



**Submission
to
House of Representatives
Free TAFE Bill 2024**

15 January 2025

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Introduction

The Australian Education Union (AEU) represents 185,000 members employed in the public primary, secondary, special, early childhood, TAFE, Adult Migrant Education and Disability Education sectors throughout Australia.

This submission is made on behalf of AEU members and the communities in which they serve. The AEU welcomes and supports the Free TAFE Bill 2024 and notes the commitment of the Albanese Government to ensure that TAFE, the public provider is at the heart of Vocational Education in Australia.

This legislation reflects the tripartite approach on skills and training taken by the Albanese government since the September 2022 Jobs and Skills Summit, bringing together unions, government, and industry to focus on opportunities to provide Australians with access to lifelong learning, career pathways and workforce participation.

These priorities were further reinforced through the National Skills Agreement which commenced on 1 January 2024 and provides for an additional \$3.7 billion for the VET sector over the next 5 years and highlighted the importance of returning TAFE to the heart of the VET sector, and the importance of state governments working collaboratively with the federal government to achieve these outcomes.

This agreement also noted the key role TAFE plays in providing high quality vocational education and supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds, Closing the Gap for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people, and increasing gender equity for workers in the Australian economy.

The AEU asserts the need for additional parallel investment into Australia's public TAFE institutions – Whilst this legislation is critical for allowing more students to access VET study, it must be matched with funding for TAFE infrastructure, teaching and learning programs that support the unique needs of VET students, supports the TAFE workforce and revives and rebuilds the critical infrastructure that TAFE needs in order to support the influx of new students into the system. Furthermore, recognition must be given to TAFE's social contract with the Australian community and the significant economic and societal benefits gained from investment in high quality vocational education.

It is TAFE as the public sector provider of high-quality education and training that offers the best educational outcomes for students, and is the best value for money investment that governments could make into the VET sector

TAFE continues to make a strong and disproportionately positive economic and social contribution to the Australian community, with higher earnings and productivity for TAFE graduates and the resulting increased tax revenues and profits to employers, the additional economic footprint of TAFE purchasing and supply chains and the fiscal benefit of reduced social assistance and public healthcare expenditure arising from TAFE's contribution to lowering unemployment and supporting a healthier workforce and society¹.

¹ 1 Pennington, A., An Investment in Productivity and Inclusion: The Economics and Social Benefits of the TAFE System, Centre for Future Work at the Australia Institute, 2020

The annual total economic benefits of Australia's historic investment in the TAFE and the current TAFE trained workforce were quantified in 2020 at \$92.5 billion annually, approximately 4.5% of Australia's annual GDP.²

Who are the students accessing Fee-Free TAFE?

The introduction of Fee-Free TAFE has been lifechanging for students as it has significantly reduced financial barriers for students pursuing vocational education and provided the opportunity to investigate different VET pathways. For more than a decade, the contestable funding agenda in vocational education occurred at the expense of a properly funded public vocational education system. Consequently, TAFE campuses were closed, courses were cut, TAFE teachers were casualised or laid off and student debt grew. Fee Free TAFE has restored billions of dollars to TAFE and as a result, the need for state-of-the-art teaching and learning spaces, more TAFE teachers and more student support has grown, which conversely, is a good problem for the sector to have but one which requires the attention of governments beyond the life span of the current National Skills Agreement. Therefore, the introduction of the Fee Free TAFE Bill is viewed by the AEU as an essential foundation for future federal policy development for Skills and Vocational Education.

In Victoria, students have saved an average of over \$10,000 in tuition fees on full qualification, with some students saving more than \$30,000³ The removal of financial barriers is particularly significant in the VET sector, which as stated in NCVER's *Skilling Australia* report is: "*frequently the entry point into tertiary education for the disadvantaged, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, those from low socio-economic status backgrounds, and women and girls*"⁴.

AEU members have shared the significant positive impact that fee-free TAFE has already had:

"We get students who would never have been game to throw their hat in the ring without it. It's quite confronting facing a study loan and especially as many of our students are parents and to put that additional financial burden on their family is a huge thing for them. To have that one impediment removed has made a big difference and I've seen the demographic change in the classroom." - Vanna, Learning skills teacher

² [2 Pennington, A., Op. cit.](#)

³ *Five years of free TAFE has saved students millions* (2024) Premier of Victoria. Available at: <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/five-years-free-tafe-has-saved-students-millions> (Accessed: 21 January 2025).

⁴ Trimboli, D. (2023) *Skilling Australia's current and future workforce*, NCVER. Available at: <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/skilling-australias-current-and-future-workforce>

“TAFE also helps with community building. A disproportionate number of disengaged students and those with disability live near the poverty line. Fee-Free TAFE courses are more affordable qualifications than university degrees and increase accessibility for those on low incomes, especially people with disability. Having more people with disability in educational settings and workplaces also enables students to have important opportunities for networking and connecting with their community and a more supportive environment overall.” -Michelle, Vocational Education teacher

“The best thing about TAFE in 2024? Fee-Free TAFE and the federal government commitment to increased funding to the TAFE sector in general. This has made a huge difference to enrolments and allowed more students to gain foundation qualifications that have increased their confidence and ability to enter the workforce.” - Gary, TAFE teacher

“The qualification is in such high demand that there’s a waitlist of over 560 students. Fee-Free TAFE has played a part in that as well as the diversity in nursing cohorts. It’s always been popular, but we’ve never seen a waitlist this long previously.” - Laura, Nursing teacher

TAFE Directors Australia CEO, Jenny Dodd, has similarly supported the positive impact of Fee-Free TAFE:

“Fee-free TAFE has been lifechanging for many students. Opening the doors of Australia’s public providers to those for whom fees may have been a barrier has been fundamental to improving opportunities for all. Enabling more students to gain TAFE skills and qualifications leads to those people having higher levels of earning capacity. Giving more students the opportunity to gain skills and qualifications in high demand courses through fee-free TAFE is likely to lead to significantly improved outcomes for them as individuals and for the country.”

Australian students have the right to quality, accessible vocational education and TAFE excels at providing practical, occupational, and academic knowledge, skills and qualifications. However, for the last decade the absolute prioritisation of the market in vocational education has occurred at the expense of a properly funded, planned and executed public vocational education system. The market typically fails to deliver quality VET opportunities in regional and remote Australia, in Aboriginal communities and Torres Strait Islander communities, and for people with disability. The AEU notes the critical role public TAFE plays in thin VET markets in regional, rural and remote areas, and in states with small populations, further reinforcing the unique and diverse needs that many TAFE students have.

TAFE is a public good for all people within Australia, and by supporting and educating all students, regardless of their circumstances or backgrounds the public TAFE system is providing a clear benefit to all Australians. however, additional student support is needed to ensure that students are in the best possible position to complete their study, fill the critical skills shortages and receive the wider economic benefits that the legislation aims to provide.

The AEU’s *State of our TAFE* survey, conducted in November 2023, found that since the implementation of fee-free TAFE, over 63% of respondents said that there has been an increase in the number of students with additional needs enrolling in Fee-Free TAFE, including 74% of respondents noting an increase of students with mental health needs, and

60% of respondents noting an increase in students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

This increase in student needs has an obvious impact on the workforce, with a majority of respondents noting that the pace and intensity of their work has increased since the introduction of Fee-Free TAFE.

The AEU believes that a significant investment in critically needed support services for students would improve student engagement, retention and course completions. While we commend the federal government for removing the financial barriers to entry, fully funding additional learning support and counselling services must also be a priority to give those who enrol in Fee-Free TAFE places with diverse needs the resources and support to succeed, while also enabling the TAFE teaching workforce to focus on providing a high-quality vocational education

The AEU recommends that additional support for students is needed to achieve the goals laid out in the National Skills Agreement regarding supporting priority population groups, including:

- First Nations Australians
- Young people (17-24)
- Unpaid carers
- Women facing economic insecurity
- Women undertaking study in non-traditional fields
- People with disability
- Certain categories of visa holders

Support for the TAFE workforce

Just as the introduction of Fee-Free TAFE has been lifechanging for students, it has been equally groundbreaking for staff. The restoration of recurrent, guaranteed funding to TAFE after decades of neglect means the TAFE workforce has greater confidence in the future of the industry, and the larger and more diverse class cohorts have given teachers a stronger belief that they are positively contributing to their community, especially in regional and remote areas. While these are positive developments, they have exacerbated existing issues such as 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. The AEU believes this legislation requires a commitment to improving working conditions, limit excessive workloads, and encourage workplace retention and recruitment to maintain and secure a skilled TAFE workforce that is essential for the future of the sector.

As previously mentioned, the AEU's *State of our TAFE* survey has found that since the implementation of the Fee-Free TAFE program, TAFE employees have indicated a significant increase in working hours and intensity. 60% of respondents stated that their working hours had increased, and the majority of respondents stated that the pace and intensity of their work had increased. When asked to identify contributing factors to the increase in their current workload, the increased administrative burden, and the widening of duties were overwhelmingly highlighted by staff.

The increase of the intensity of work and the burden of additional tasks has real and substantial impacts on the ability of TAFE teachers to continually develop their teaching practice, maintain their industry currency, to update and develop curriculum and to provide sufficient time for students to learn and practice skills.

More than two-thirds of responding members also noted that they had considered leaving the sector in the last year. Despite the significant increase in funding to get students into TAFE, the legacy of the past two decades of underfunding TAFE and the decimation of the TAFE workforce over this period has had lasting impacts.

The AEU believes that the ongoing success of the Fee-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. To stop the exodus of valuable teaching staff from the sector and deal with the increasing complexity of the work, more teachers and support staff are needed. Further, governments must address expanding scope of responsibilities for the TAFE workforce, and address attraction and retention issues providing decently paid, secure jobs.

Additionally, in order to attract new workers to the sector, defined and regulated career pathways must be supported to allow experienced workers from industry to transition into TAFE teaching roles that are appropriately remunerated. More effort must be made to make TAFE teaching jobs attractive to attract the experienced industry practitioners that are required to deliver the best possible educational outcomes without compromising the fundamental requirement for TAFE teachers to also be highly qualified adult educators.

Support for TAFE Infrastructure

Just as the TAFE workforce requires additional support in order to deliver the outcomes students need, the infrastructure across Australia's TAFE campuses also requires a significant increase in investment so that students can learn on state-of-the-art systems. Even with the significant influx of TAFE students in recent years, most TAFE campuses have received very little federal investment in buildings and equipment over the last decade.

The sole measure in the 2023-24 Federal Budget was a new Capital and Equipment Investment Fund, totalling just \$50 million over three years. This funding is similar to the previous coalition government's short term, \$50 million TAFE campus upgrade fund in their 2021-2022 Budget. This reflects a long term, bipartisan neglect of the infrastructure on Australia's TAFE campuses, and the impact of this neglect has become more apparent with the influx of new students.

AEU members have highlighted a significant need for better infrastructure on our campuses, with less than one in five TAFE teachers considering the buildings and equipment at their campuses to be adequate. IT and other learning equipment is generally viewed to be out of date, and classrooms and buildings inadequate for the student cohort.

"Most equipment is 30 plus years old, which makes it impossible to deliver the training required for today's industry" - Metal Trades Skill lecturer, Victoria

“There is a lack of adequate infrastructure to teach. For example, we have classrooms with 40+ students, but no air conditioning or windows that open” - Foundational Skills teacher, New South Wales

“Very little time has been given to research and select new equipment. We should have a well thought out strategy to align our equipment with current industry needs but no consultation with industry was allowed for.” - Electrotechnology lecturer, Victoria.

“We have inadequate infrastructure and inadequate computers available to support students. Students laugh and are frustrated at lack of tools/equipment and workspace.” - Building lecturer, New South Wales

“Class sizes and number of classes have increased. We do not have the infrastructure to support this. I have made requests and submissions for additional workspace, increased classrooms, and additional computers to support students, but they have all been rejected. We have 18 computers to support 152 students all learning on the TAFE Digital Learning centre. It is ridiculous and I am receiving complaints from students, employers, and parents.” - Building and Construction lecturer, New South Wales

These statements reflect that in order to achieve the goals outlined in the National Skills Agreement, and to achieve the best possible outcomes for the students taking up places under the Fee-Free TAFE program, an equally ambitious investment is needed in renewing campus buildings, equipment and infrastructure. In short, state of the art education requires state of the art facilities.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Under s 8(1) of the legislation, provisions should be added requiring FT agreements between the federal and state and territory governments to also deal with matters relating to the TAFE workforce, 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. Additionally, under s 8(1.1), provisions should be added requiring the State and Territory government to provide Commonwealth information about the state and conditions of the current TAFE workforce, including recruitment and retention provisions.

Recommendation 2: Under s 8(1) of the legislation, provisions should be added requiring FT agreements between state, territory governments and the federal government to also deal with financial assistance provided to state and territory governments to improve existing TAFE infrastructure, construct new infrastructure to meet the increase in student demand, as well as the provision of new equipment for students and staff. Additionally, under s 8(1.1), provisions should be added requiring the state and territory governments to provide the federal government information regarding these matters.