

Government toolkit 'underwhelming'

Traditional trades are not the only areas in need, say TAFE heads.

SKILLS / MEGAN JOHNSTON | September 29, 2004

The heads of Australia's TAFE institutes have criticised the Government's new skills initiatives as short-sighted and inadequate.

Last week the country's skills shortages rose to the top of the political agenda (see story above) Chair of TAFE Directors Australia, Gillian Shadwick, told delegates at last week's TDA Congress in Sydney that while she greeted the funding injection as "tremendous news", traditional trades are not the only areas in need.

"We have been asking for more recognition for some time because we are aware that in those areas – automotive, metal, manufacturing and so on – that Australia's heading for a problem.

"It's easy to think of skills gaps and skills training as all about apprentices and traditional trade areas, but in fact if we don't look to the skills gaps in some of the paraprofessional and other skills in VET and TAFE then we'll only come to a short-term solution," she said.

Traditional trades are also rapidly changing and more technically complex than they once were, Shadwick said.

The policies announced last week fall "well short of what is required to address Australia's future skills needs", she said.

"TDA agrees that more emphasis needs to be put on apprenticeships in the traditional trades as well as higher-level skills qualifications in other areas. There has been too much emphasis on short-term traineeships at the expense of medium and higher-level skills training."

The "crux of the problem" is it is not clear how the new system will attract more apprenticeships or how additional training places will be funded, Shadwick said.

The sector also needs more information on how the Institute for Trade Skill Excellence will work, she added.

"TDA is concerned that the new system may be introducing another and unnecessary layer of bureaucracy into the system. [How will it] relate to the existing system for registering training organisations and recognising qualifications.

"Nor is it clear how it will relate to the new Industry Skills Councils that have just been set up."

Shadwick said it is "very disappointing" that Howard made no mention of a greater national investment in skills development generally.

"The facts are that Commonwealth government funding for TAFE is now significantly less in real terms than it was in 1997 despite large increases in demand and in numbers of students. The latest figures show that there are over 42,000 students wanting to study in TAFE but for whom places cannot be found."

Last month Shadwick called on the federal government to commit to additional growth funding of at least 5 per cent per year in real terms under a new ANTA Agreement with the states and territories. The government should also initiate a high level, independent review of Australia's future VET needs, she said.

In his keynote address to the TDA conference, chair of the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, Jack Dusseldorp, said last week's announcement does "not seriously confront the long-term strategic issues of innovation, educational attainment and youth disengagement".

The VET sector is also largely excluded from national innovation strategies, has poor national data and the quality of training is often questionable, he said. The ANTA Agreement is also stalled.

The Coalition has only partially kept a previous election promise to deliver a comprehensive response to the Eldridge report on youth pathways. He said Labor's 'learn or earn' Youth Guarantee had "raised the bar".

"We very much hope the Coalition will come to the party given the strong foundations that are in place and the accumulated knowledge and experience showing what might be achieved," he said.

Maree O'Halloran, president of the NSW Teachers Federation said: "Although \$800 for a tool kit may seem attractive, it is farcical if there are not enough apprenticeships or student places at TAFE. Both federal and state governments have failed to address the funding crisis in TAFE."

Democrats leader senator Andrew Bartlett said the tool voucher scheme "hits the thumb not the nail".