

TAFE college sales accelerate attack on public education in Australia

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A major educational institution, the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college campus at Scone, in the Hunter Valley north of Sydney, has been sold by the New South Wales (NSW) state Liberal-National government to Racing NSW.

TAFE colleges have traditionally provided vocational training for qualifications in trades, short courses and more recently, pathways to university, as well as diplomas and some degrees.

Premier Gladys Berejiklian’s government claims that Scone TAFE is under-utilised. However, TAFE colleges, like universities, have been systematically run down with increasing casualisation of teachers, gutting of courses and increases in fees, taking them well out of the reach of many students, especially in regional areas.

What is even more galling for the Scone community is that the site was rumoured to be selling for \$3 million, which is less than it cost to build the college in 1996.

The sell-off is part of a wider assault on jobs, courses and conditions for teachers and students alike. In 2015, the state government had already prepared proposals for the sale of 27 TAFE sites.

Of these, 21 are in regional NSW—areas devastated by unemployment, especially among youth, and ravaged by droughts, floods and bushfires. The Hunter region has a 15 percent youth unemployment.

This month, TAFE NSW released documents that show a planned net statewide elimination of 678 jobs, including student advisors, customer support officers, field officers, VET fee help coordinators, help desk operators, gardeners, caretakers, facilities officers, security guards and site services assistants.

Scone TAFE, like some other TAFEs, is being replaced by a Connected Learning Centre (CLC) that, according to the TAFE NSW website, provides online

courses using virtual reality experiences, simulations, mobile training units and “more accessible and flexible learning.”

The Scone campus is the only TAFE that specialises in agriculture in the region. NSW TAFE managing director Steffen Faurby attempted to stifle concerns about how practical courses would be conducted through the CLC, telling the *Land* in February that courses such as chainsaw operation and welding would take place through a mobile training unit.

But Bob Sim, who has been teaching a farrier course at Scone TAFE for 25 years, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that agriculture courses are “not a thing you can teach online. You can’t shoe a horse out of a book. We have all the anvils here, the steel, the forges.”

A head teacher at the institution, Stuart Murphy told the *Land* that the community was “up in arms” about the sale and “you can’t deliver practical skills in a Connected Learning Centre.”

As stated in its 2018–2019 Annual Report, TAFE NSW “is seeking opportunities to grow commercial revenue.” It is restructuring to meet the business demand for students to be “job ready” and, like the public universities, to offset declining government funding by turning to corporate sources.

In 2018, the federal Liberal-National government under Prime Minister Scott Morrison cut \$325.8 million in funding from TAFE, taking to \$3 billion the cuts from vocational education by the Coalition government since it gained office in 2013.

In response to the outrage at the Scone TAFE sell-off, the trade unions—Unions NSW, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and the Public Service Association (PSA)—called for a “community forum” on March 31 to save Scone TAFE. The speakers included

state Labor Party leader Jodi McKay.

On a social media post on April 1 about the forum, McKay promised that “Labor will fight to ensure the money from the sale is reinvested back into the Scone community” and “Labor will work to establish a Parliamentary Inquiry into the sale of TAFE campuses across NSW.”

In other words, Labor will accept the Scone sale and try to divert the fight against TAFE cuts into toothless parliamentary hearings. This is in line with Labor’s own record.

For example, in 2010 Premier Kristina Keneally’s state Labor government demanded lower pay rates and longer hours for TAFE teachers. Despite opposition from teachers, Labor’s demands were facilitated by the NSW Teachers Federation.

Then, as a result of the Rudd-Gillard federal Labor government’s “education revolution,” for-profit vocational training providers mushroomed at the expense of the public TAFE colleges. The millions in funding cuts to TAFE saw course fees escalate. For example, Aged Care Certificates, an accreditation for undertaking one of the lowest paid jobs in the health sector, soared from \$840 to \$4,000 per semester. Courses were also shortened, with the electrical trades course cut from 36 to 30 weeks, and teacher-student ratios in many courses were reported to have doubled.

Despite this record, the unions are backing the return of further Labor governments, while criticising the state Liberal-National government. NSW Teachers Federation president Angelo Gavrielatos complained that staff, students and local residents had not been adequately consulted before the state government decided to put the Scone campus up for sale.

Under Labor governments, all the teacher unions supported the pro-business Gonski agenda, which has poured funds into private schools, accelerating the gutting of public education. The bitter experiences of the past decade show that Scone TAFE cannot be defended by relying on Labor or the unions.

The working class has a basic social right to public, free high-quality education at all levels, including vocational education. That can be achieved only by a break from the unions and the formation of rank-and-file committees in all public education institutions, including TAFE, to fight for a socialist program to reorganise society according to need and not the profit

dictates of the market.

To discuss this perspective, we urge teachers, parents and students to contact the Committee for Public Education at <https://www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation> or cfpe.aus@gmail.com.



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