

Permanent fee-free TAFE legislation critical for Australia's prosperity



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In its submission to the Senate Committee Inquiry into the Free TAFE Bill, the AEU has outlined its strong support for the legislation, noting the commitment of the Albanese Government to ensure that TAFE, as the public provider, is at the heart of vocational education in Australia.

The passing of this legislation is vital to ensure Australia's TAFE system does not go backwards when we have a Federal Opposition opposed to free vocational education through a public provider.

Demonstrating this ideological opposition, Shadow Minister for Industry, Skills and Training Sussan Ley has said about fee free TAFE: "a key principle and tenet of the Liberal Party: if you don't pay for something, you don't value it" and called free TAFE a "flop".

"Under the Albanese Government we have seen historic advances in the take up of TAFE after neglect of the public system for more than a decade under the Coalition Government. We can't afford to go backwards," AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe said.

"The introduction of free TAFE has been life-changing for students as it has significantly reduced financial barriers for students pursuing vocational education and provided the opportunity to investigate different career pathways, particularly in areas of extreme skill shortage. TAFE not only offers the best educational outcomes for students, it is the best value for money investment that governments could make into the VET sector."

The AEU believes that the ongoing success of the free TAFE program depends on a skilled, sustainable and supported TAFE workforce, and that significant investment needs to be made to allow teachers to provide students with the best possible outcomes.

"Just as the introduction of free TAFE has been life-changing for students, it has been equally groundbreaking for staff," Ms Haythorpe said.

“After more than a decade of neglect, the TAFE workforce now has greater stability and confidence in the future of the industry. However increased class sizes, excessive working hours, and a growing administrative burden – issues that the TAFE workforce was already struggling with over the past two decades of underfunding – need to be addressed for free TAFE to continue to be a success.

“In addition to this legislation, a commitment to improving working conditions, limiting excessive workloads and encouraging workplace retention and recruitment is required to attract and maintain a skilled TAFE workforce that is essential for the future of the sector.”

In its submission the AEU asserts the need for additional parallel investment into TAFE infrastructure and equipment to support the influx of new students into the system.

It also recommends including support for improving workplace conditions for the TAFE workforce, addressing excessive workloads, guaranteeing solid career progression and pay increases for staff, and improving both recruitment and retention of the TAFE workforce.

