakes they have made there,” he said.

But ACCI employment, education and training director Jenny Lambert remains concerned. She said the jigsaw-like changes occurring across the states were confusing for employers and students, and there was no sign as yet of a nationally consistent training system, which was the intention of the $1.75 billion National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform, signed in April and to be delivered by 2014.

Ms Lambert also warned against going further down the route of student demand-driven, uncapped systems for post-school education.

“We certainly believe an uncapped, student demand-driven system has got to be significantly restricted,” she said.

“It needs to be capped and directed to where the skills needs are.

“What we need to do strategically as a country is to continue to get the balance between the various aspects.”

The commonwealth has put $1.75 billion on the table for states that their overhaul vocational education and training systems to provide greater choice and quality.

Central to the reform process is the introduction of a student entitlement,
ACCI fears vocational skills fix won’t work

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or voucher, system to support students
in certificate courses.
As part of the changes, the common-
wealth will extend income contingent
loans similar to those that are offered
for university-level study to students
doing diplomas.

Another of the core reform principals
that students will be allowed to “spend” their entitlement with any pro-
vider, public or private, breaking the Technical and Further Education stran-
glehold on the market.
In NSW, government subsidised training will be offered for up to certifi-
cate III level to individuals over the age
of 15 who do not already have a post-
school qualification.

David Collins, the general manager
of state training services in the NSW
Department of Education and Commu-
nities, said the government would work
with industry to make sure that subsi-
dised courses on offer were in line with
skills shortages.
“We will be working with industry to establish a skills list which will really
define the scope of the qualifications that will be funded under the entitle-
ment.

To boost quality, public and private providers approved to deliver subsidised
courses will have to enter into contracts. The stipulations will be over and above
the thresholds applied by the national Vocational Education and Training reg-
ulator, the Australian Skills Quality Authority, he said.

Stephen Cartwright, the chief execu-
tive officer of the NSW Business Cham-
ber, said he was confident that business
involvement would prevent a repeat of
the budget blowout in Victoria.
“The problem with the way that the Victorians approached this was they
decided . . . to allow the voucher system to apply, so that the student chose what-
ever course they felt like doing,” he said.
“And so you ended up with a surplus of baristas, nail technicians and fitness
instructors. If you are going to have tax-
payer money subsidising training it, should be for those areas of the work-
force where we’re short of people.”

Queensland and Western Australia
are the only major states that have yet to
announce their reform plans.

West Australian Minister for Train-
ing and Workplace Development Mur-
ray Cowper said the state had reached
in-principle agreement with the com-
monwealth but final endorsement had
yet to occur. “The formal endorsement
process of the implementation plan by
the WA government is currently in
progress,” he said in a statement.

Jodi Schmidt, the deputy director-
general of training and employment in
Queensland, said the state government
was “taking an in-depth look at the
Queensland VET sector and how it could be revitalised”.

A report by the Queensland skills and
training task force has recommended
halving the number of TAFE colleges
across the state and giving the remain-
ing TAFEs greater autonomy.

A final report and recommendations
are due in November.
“We are committed to ensuring voca-
tional education students have real
career prospects and outcomes and it’s
not a case of training for training’s sake,” Ms Schmidt said in a statement.

A spokesman for the federal Depart-
ment of Industry, Innovation, Science,
Research, and Tertiary Education said
none of the $1.75 billion in reward pay-
ments for the states had been paid yet.

NSW wants to avoid Victoria’s mistakes, says Adrian Piccoli. Photo: QUENTIN JONES
P-DEF: Senate honours fallen digger

CANBERRA, Oct 29 AAP - The Senate has paid tribute to Australian soldier Corporal Scott James Smith, who was killed in Afghanistan last week.

The 24-year-old special forces soldier was the 39th Australian soldier to die in Afghanistan since the international mission began in 2001, and the seventh so far this year.

Senators stood for a minute's silence honouring his service to Australia after parliament began sitting on Monday.

Leader of the government in the Senate Chris Evans said the chamber expressed its deepest sorrow and tendered its sympathy to his family, friends and colleagues.

Corporal Smith was killed when an improvised explosive device exploded as he searched a compound during an operation in southern Afghanistan on October 21.

AAP lpm/klm/clf
FED: Senate honours fallen digger

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AAP lpm/klm/clf/jmt
Money must not drive the language agenda

The belated discovery of the importance of Asian languages is welcome ("Target Asia: education the key", October 29). However, the relentless emphasis on business needs at the expense of educating for a wider cultural awareness is regrettable. All languages are important, not just those widely used in business. Languages traditionally taught because of their cultural or historical importance should not be neglected either. Nor should less widespread languages be forgotten. What about Norwegian? Gaelic? Latin? Old French? Indigenous languages?

A suggestion: the digital channel ABC3 could run language programs in the evenings after the cartoons stop, permanently available on iView, supported by free course materials downloadable from the ABC website. The ABC used to run language courses, including courses in Chinese and Japanese, back when it only had one TV channel. Why have language courses been dropped now it has three?

If we want to improve Australia’s proficiency in Asian languages, the children of migrants must learn their parents’ language, and must not be intimidated by their school peers or work colleagues when they use it. Even today, when we are all taking about being bilingual for business and trade or medical purposes, such as reducing Alzheimer’s, people are given “attitude” if they speak in a different language and are sometimes loudly told to use English. A friend was talking to her mother in her language at work because the mother couldn’t speak English and a colleague told her off.

Let’s start with a small step which doesn’t need any investment except changing our attitudes.

Perhaps our Prime Minister should have looked at the example set by Singapore before she embarked on her white paper. Singapore is a fusion of four ethnic groups, all of which have various dialects. There is no disputing the commercial success that Singapore has achieved, despite the different languages of the inhabitants. Yet the main language spoken is English, though school students are encouraged to learn their “mother” tongue. For many years now, the English language has been the language of world business. Some 30 years ago, Australian stu-
Students were encouraged to learn an Asian language, mainly Japanese, but also Chinese. How are schools to choose which Asian language they should teach, where are the teachers coming from, which particular dialects should they teach?

The white paper is just another smokescreen inflicted on the Australian public, to divert attention away from the real issues facing Australia.

Ross Murdoch
Sippy Downs (Qld)

The major focus of the *Australia in the Asian Century* report seems to be on the potential for Australia to gain from the rising middle class in the region. The other side of Asia's urban growth, however, is increasing poverty and slum settlements.

I recently visited slums in India through a scholarship from the Architects Registration Board and there is a great need for renewal programs to improve slum conditions. India has only 28 per cent of its population living in cities and this is likely to grow to 50 per cent over coming decades. Many of those migrating to the cities are the poor who will end up in slums.

Australia needs to balance the upside of Asia's growing affluence and the potential to use this as a business opportunity with a responsibility to help improve the lot of the poor and particularly their living conditions. We need to give as well as take.

Chris Johnson
Newtown

As spoken, Hindi is not a language but a bundle of related languages. Hindi is not the aspirational language of the Indian “middle classes”. English is. The ordinary lower middle classes, i.e. the aspirational upper poor, scrimp and save to send their sons to “English medium” schools. Forget about Hindi. Help improve the teaching of English in India.

Robert Stern
Lane Cove

A Mandarin-speaking prime minister would be a good idea.

John Casey
North Ryde

On ABC Radio National Prime Minister Gillard stated that education was one of the key areas in which Australia had a service to sell to a growing Asian market. It's a pity then that our state government is slashing our high-quality TAFE system, and last week’s federal mini-budget further reduced tertiary education spending on research.

Education appears yet another area where the vision in government is all short-sighted.

Colin Hesse
Marrickville

I bet Asia is really excited about connecting with Australia and our fabulous technology. Technology that includes day two of trying to upload some pictures to the cloud with little end in sight. NBN – what NBN? And the joys of hearing about the wonders of digital radio that is not available in the vast majority of places in Australia – happy days!

Barbara Simmons
Shoalhaven Heads
EXPERTS WARN OF MASSIVE BILL FOR LABOR’S UNIVERSITY AND LANGUAGE GOALS

Asian vision ‘will cost us billions’

BERNARD LANE
JUSTINE FERRARI

REALISING the education ambitions contained in Julia Gillard’s Asia white paper could cost billions of dollars, with a leading vice-chancellor predicting the government would have to find an extra $10 billion a year in research funding if it were to double the number of Australian universities in the global top 100.

The goal of bringing the four priority Asian languages into Australian school classrooms could also be a significant expense, with key Asian education research groups predicting it would require thousands of extra teachers and cost billions of dollars.

“It depends how you do it, but if each (of the 10,000) schools has at least one teacher in an Asian language, that’s thousands of teachers,” Asian Studies Association of Australia president Purnendra Jain said.

“It’s a tall order at this stage. It’s billions of dollars and a medium-to long-term design and implementation. First, the federal government needs to put in some money . . . and state and territory governments need to come on board as well.”

The Asia Education Foundation yesterday estimated it would cost about $100 million a year to double the number of students studying an Asian or other foreign language.

University of Technology, Sydney vice-chancellor Ross Milbourne, an economist, estimated about $10bn a year would have to be pumped into the sector to bring the additional five institutions into the global top 10 of the Shanghai rankings. His estimate is based on how much extra research income Australia’s clutch of medium-ranked universities would need to match that of institutions just inside the top 100.

His analysis assumes increased research funding would need to be pumped into the sector as a whole — “lifting all boats” — rather than picking winners.

Professor Milbourne said the lower-ranked candidates for top 100 status among Australian universities had an average research income of $50m-$60m a year, which would have to rise to at least $372m in annual research income, matching the US Case Western Reserve University, which holds the No 99 spot in the Shanghai ranking.

“That implies you have to add $10bn a year to the higher education budget and then . . . wait about 15 years for the research to produce an impact and citations (to influence rankings),” he said.

Australia has five institutions in the top 100 of the Shanghai-based league table, which is dominated by universities with strong research programs. As well as increasing the global rankings of our universities, the white paper, unveiled in Sydney by the Prime Minister on Sunday, sets a series of ambitious education goals, including elevating the nation’s schools system into the world’s top five and giving every school student the chance for continuous study of one of four priority Asian languages — Chinese, Hindi, Japanese and Indonesian.

As Ms Gillard and new Asian Century Minister Craig Emerson began selling their vision for Australia to unlock the gains of Asia’s burgeoning middle class, the states lashed out at the federal government’s decision to link Gonski funding to the teaching of Asian languages.

Dr Emerson said yesterday the states would be denied education funding under the $6.5bn Gonski funding model if they did not supply the teachers needed to provide all students with the ability to access at least one “priority” Asian language.

School Education Minister Peter Garrett, who will have a teleconference with state ministers tomorrow about Gonski funding model if they did not supply the teachers needed to provide all students with the ability to access at least one “priority” Asian language.

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Asian vision ‘will cost billions’

Continued from Page 1

funding, refused to say how much the Asian language blitz would cost or even how many additional teachers would be required to teach either Chinese, Hindi, Indonesian and Japanese to students. The government has emphasised the role of the National Broadband Network in delivering language education.

The Asia Education Foundation yesterday estimated it would cost about $100m a year to double the number of students studying an Asian, or other foreign, language.

Executive director Kathe Kirby said Australia had previously doubled the number of students studying an Asian language under a Keating government program that ran from 1995 to 2002 when it was cut by the Howard government. Based on the money invested in that program, the AEF estimates in today’s dollars it would cost at least $100m a year for 10 years to double the number of students studying an Asian language, or about $33 a student per year for every student in the school system.

At present, about 18 per cent of students study an Asian language in primary and high school, but many drop it before Year 12, when the proportion of students falls to 5.8 per cent.

Professor Jain said the Prime Minister’s commitment that every student in the nation have the chance to learn an Asian language would require thousands of extra teachers. He said Hindi had come out of nowhere to be one of the four priority languages, replacing Korean, and only a very few schools around the nation taught Hindi. Mr Garrett said yesterday there were roughly 3000 Asian language teachers but could not say how many were needed to meet the goals of providing a language to every student. “That will depend on our discussions with the states,” he said.

He added that “we needed to recognise” that having a teacher in a classroom was not the only way to deliver Asian languages and there were lots of opportunities to use online learning.

Future Fund chairman David Gonski, the author of the government’s Gonski school funding reforms, said his review did not examine the syllabus and was solely a funding review. “The point I would make very strongly is the (Gonski) review stands as a funding review, in terms of what has been written by Dr Henry it makes a lot of sense but I am not suggesting to you that they should be linked. It is not for me to do that,” he told The Australian.

The three biggest Coalition states reacted angrily to Dr Emerson’s comments on school funding, with Victoria accusing the government of blackmailing them, NSW questioning how more reforms could be tied to the “mythical” Gonski funding, which has yet to be negotiated with the states, and Queensland saying the plan was “light on detail”.

“We have had no engagement at all regarding the white paper and this has a profound effects on us because we run the schools and we provide the teachers,” Victorian Education Minister Martin Dixon said.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING
MILANDA ROUT, ANDREW TROUNSON, IMRE SALUSINSZKY AND LAUREN WILSON
Doubts cast on Gillard’s goal for top 100 rankings

By BENJAMIN PREISS

THE FEDERAL government's goal of having 10 Australian universities in the world top 100 is probably impossible without "massive investment" in research, a leading education academic says.

Australia has five institutes ranked in the Academic Rankings of World Universities top 100, but the government plans to raise that number according to goals outlined in its Asian Century white paper, released at the weekend.

Professor Simon Marginson, of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne, said it would be a "very big stretch" to pull another five universities into the top 100.

"I can't see it happening," he said. "I think a better target would be seven or eight in the top 100 and two or three in the top 40."

Melbourne University is the highest-ranked institution on the ARWU ladder, at 57, followed by the Australian National University at 64.

The rankings are based on a range of research-related measures, including the number of alumni and staff winning Nobel prizes and the number of articles published in academic journals.

Christopher Ziguras, deputy dean at RMIT's school of global studies, said plans to boost the rankings of Australian universities were growing "tiresome".

"When you see every country in the world come up with the same strategy . . . it's not so meaningful any more," he said.

Associate Professor Ziguras agreed it was costly to increase a university's position in world rankings. "To take a university up in the rankings to the top of the tables is phenomenally expensive because you're competing against universities that have been established for hundreds of years," he said.

"They've been accumulating reputations for centuries."

Professor Ziguras said lifting the rankings of individual institutes might provide few benefits for the broader higher education sector. "It's an investment in research output but it doesn't necessarily mean that having one university high up in the league tables benefits the system as a whole."

The white paper also calls for stronger relationships between Australian and Asian universities. Professor Ziguras said Australian institutions were making progress in establishing stronger ties with Asia.

But universities needed to excite students about Asian culture to lift interest in studying Asian languages. Professor Ziguras said more generous government subsidies would help students to study in Asian universities and experience local culture.

"If we want to make that the norm we're going to have to make that experience available," he said. "That's going to take funding."

Monash University vice-chancellor Ed Byrne said his university's presence in Asia was the result of two decades' work. The university has a campus in Malaysia and a graduate school in Suzhou, near Shanghai.

Professor Byrne said establishing a presence in Asia required a commitment to a vision backed by solid investment. "These overseas operations have to pay their own way," he said.

Monash's Malaysia campus is a private university while its graduate school, a partnership with China's Southeast University, has government backing. "Establishing a university in another country is a massive endeavour and one can only do it with a massive degree of government support."

Melbourne University's Asia Institute director Pookong Kee said universities still had a long way to go in showing students the benefits of spending time in Asia. He said many Australian students still preferred to study in Europe or the US.

But Professor Kee praised the white paper's emphasis on the growing opportunities in the region. "I welcome the white paper because it reminds us of the danger of not doing anything."
To take a university up in the rankings to the top of the tables is phenomenally expensive.

CHRISTOPHER ZIGURAS, RMIT
Lifting rankings will take ‘decades’

The head of Australia’s highest-ranked tertiary institution, the University of Melbourne, says it is possible to lift 10 Australian universities into the world’s top 100 but no one has tried to calculate the cost.

In the Asian Century white paper, the federal government notes that, at five, Australia has the third highest number of universities in the top 100 as listed by the Chinese-based Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) and has set a “national objective” of putting 10 of its universities into the top 100 by 2025.

University of Melbourne vice-chancellor Glyn Davis said yesterday that it was an “ambitious goal”. “It has taken the University of Melbourne nearly a decade to move from our starting position of around 92 to our current position at 57. You have to be realistic. It takes that long to lift institutions up. “To get the 10 institutions [into the top 100] is at least a decade’s work. It’s not an unrealistic aspiration but it’s important to remember both time and resources.”

He said the more that the government relied on research-only rankings, such as the ARWU, the more expensive it would be to lift universities’ positions in the rankings because there was a linear relationship between funding and research output.

But he said it was possible. “It can be done if you’re thinking a 2025 sort of time frame,” he said, but declined to put a figure on how much it would cost. “You could actually do the sums on that and no one I know has tried to model it.”

Of the five Australian universities named in the ARWU top 100 this year, they are the University of Melbourne at No. 57, Australian National University at No. 64, and University of Sydney, University of Queensland and University of WA, all in the 90s.

Yesterday, Monash vice-chancellor Ed Byrne said it would not be possible to achieve the government’s goal. But he also said that the research-only ARWU index was too backwards looking and other rankings such as the Times Higher Education World University Rankings and the QS World University Rankings should also be considered because their rankings were broader and include quality of teaching.

However, reflecting the concerns of other universities that the government could choose to concentrate funding on the top 10, executive director of the Australian Technology Network of Universities, Vicki Thomson, questioned what happened to the other 28 universities. “Should we put all our eggs in the one basket? I don’t think so.”

University of NSW vice-chancellor Fred Hilmer welcomed the intention but said the “challenges ahead are immense, particularly with the massive investment countries such as China and India are making in rapidly expanding their tertiary education systems and building their own world-class universities”.
PM pressed to do right by Wong

Laura Tingle
Political editor

Prime Minister Julia Gillard is under pressure to intervene in the preselection which has pushed Finance Minister Penny Wong to second on the South Australian ALP Senate ticket.

While Opposition Leader Tony Abbott was highlighting Labor's discomfort on the issue, it was not his comments putting real pressure on Ms Gillard.

The pressure comes from House Leader Anthony Albanese signalling the decision will be appealed at Friday's ALP national executive.

But it also comes from some compelling Labor history.

Senator Wong did not have the numbers to win the No 1 spot on the ticket from Don Farrell, one of the powerbrokers who orchestrated the 2010 Gillard coup.

She is not the first cabinet minister to find herself in this position. Hawke government industry minister John Button found himself at No 2 on the Victorian ticket in 1987 behind union leader John Halfpenny. The ALP national executive intervened and put Button at No 1, fellow cabinet minister Gareth Evans at No 2 and Halfpenny at No 6. Another South Australian cabinet minister, Nick Bolkus, was also elevated to No 1 on the SA ticket during the Hawke years.

The same happened to John Faulkner as defence minister in 2010 and to Chris Evans.

Some cases have not involved formal intervention, just an acceptance that cabinet ministers must be given precedence on the ticket.

“What do all these people have in common,” one Labor source asked yesterday. “They all have penises.”

For the Prime Minister to accept Senator Wong’s No 2 spot would fly in the face of Labor history over the past 30 years.

Amidst such acrimony over sexism, this is a particularly unviable option, especially given Senator Farrell's role in her elevation.

As deputy prime minister, Ms Gillard was quite prepared to intervene in preselections in another state to protect supporter Laurie Ferguson.

Ms Gillard yesterday insisted she would not intervene.

If she maintains this position she either ends up on the wrong end of a national executive decision, or forces it to make a politically dumb decision to let the preselection stand.
Labor cuts to Asian initiatives draw fire

Nick Butterly and Andrew Tillett
Canberra

The Gillard Government’s push for Australia to become better integrated with Asia has been attacked amid revelations Labor has cut funding for a major Asian languages program.

A major recommendation in the Asian Century White Paper, released on Sunday, was that students should be encouraged to study the languages of the region and businesses should gain a greater understanding of Asian countries.

But under questioning from the Greens in the Senate yesterday, Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans confirmed funding for its National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program petered out at the end of the 2011-12 financial year.

Greens leader Christine Milne said experts in the language education sector had recommended the Government needed to spend up to $100 million a year for 10 years if Australia was to reverse the decline in Asian language studies.

The Government also came under fire yesterday for slashing diplomatic posts in Asian countries as part of Budget cuts to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade — a process at odds with Labor’s plan to lift ties with the region.