

Political and natural disasters: both bad for communities



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There are very few national institutions with the reach of TAFE.

TAFE, like public hospitals, the judicial system, public art galleries and museums, local libraries, public transport, the ABC, and other educational institutions, exists as a public good. However, TAFE is more complex than most other public institutions because it is home to a multiplicity of purposes, groups and educational and social practices.

For decades, throughout Australia, it has been the engine-room for skills development and broader education opportunities for millions. There is simply not an Australian home that does not have either a direct or indirect connection to TAFE. It could be a family member educated in TAFE or a qualified trades-person providing a service.

And yet, this uniquely Australian institution, once the envy of many countries, is under very serious threat. Just as though every citizen has in some way been a beneficiary of this public good, conversely, its decline will impact on us all.

Since the market funding model was introduced at a Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) meeting in 2012, TAFE has been decimated across the country. There are fewer Australians in training now than when the privatisation model was introduced. There are 140,000 fewer apprenticeships now than when the Federal Coalition was elected in 2013.

In some states, notably Victoria and Queensland, TAFE has become a minority provider. In other states the enrolment share has declined rapidly. Yet, there has been a proliferation of shoddy, private for-profit "colleges" that have been enriched by public funding that should have gone to TAFE. The result? High student debt, low course completions and worthless qualifications.

Despite its extraordinary reach and social purpose, TAFE remains the lowest funded of all the education sectors. In 2017 in Australia, TAFE funding was lower than it was in early 2000. By 2018, the Budget papers revealed that vocational education funding was expected to decrease by 3.1 per cent in real terms from 2018-19 to 2021-22. Closer to home, NSW funding has declined rapidly from \$1.77 billion in 2013 to \$1.52 billion in 2017, a change of 14.5 per cent.

In short, the vocational and education sector is a political disaster.



More recently, in mid-October 2019, the Morrison Government pushed through legislation, supported by the ALP, that means \$3.9 billion will be cut from the Education Investment Fund; a fund set up to invest in infrastructure for higher education and TAFE. Instead, it has been diverted to fund natural disaster relief. Let's be perfectly clear: the Federal Government should be investing in drought, fire and flood relief for affected communities but not at the expense of young people's educational opportunities.

Many of these rural and remote communities have seen natural disasters devastate local economies resulting in diminished employment opportunities for local people, particularly school leavers. The government should be investing in TAFE, as well as in disaster relief.

One revenue source is the Petroleum Rent Resource Tax, which could have been used to fund natural disaster relief rather than raid the Education Investment Fund. Mining and other resource companies have been escaping this tax obligation by billions of dollars each year. The loopholes should be closed, the revenue collected and the funds provided to economically depressed regions.

However, investment in TAFE has to also be part of this solution. Our regional, rural and remote communities need immediate relief to see them through the natural disasters but also long-term investment in TAFE. This can only occur when the market model is scrapped and funding for TAFE increased and guaranteed.

Natural disasters are difficult enough for communities. They should not also have to deal with political disasters such as cuts to TAFE.