

GRADUATE WOMEN VICTORIA

Serving and empowering women through education and advocacy



As at: 2/12 Tollington Ave,
Malvern East VIC 3145
16 November 2014

The Hon Steve Herbert MLC
Minister for Higher Education and Skills
Level 1, 2 Treasury Place
East Melbourne, VIC 3002

Re TAFE Rescue Fund and consultation with Federal Assistant Minister for Education and Training on the Future of VET

Dear Mr Herbert,

I write as President of Graduate Women Victoria Inc (GWV), an affiliate since 1921 of the National Federation of Australian Graduate Women. Our particular concern is that all Australians, but particularly girls and women, should have access to all levels of lifelong, affordable, quality education, so that they are skilled to achieve financial independence and informed participation in public life.

GWV would like to congratulate you on your appointment as Minister for Training and Skills in the new Government of Victoria, and especially on your recent announcement of the \$320 million TAFE Rescue Fund, which is a very welcome reversal of a period of neglect for TAFEs. During the previous Coalition Government, GWV wrote several times to express concern about its failure to give proper financial support to the TAFE system while diverting scarce funds to private providers. After publication of the 2014 Annual Report of the Australian Skills Quality Authority which identified a mere 20% of the 1,515 VET colleges audited as being fully compliant with its standards, and just before the Victorian election, we wrote to both you and the then Minister, Mr Wakeling, seeking post-election commitment to the following:

1. Accessible publication of any adverse finding made by the ASQA as to substandard performance of any VET provider.
2. A funding model for training colleges that does not subsidise colleges upfront for their enrolments and prohibits colleges from offering inducements such as free i-Pads and other incentives such as promises of quick paths to qualifications.
3. Better supervision and enforcement of compliance to the regulations governing quality of college offerings, especially in the case of colleges offering online courses and courses to foreign students,
4. A restoration of levels of TAFE funding to equivalence with pre-2010 levels and a reversal of the policy of preferring private providers over TAFE.

5. A reduction in the subsidies paid from the public purse to private providers.

We understand that it may not have been possible to respond to such a request during a short and busy pre-election period, but we are pleased to see progress already made in meeting the urgent funding needs of TAFE (Item 4)

We also note that the Federal Government has taken on board concerns about the quality of courses provided by some VET colleges, and are pleased that Victoria should have been the first State to be invited to consult with Senator Birmingham on the Federal Government's plans for the future of VET. Nonetheless, our concern over the poor quality of course provision in some colleges has been increased by the recent report in the *Age* of 17.01.15 of the overall very poor completion rates of VET FEE-HELP students taking online courses as against the rate of similar students taking courses internally. Despite this, students relying on the loan system (i.e. disadvantaged students) are increasingly turning to the online courses provided mainly by the private sector. Such courses are more profitable for providers, especially if there are low completion rates and high sign-up rates, but they can have catastrophic consequences for inadequately prepared and informed students who incur a heavy burden of debt without the benefit of qualifications.

We urge you to hold Senator Birmingham to his expressed intention to investigate and take action against any provider offering poor quality courses and/or exploiting the aspirations of students already disadvantaged (Items 2 and 3) and we look forward to hearing reports of progress in this area,

With best wishes,

Dr Jennifer Strauss AM
President, Graduate Women Victoria.