Free TAFE needs infrastructure and lecturer investment

As governments promote Free TAFE as a response to Australia's growing skills shortages, WA must also ensure its public TAFE system, and the lecturers who deliver vocational education, are properly supported to meet the state's workforce needs.

The renewed national focus on Free TAFE has brought welcome attention to the vital role vocational education plays in Australia's economic and social future. Expanding access to training is an important step, but it also raises an important question: will the Cook government invest strongly enough in the public TAFE system to deliver on this promise?

These issues were also highlighted recently at the AEU's National Conference, which National TAFE Council Executive Member Gary Hedger and I attended. At the meeting, Federal Skills and Training Minister Andrew Giles spoke about the importance of rebuilding the public vocational education system and ensuring Free TAFE delivers genuine opportunities for students and workers. His remarks reinforced the need for governments to ensure that expanding access to training is matched with sustained investment in TAFE infrastructure and the lecturers who deliver it.

In WA, the answer matters greatly. The state's economy relies on a skilled workforce across industries such as construction, resources, energy, manufacturing and community services. Yet unlike schools and universities, the value of a strong public TAFE system has often been undermined by policies that treat vocational education as a competitive training market. Over the past two decades, governments encouraged the expansion of private training providers, frequently diverting funding away from the public TAFE system that has traditionally delivered the majority of high-quality vocational education.

The consequences of these policies have placed significant pressure on public TAFE campuses. Funding instability, fragmented training delivery and growing administrative demands have made the work of delivering vocational education increasingly complex. Despite this, WA's TAFE lecturers continue to provide the high-quality training that industry and communities depend on.

The introduction of Free TAFE signals a welcome shift in thinking. It recognises that vocational education is not simply a commodity to be bought and sold in a training market, but a public good that supports economic productivity, strengthens communities and provides pathways to secure employment. WA's public TAFE network is well placed to deliver on this opportunity. Across the state's five public TAFE colleges, lecturers work closely with local industries and communities to deliver practical, job-focused training across a wide range of sectors.

TAFE also plays a critical role across regional WA, ensuring people outside metropolitan areas can access high-quality vocational education close to where they live and work. At the centre of this system are TAFE lecturers. Their work extends well beyond delivering lessons. Lecturers design and maintain training programs, engage with industry, manage complex assessment and compliance requirements, and support students from increasingly diverse backgrounds. Their industry expertise ensures graduates enter the workforce with the skills and professional standards required by employers.

However, many lecturers know that the reality of working in the sector has become increasingly challenging. Rising enrolments, ageing facilities and growing administrative demands are placing pressure on teaching and learning environments. At the same time, many students are arriving at TAFE with more complex learning, financial and wellbeing needs, requiring additional support that lecturers are often expected to provide without adequate resources.

From the SSTUWA's perspective, strengthening TAFE must include strengthening the workforce that delivers it. Expanding Free TAFE places must be matched by investment in modern facilities, updated equipment, student support services and secure employment for lecturers. Without this investment, the pressure on staff and campuses will only grow.

WA is already experiencing shortages in a number of critical occupations, including skilled trades, health and community services and aged care. A strong public TAFE system will be essential if the state is to train the workforce needed to meet these growing demands. Free TAFE has the potential to expand opportunity and address skills shortages. But for that potential to be realised, governments must commit to sustained investment in the public TAFE system.

For the SSTUWA, the message is clear: if WA is serious about building the skilled workforce our economy needs, the Cook government must back that ambition with real investment in public TAFE and the lecturers who deliver it. Strengthening

TAFE means strengthening secure jobs for lecturers, improving campus infrastructure and ensuring West Australians continue to have access to a strong, publicly delivered vocational education system.

TAFE lecturers, visit bit.ly/40p8eXf to enrol in Know Your Rights – TAFE training on Friday 22 May at the SSTUWA



By Jonelle Rafols
Senior Vice President

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
ABN 54 478 094 635 © 2026