

Cuts and closures intensify in Australian TAFE colleges

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Pro-market restructuring is accelerating the destruction of the public Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system in Australia, most sharply in the country's most populous state, New South Wales (NSW).

The rollout of the Liberal-National state government's "Smart and Skilled," which commenced in January 2015, is deepening the cuts and closures set in motion nationally by the previous federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard in 2012.

Young people seeking vocational training are facing sky-rocketing tuition fees and TAFE college closures, especially in working-class areas, pushing them into the hands of profiteering private providers.

As a result, 83,000 fewer students enrolled in the NSW public system last year than in 2012, when about half a million students were enrolled, and more than 2,000 TAFE teachers have lost their jobs since 2011.

In September 2015, NSW TAFE announced plans to sell off 27, almost one in 5, of its sites, including regional campuses. Among the closures is Dapto, near Wollongong, to be followed by Epping and Chullora in Sydney.

This year, state government funding is to be slashed from three-quarters of TAFE's income to one half, while \$2 million has been earmarked to hire an executive "razor gang" to implement the government's privatisation agenda.

"Smart and Skilled" is the NSW version of a contestable funding system in vocational education established under the Gillard government's 2012 National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development, aimed at opening access to government funding to for-profit Registered Training Organisations (RTOs).

Gillard's blueprint was announced as a reform

delivering an expansion of "high quality training funded more equitably." Supposedly, it guaranteed all working age individuals access to subsidised training up to Certificate 3 level at a vocational education provider of their choice.

In reality, Labor's scheme has swept away any notion of technical training as a basic social right, and ushered in a "user-pays" system whose fees are making vocational education unaffordable for many youth and working class people.

NSW TAFE has responded to the commercialisation of vocational education by adopting a similar "business model" to that of its corporate competitors—imposing fee hikes, eliminating support services for disadvantaged youth or migrants, slashing course delivery hours and hiring less-qualified staff on lower pay.

One mature-age student told the media his fee costs had skyrocketed from \$120 per annum to \$3,000. He estimated his course would leave him a debt of up to \$8,000. Fees for Aged Care Certificates, an accreditation required for one of the lowest-paid jobs in the health sector, have shot up from \$840 to \$4,000.

Cost-cutting has already slashed course delivery hours up to 50 percent. According to one metropolitan TAFE teacher, in 2014 teachers had 168 hours to deliver a Year 12 subject. In 2015, Years 11 and 12 were combined, with hours cut to 112 hours. Electrical trades' courses have been shortened from 36 to 30 weeks. Overall teacher-student ratios are reported to have doubled.

In the past, TAFE colleges offered additional help for disadvantaged students, employing counsellors, disabilities consultants and outreach staff for young people in remote locations. Some courses were tailored specifically for individual students, along with practical

hands-on workshops run to boost their confidence. These are all being eliminated, particularly affecting Aboriginal students, people with mental illness and the disabled.

Similar schemes have been implemented in every other Australian state: South Australia in 2012 and Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania in 2014. In Victoria, where the privatisation process began in 2008 and has been taken furthest, student enrolment at for-profit providers has now outstripped that at the public TAFE colleges. Private RTOs have cherry-picked the most heavily subsidised courses, while operating on reduced overheads by slashing course hours and employing lower-paid staff.

Federally, successive Labor and Liberal governments have cut expenditure on Vocational Education and Training (VET), including TAFE, by an average of 25 percent over the past decade and a half. The for-profit sector has milked government funding and training subsidies, amassing lucrative profits, while students have been left to repay thousands of dollars in vocational education loans.

Nationally, thousands of TAFE teachers' jobs have been eliminated. According to the Productivity Commission, more than 40 percent of those employed in non-TAFE providers have no formal pedagogic training.

The teaching trade unions have collaborated in driving the privatisation process. In 2013, the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) worked with TAFE management to ultimately push through, against teachers' opposition, an enterprise agreement that permitted full- and part-time qualified teachers to be replaced with less qualified or even unqualified assessors and education support officers, resulting in hundreds of job cuts.

Last September, TAFE management demanded a new agreement that requires TAFE teachers to teach 100 extra hours annually, increases annual teaching weeks from 36 to 41 and introduces a new category of "trainers," to be paid at \$20,000 less per annum than qualified teachers.

The Labor Party, the Greens and the NSWTF leadership have professed outrage at TAFE's demands. NSW Labor is blaming the state Liberal-National government for TAFE's crisis and promising to abolish "Smart and Skilled." The Greens have called for "the

failed market contestability experiment" to be abandoned, and the NSWTF has declared it will not engage in "a race to the bottom with private providers."

This is all so much hot air, aimed to cover over the fact that it was the Gillard government that initiated the privatisation process, with the Greens as virtual coalition partner in the minority government. As the record shows, the NSWTF has been central to imposing enterprise agreements to undermine wages and working conditions.

For months, as in 2013, the NSWTF has been in closed-door meetings with TAFE management over a new proposed agreement, while keeping teachers in the dark about details of the discussion. While TAFE Institutes are daily wielding the axe on teachers' jobs across the state, union leaders are in talks with management, essentially about how to impose further restructuring.



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