TAFEs to cop brunt of public sector job cuts: opposition

NSW opposition MPs say TAFE colleges will incur a disproportionate share of up to 10,000 public sector job cuts, as the state government winds down training over the next year.

While TAFEs were spared a Victorian-style slash and burn in yesterday's state budget, they received $16 million less than last year, with training delivery projected to decline by almost 250,000 contact hours. The budget also allocated $13m less to TAFE infrastructure and $25m less to support the training system.

"This is the first time I have ever seen vocational training funding go backwards in dollar terms," opposition education spokeswoman Carmel Tebbutt said.

She said funding hikes had averaged 4.7 per cent a year for the past decade. Ms Tebbutt said it was hard to explain a decrease in training given the uncertain economy -- traditionally a time of increased enrolments -- and the recent Council of Australian Governments agreement to boost training. "It just doesn't make sense other than they've cut the budget, so they can't afford to provide as much training," she said.

"At a time of skill shortages it's very short-sighted."

The budget contains no provision for new measures agreed to at COAG, including a guaranteed training entitlement and HECS-style loans for diploma students.

Greens MP John Kaye said the 0.9 per cent cut to TAFE training was really 3.4 per cent when inflation was taken into account.

He said this equated to a $62m cut this year, and more than $1 billion in real terms since 1997.

"When you've cut so deeply for so long, you've squeezed every possible avenue of efficiency out of the organisation," Mr Kaye said. "This will push TAFE to the edge."

He said the latest funding cut would cost more than 600 TAFE jobs or more than 4 per cent of the full time-equivalent workforce.
Treasurer Mike Baird said the government was aiming to reduce staffing costs by 1.2 per cent across the public service.

Police, nurses and school teachers have been quarantined, but not TAFE teachers.

Ms Tebbutt said the cuts made "a mockery" of Education Minister Adrian Piccoli's pre-election signing of a five-point commitment to support TAFEs.

A spokesman for Mr Piccoli said NSW was "in the process of developing our implementation plan" for the COAG measures.

The HES understands it may be up to two months before NSW reveals how it plans to implement these changes, which have been the subject of consultation since September last year.

Mr Piccoli's spokesman said the 2012-13 TAFE budget estimate of $1.8bn represented a "slight decrease" on last year's estimates.

"TAFE NSW, like other government agencies, is required to achieve ongoing efficiency savings including general efficiencies, information and communications technology and procurement savings," he said.

"The decrease in the TAFE capital budget reflects the conclusion of some significant commonwealth programs."

The budget papers reveal that NSW expects to fund vocational training by an average of $12.03 per student contact hour, after two years of increased costs.

Training cost $12.08 in 2009, $12.34 in 2010 and $12.56 last year, the papers say.

However, estimates on the Department of Education and Communities website, sourced from the Productivity Commission, suggest that this figure has consistently declined and had reached $11.92 by 2010.

Nevertheless, NSW still plans to spend far more on training than its southern neighbour.

In last month's budget, Victoria announced a maximum funding rate of about $12.50, with some courses to receive state government support of just $1.50 an hour.

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