

Neglect TAFE at economy's peril

KERRI CARR

TAFE's role should be elevated within the tertiary sector for the public good, speakers at a national conference advocated on October 20.

Neglecting TAFE would shoot the economy in the foot, Anne Jones from Victoria University declared. High-quality workmanship is needed to implement innovation, she reminded the audience of industry, TAFE, non-government organisations and union. "Technicians take brilliant ideas and make them work," Professor Jones said.

Dr Jim Stanford from the Centre for Future Work said investing in quality VET is a "no brainer" for building a high-skills digital economy.

The conference, held in Federation's auditorium, sought to set a new path for discussions

on TAFE. Australian Education Union Federal TAFE Secretary Pat Forward told conference: "The questions about who should fund and control TAFE, and whether the tertiary sector needs to be reconceived are not the first questions to ask in discussions. Unless we debate and agree, as a society, on the role of a public TAFE sector and reach a new social settlement about its purpose and significance, tinkering on the edges will simply be a distraction, as the sector continues to be eroded and diminished."

Professor Leesa Wheelahan, from the University of Toronto, envisions TAFE's future as the anchor institution of quality vocational education, producing education of a quality that individuals, employers, unions and the community value.

Professor John Buchanan, from the University of Sydney Business School, backs the idea of building TAFE up as an anchor institution.

Federal shadow education minister Tanya Plibersek noted Australia hasn't seen a large-scale review of TAFE, as has occurred for schools and universities, in a long time. The average 15-year-old will work in 17 jobs in five occupations during their working life, Ms Plibersek said. She stated the skills required for this would not be gained in a single university degree and that a "post-secondary education system that's fit for purpose" was required.

The conference heard only 33 per cent of VET graduates in 2016 were in jobs associated with their qualification. The reason: current qualifications, based around competencies (skills), are not

matching the needs of individuals or industry. A "capabilities approach" to qualifications was recommended as an alternative by several speakers. Qualifications would be based on vocational streams and on the capabilities of students, rather than specific skills – preparing them for a range of occupations, not a single job.

Professor Buchanan said a capabilities approach would help people adapt to an uncertain future. Brian Howe, from the John Cain Foundation, said vocational education needed major funding reform – a thought echoed around the auditorium. The conference was presented by the Australian Education Union in partnership with the John Cain Foundation.

— **Kerri Carr**