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I, Peter O'Kelly, of SURFSIDE make the following statement on the basis of my personal knowledge and beliefs, except where otherwise stated.

I am 50 years old and work as a TAFE Head Teacher, in the postcode of 2537. As an immigrant from Ireland, I was impressed very early in my working life in Australia with the service provided by TAFE to the community, so much so that I later sought employment with the organisation. When I was employed, TAFE was resourced well and I experienced what it was to be part of a thriving organisation that had as its goal high industry standards and the good of the community at large. This was my experience at Mudgee, Loftus and East Sydney TAFEs. However since 1996, I have witnessed the stripping away of funds and therefore the services that TAFE offers by successive state governments to the point that "coalface" activity is now being grievously affected. I have been appalled recently by **federal government efforts to increase funding to TAFE only for State governments in NSW, QLD and Victoria to continue to decrease spending** and decide to impose staff cuts where in NSW it is likely that over 800 jobs will disappear. Inevitably with the jobs will go courses and services to students and industry who are front and centre to every TAFE teachers' focus. TAFE teachers are at the coalface of training and they ensure it works despite the funds that have been taken away primarily because of their commitment to students. The amount of goodwill and work extra to the hours paid that TAFE teachers do has incrementally grown over the past 15 years. This is particularly the case with Head teachers and was borne out by a recent review in NSW. Despite this, **TAFE teachers in NSW have been vilified by TAFE management and the NSW state government because of their "high" wages**. TAFE teachers want a quality training system for their students which is resourced well and not duplicated by the high school sector, trade schools or inferior RTOs which have blown out in the last 10 years.

Without TAFE, many people in Australia would be without second-chance Education, an education that allows individuals to dig themselves out of holes that life saw them fall into. This may be the older female who has dedicated her life to-date to family and wants a new way forward, it may be the student with a mental illness that wants to be accepted by society, the student who has made a bad career choice and wants to change but can only so with appropriate training behind them, the student who has a low paid job and cannot lift themselves to higher roles because they cannot afford the fees that training now costs and

so on. All of these are deserving causes and reflects just a few of the student scenarios, I come across on a regular basis.

As a Head Teacher I accept change and understand that it is an important part of the modern workplace dynamic. In my experience, **TAFE has shown itself to be flexible and responsive to national agenda changes.** In NSW, the government has cut more than \$130m from TAFE. More than 800 TAFE workers will lose their jobs over the next four years. Courses are being cut, students fees have increased and campuses are threatened. These cuts expose TAFE to being also-rans alongside RTO's that are entrenching lower benchmarks in training. I believe that if TAFE is properly funded, it will continue to play as it has for over 100 years a positive force in the provision of skilled workers for Australian industries and be the benchmark example that it needs to be to private RTOs. Being asked to deliver quality with less and less resources is proving impossible at the moment. It's laughable then that the VET sector is **dealing with a skills shortage ultimately by dealing people a shortage on skills!**

There are numerous students that my teachers and I have been involved with where TAFE has been an incredibly positive experience in their lives. **Learners whose life experiences are not highly regarded by themselves or others often find a space in TAFE where they are encouraged to aim higher and carve out a future for themselves** which gives added meaning to their lives and the productivity of this country. These include women returning to the workforce, students with disabilities finding work; disengaged kids at school suddenly realising there is a training pathway for them through TAFE, university graduates who return to TAFE to enable them to gain practical skills which university didn't equip them with; the list of people and scenarios we assist is endless, however the funding of TAFE programmes increasingly sees us servicing only the needy (those on benefits) in our communities because the cost is perceived by the general public as too high to bear.

TAFE means a lot in my shire - Eurobodalla. It has been for many years the focal point of skills training in the shire. This allowed training resources to be concentrated in one area and allowed the campus to be a centre of excellence. Today however in my area of training - Tourism and Hospitality I can count in excess of ten companies (RTOs) that offer training in these programmes in my region. We do our best to compete. However in what is regarded as a lean market due to lower population, the numbers each RTO trains is not very sustainable. We lose out quite frequently because our delivery costs are higher due in part to paying our teachers a reasonable wage. These private RTOs then cut corners to return profits to their owners or shareholders resulting in inferior, rushed and tick/flick style training. Recently I was approached by Australian Red Cross to provide a hospitality trainer for a course they intended to run for three weeks at Moruya Golf Club. These learners were a group of unemployed people who had been sourced through Campbell Page, a local JSA. The approach was made with one week's notice and oh it would be good if we could facilitate them with a kitchen facility to enhance their delivery. These ad hoc approaches to training are replicated across the nation. Those undertaking training deserve better than a Certificate Two Qualification being delivered in 3 weeks. A group of learners like this deserve the full allocation of 250 hours of training delivered over a longer period of time to allow better skills and attitude formation.

Less funding for my Institute seems to mean curtailing the number of courses being offered, decreasing the course offering at regional campuses and restricting the offering of many courses to the larger campuses which are centred in bigger population centres. These strategies cause great disadvantage to students by increasing distances travelled to attend TAFE, increasing costs of travelling to TAFE, exposing students to harm on our roads and limiting the range of courses and study options to students. **TAFE should be for all, including those who live in regional Australia, not just metropolitan areas simply because the economics stack up!**

As TAFE Administration Fees have increased, I have seen a steady decline in the numbers of students enrolling at TAFE. We are being told by TAFE Management to cost many of our higher level qualifications. This sometimes means courses for students are now costing \$10,000 or more. **This country once prided itself on being the “clever country”, however the barrier created by increasingly higher costs to accessing education and training restricts the development of skills** especially for a clientele who would otherwise be motivated and keen to engage with the training provided. The **increase in TAFE fees** have resulted in lower levels of enrolment and has effectively **discouraged thousands of students** from enriching their lives with higher level skills and the resultant potential increase in incomes and standards of living.

As I understand it the government wants a **VET sector where the cost of training is borne by a partnership between government, business and the individual**. I see this working the metropolitan areas with larger enterprises, however it does not appear to meet the needs of regional Australia where the SMEs rarely put funding into training and expect the learner to bear the cost. Increasingly we see this in relation to apprenticeships and traineeships. I think it is time to reconsider the **Training Guarantee Levy** where a percentage of revenue is dedicated to structured training opportunity which will benefit the business also.

I urge the committee to ensure that our **TAFE sector is well-funded because it is important to the future technical skills needs** of this nation. It is important to Australians that a strong VET system is maintained. TAFE needs funding to continue its important role in skills development of over one million Australians each year, a role it has done well for over a century. TAFE deserves to be nourished by proper funding and empowerment to continue to deliver quality training that delivers to all Australians. It should be unimpeded by the competitive free for all that has resulted in spiralling quality tensions and an unfortunate de-skilling of the nation. It makes no sense to cut TAFE funding, or to turn the VET sector into a private, for-profit business. TAFE should remain affordable and accessible to all Australians. Please do what you can stop the break-up of TAFE.

Submitted by
Peter O'Kelly
Thursday 18th of April 2013