THE TAFE sector has warned that the Gillard government's tougher points system for skilled migration will “devastate” demand from international students studying trades and vocational skills.

The system, for migrants without employer sponsorship, rewards degrees and English skills at the expense of trades.

It also favours migrants aged 25-32 at the expense of younger applicants -- the main demographic for TAFEs and private training providers.

The system overturns the regime introduced by the Howard government, which favoured specific occupations and was cynically exploited by students and colleges as a direct path to permanent residency.

TAFE Directors Australia warned that applicants younger than 25 with trade or diploma qualifications would have little chance of securing enough points under the new system.

Such students could qualify by securing employee sponsorship, but TDA warned the casual and contract nature of such work meant that sponsorship alone would not be enough to cover skills shortages. “While TAFE supported the overall intent to drive higher qualifications and quality, the unintended consequences left a devastating outlook for international students in Australia’s TAFE institutes -- and likely beyond into colleges and universities,” TDA chief executive Martin Riordan said.

TDA’s concerns were backed by the Australian Industry Group, which said the points system did not reflect the “critical” need for skills.

TDA’s warning comes ahead of a meeting today between global education peak bodies and government representatives, including Immigration Minister Chris Bowen and Trade Minister Craig Emerson.

The TAFE sector is pushing government to reconsider its more onerous visa regulations, which are making Australian colleges uncompetitive against competitors in Canada, Britain and the US. Industry recommendations include reducing the amount of money applicants must prove they have to pay tuition and living costs.