



3 May 2017

Concern over lack of genuine student choice in higher education reform plan

The uncapping of some diploma-level programs at public universities, as outlined in the federal government's higher education reform package has raised concern in the TAFE sector, according to peak industry body, TAFE Directors Australia (TDA).

The reform package proposes Commonwealth funding to public universities for approved sub-bachelor courses with an industry focus, starting in 2018.

The Chief Executive of TDA Craig Robertson said the proposed expansion would skew toward a university place, rather than a high quality vocational place at TAFE, which has a deep history of delivery to industry standards with strong employment outcomes.

"We want to work with the government about the basis of approval for these courses," he said.

"We also have concerns about the cost to students who are likely to pay higher fees for sub-bachelor programs at a university and will likely continue to pay higher fees if they proceed to a bachelor degree.

"The government has failed to recognise the cost effective options available at TAFE and has chosen to load the cost on to students in higher fees," he said.

Currently Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) funding is not available to most students undertaking bachelor programs at TAFE. These students must take out a full fee higher education loan, but face an additional loading of up to 25 per cent.

"If Commonwealth funding is extended to selected diploma, advanced diploma and associate degree programs at universities, the distortion will be made worse," Mr Robertson said.

"Students in the vocational education and training sector will effectively have an incentive to abandon the public TAFE system and be diverted to an untested university stream supported by a new government subsidy."

Overall, the reform focuses on student choice but only within universities.

“It is difficult to see how the package could genuinely be labelled higher education reform when it highlights the importance of student choice but fails to consider other legitimate course choices, such as in TAFE.

“It also raises the question as to exactly how universities would develop this new industry-focussed stream to start next year, and whether it is the most appropriate use of resources.

“We are disappointed that the higher education reforms have been developed with little regard to moving toward a coherent tertiary sector.

“We would like to work with the government to address these issues, so that there is a greater focus on a tertiary sector that offers students choice, based on their learning style and job aspirations.

“TAFE delivers in over 1,000 locations across the nation and trains over two million students each year. Its engagement with industry in course design and delivery is one its most well-regarded features.

“Slicing off critical parts of TAFE and handing them to the university sector is not the way to approach tertiary reform and could adversely impact TAFE, particularly in regional Australia,” Mr Robertson said.

TDA welcomed the decision to undertake a review of the higher education provider category standards.

TDA called on the Higher Education Standards Panel to work toward a genuinely diverse higher education sector when it reviews the categories and criteria, noting that the current criteria and the flow-on impact to funding does little to stimulate innovation and genuine choice for students.

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