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Welcome recommendations from BCA for national focus on Australia's technical and vocational education system

The 2014 Chancellor's Lecture at Swinburne University of Technology, delivered by Jennifer Westacott, Chief Executive of the Business Council of Australia, has called for national focus for TAFE as an integral element of a quality and competitive national open training market, and clarity around the Commonwealth's role in a new risk-based quality VET framework.

TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) welcomes Ms Westacott's address, delivered significantly, at one of TDA's six dual sector university members operating with a TAFE division.

Ms Westacott nominated 'five pillars' for policy change, needed to drive better outcomes for technical and vocational education.

TAFE was one pillar specifically nominated, with Ms Westacott urging further governance reform, which she said was essential to ensure clearer independence of operations and capacity to compete in the open public/private training market. The five pillars for change were:

- Commonwealth's VET Reform Task Force to lead with clear vision for the sector;
- Commonwealth to be the chief coordinating agency for technical and vocational education, to overcome increasingly divergent state and territory skills policy;
- Integration of the VET system with industry, investment in pathways, to overcome so many young Australians struggling with unemployment ("More than 62 per cent of unemployed youth have not made it to Year 12.");
- Unleashing public providers to better operate in an open market, and a risk based regulatory model to ensure quality of outcomes;
- Consistency across jurisdictions.

Ms Westacott singled out for criticism the current narrow approach to funding Training Packages, which aggravated industry perceptions of skills miss-match.

Ms Westacott said the rigid apprenticeship system had not kept pace with the urgency to retrain people in new jobs, and those seeking new qualifications. A further concern was the erosion of the states' funding base for VET due to a weaker fiscal position, and lack of foundation skills and pathways from schools to skills.

Ms Westacott also raised concern that international education in VET had been badly impacted, and would need to significantly improve to allow technical and vocational education to be a major Australian export.

Ms Westacott closed by commenting that Australia's quality VET system had been the bedrock of national economic growth. While schools had often failed, it was the technical and vocational education that remained critical to human capital development, productivity and cohesion.

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