TAFE won’t survive

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There are some aspects of the current “debate” or emerging reality in TAFE and VET which we are urged to accept as truths or realities.

I don’t agree what we should. I think there are things which, as custodians of the precious public provision of education in this sector, we should contest, we should rail against, and we should be angry about.

I think we should be deeply concerned that in the same year as TAFEs in Victoria revealed losses of more than $216m, the principals of the newly listed for profit provider, Vocation withdrew more than $225m of clear profit, profit based on a business model which saw one of its founding members more than 95% reliant on government funding, and therefore came almost entirely from Victorian taxpayers.

I probably don’t need to remind this audience that every cent invested in TAFEs across the country is expended on people – students – and that this investment is an investment in the future of our society and the economy.

Neither do I need, in front of this audience, to remind people that TAFEs are neither uncompetitive, nor intransigent nor unable to change. For those of us who have been in the sector for decades, there is ample evidence of TAFEs adaptability, its competitiveness and its nimble capacity to invent and re-invent itself at the whim of government policy.

Like all public institutions, TAFEs have had their ups and downs, and it would be a very foolish person who claimed that there have not been problems, nor that there is not, at every turn, a need to improve, to renew and to caste a weather eye to the winds of change.

But we should not, in our attempt to justify our existence simply repeat the mantras and ideological vagaries of government policy determined by bureaucrats and marketeers as if they were uncontested truths.

No-one has presented evidence that the free market or competition is a better basis for policy in the sector and no-one has explained how delivering huge profits to a voracious private sector will improve delivery or quality of vocational education. No-one has explained what will happen if TAFEs, these incredibly highly regarded lynch pins of communities and economies across the length and breadth of this country are replaced by profit driven, fly-in, fly-out providers for whom the delivery of profit to shareholders must be, always, the driver of their delivery model, and the shaper of their purpose.
TAFE is absolutely on the edge. Much of the question about its short, medium and long term survival will depend on policy determinations over which we, in the sector and in this room have only tangential control.

We must walk the very challenging and fine line between realism and optimism. We must continue to call for public policy based on evidence, not ideology. We must re-awaken in communities and amongst students, and workers and employers the core values which underpinned the foundation of the modern public vocational education system in this year of the 40th anniversary of Kangan.

But we must look to the future, rather than the past. There is nothing “old fashioned” about the public good, about cutting edge technical skills in a rapidly changing economy, about social inclusion and cohesion, about planning for the future. We must invest in individuals so that they don’t just learn once, and never return, but so they get the skills and the know-how to return when they need to change their career, when they become unemployed or when life treats them poorly, and they need to build themselves another chance for the future.

TAFEs cannot do this on their own. It is really madness to assert that they are not competitive. Most TAFE colleges would die for the 80% – 95% reliance on public funds which has underpinned Vocation’s meteoric rise. For decades, TAFEs have developed fee-for-service relationships, have tailored training for individual employers – their public funding has declined by any measure, and for good or for bad, they have had to build their commercial activities.

But I would argue, in this emerging reality, that one of the biggest points of difference between TAFEs and private RTOs, one of their significant advantages, is their teaching staff. Investment in the teaching workforce is an investment in quality, an investment in adaptability and an investment in innovation. Investment in teachers is an investment in the whole sector, because now more than ever the teaching and broader TAFE workforce have to be mobile. Governments must be persuaded that this, amongst other things like an investment in pedagogy and in research, holds the key to the future, even if your vision of the future is limited to workforce development and the economy.

The future of the teaching workforce can never be realised through the narrow and instrumental confines of the TAE Training Package.

TAFEs build relationships with industries and communities. They are there for now and for the future. They are about partnerships, about innovation – they are about the public good and not individual profit. They are critical to the future. All our polling shows that the Australian public knows this. It is governments and bureaucrats that don’t – and that should point us to where our efforts need to lie.

I’ll say again that TAFE is on the edge. There is surely not one person in this room who would disagree. I don’t believe that saying this is talking TAFE down. Unless we deal with the reality we find, we have no hope of building strategies for the future. The future of TAFE – whether
there is a future, and what it will look like – lies largely in the hands of people like us. I think it’s a future worth fighting for.