Urgent action needed to ensure TAFES can continue to change lives

Governments must act to preserve the unique role of TAFEs at the heart of Australia's vocational training system, the AEU said today.

Marking National TAFE Day in Canberra, AEU Federal TAFE Secretary Pat Forward said that TAFEs were under threat from a privatisation agenda that favoured forprofit providers looking to make quick profits at the expense of students and taxpayers.

"TAFEs are still educating over one million Australians each year – 550,000 of them aged between 15 and 24," Ms Forward said.

"They are continuing their role of providing vital skills training and a second chance at education for many students.

"But their future is uncertain due to funding cuts and policies that have allowed unscrupulous for-profit training providers to compete with TAFEs for funding.

"Governments need to stop the trend towards privatisation of vocational training and guarantee TAFEs a minimum share of at least 70 per cent of vocational training funding.

"The combination of privatising funding and poor regulation of for-profit providers has been a disaster which has lowered the quality of vocational training and left students with huge debts.

"Students, taxpayers and industry are the losers and the only winners are the forprofit providers who are reaping big profits.

"There are no limits on what the providers can charge for courses through the VET FEE-HELP system, and students are often misled about the huge debts they are liable for after their course has ended."

"Research conducted by the University of Sydney's Business School on behalf of the AEU found the average annual profit made by sharemarket-listed providers was around 30 per cent, with Australian Careers Network earning a massive 51 per cent annual profit on the back of taxpayer-funded training.

"The report found that these profits are coming at the expense of quality delivered to students, and were damaging trust in the vocational education system.

"We have already seen over 10,000 Victorian qualifications cancelled in fields like Aged Care and Child Care due to poor quality instruction, and students left to pick up the pieces.

"The Australian Standards and Quality Authority's 2013/14 annual report found that 75 per cent of courses failed to meet standards on a first inspection, an incredibly high figure which shows that regulation is not keeping up with the huge growth of private providers.

"TAFEs cannot compete fairly with unscrupulous providers who claim to be able to teach a year-long course in eight weeks, or which mislead students about the debts they will incur from taking a course."

"We need immediate action to lift standards: including minimum hours for courses, a ban on contracting out training to unregistered third parties, greater transparency about fees, and further restrictions on how private providers are able to market themselves.

"But the only way to maintain the quality of the sector is to limit the proportion of government funding tendered to the private sector to 30 per cent, to ensure TAFEs retain their capacity to provide quality training to all Australians who need it.

"The great concern is that once we lose the experience and capacity of TAFEs we will be unable to rebuild it and students will be left with a sub-standard system."

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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