



Queensland Teachers' Union

Submission to Queensland Parliament Economics and Governance Committee inquiry into the Queensland Government's economic response to COVID-19

Authorised by QTU Executive

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Terms of reference

1. That the Economics and Governance Committee inquire into and report to the Legislative Assembly on the Queensland Government's response to COVID-19 in relation to the economic response only;
2. That in undertaking the inquiry, the Committee should take into account the Australian Government's response to COVID-19 and its impacts on the Queensland Government's response;
3. That in conducting the inquiry the Committee is to be conscious of any requests for witnesses or materials and ensure that any requests do not unreasonably divert resources from the immediate COVID-19 response; and
4. That the Committee report to the Legislative Assembly by no later than 3 months after the conclusion of the Public Health Emergency declared under the Public Health Act 2005 regarding COVID-19.

The Queensland Teachers' Union acknowledges the terms of reference of this inquiry. The Union thanks the Economic and Governance Committee for the opportunity to respond to this inquiry and would welcome the opportunity to participate in further discussion.

Introduction

Established in 1889, the Queensland Teachers' Union of Employees (QTU) has chalked up over 130 years of achievements in providing professional, industrial and legal leadership to Queensland's state education and training sectors. In 2020, the QTU is the professional voice of more than 48,000 teachers, heads of program, and school leaders working throughout Queensland in special schools, primary and secondary schools, TAFE colleges, Central Queensland University (CQU), and other discrete education facilities. Throughout this QTU submission, the term "TAFE" refers to both TAFE Queensland and the dual sector entity Central Queensland University.

As a significant stakeholder in Queensland education, the QTU is committed to actively engaging in processes where the voice of teachers ought to be heard, including on matters of economics and governance. The QTU's submissions and participation in stakeholder consultation are informed through the Union's active membership, which includes more than 2,500 QTU Workplace Representatives as well as decision making forums like our QTU Executive, which consists of democratically elected members from across the state.

This QTU submission is made in the interests of Queensland's state school teachers and VET educators, and the communities in which they live and work. The work of QTU members throughout the state ensured continuity of learning in state schools and public VET courses, and supported other essential workers during the pandemic. The work performed by Queensland's teaching profession represents significant economic activity in response to COVID-19. QTU members re-engineered education from classroom-based delivery to remote learning, virtually or by paper, with a minimum of notice. This was an amazing professional feat, as anyone with any understanding of teaching and the operations of schools would appreciate, notwithstanding limitations of time, resources and experience in remote teaching. At the same time, many school systems around the world were shut.

On Monday, 1 June 2020, the Economic and Governance Committee¹ received a briefing from Ms Mary-Anne Curtis, Director-General, Department of Employment, Small Business and Training. Ms Curtis outlined some of the work that has been undertaken by TAFE educators and we refer to this in section 4 of this submission.

In a private briefing for the Education, Employment and Small Business Committee² on Thursday, 7 May 2020, Mr Tony Cook, Director-General, Department of Education, outlined

¹ Queensland Parliament, (Economics and Governance Committee). Public briefing - Inquiry into the Queensland Government's economic response to COVID-19, 1 June 2020
<https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/documents/committees/EGC/2020/COVID-19/I02-trns-pb-1June2020.pdf>

² Queensland Parliament, (Education, Employment and Small Business Committee). Private briefing - Department of Education response to COVID-19, 7 May 2020
<https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/documents/committees/EESBC/2018/Portfolio/trns-07May2020-DESBT.pdf>

some of the work that has been undertaken by Queensland teachers, heads of program and school leaders in response to COVID-19. The Director-General's list includes:

- development and uploading of learning materials to The Learning Place
- trials of technology products like Skype and Teams
- preparation of paper-based learning materials
- arrangements for departmental ICT devices to be loaned to students
- provision of learning packs (hard copy, online, virtual)
- work with the department and/or external software providers
- individual and class assessment.

QTU members advise that this list is not comprehensive. One regional state high school teacher and elected member of QTU State Council has been recording hours and complexity of work. Like many members, our Council delegate sums up work throughout the pandemic as, "rewarding, but absolutely frenetic". The Council delegate's work diary shows that in the first three weeks of Term 2, 102¾ hours of work were performed, without daily allocations of rest pause or meal breaks, and contact time nearly doubled. The Council delegate describes typing "as fast as I can for hours and hours without any sort of break, over and over," and fielding and responding to more than 50 emails per day, as well as numerous follow-up phone calls, for multiple reasons.

This QTU submission is organised in four themes, including recommendations.

1. Post COVID-19 economic recovery
2. Backing Queensland's teachers
3. Queensland's education sector's response to COVID-19
4. Securing TAFE's future.

Recommendations

The QTU asserts that there is an increasing importance at local, state, national and global levels that support the recommendations made in this submission. In Queensland state schools and TAFE we know that increased funding is making a difference to the education of Queenslanders.

The QTU makes the following recommendations to the Queensland Parliament Economics and Governance Committee inquiry into the Queensland Government's economic response to COVID-19. The QTU calls on the Queensland Government to:

1. increase investment in public infrastructure
2. refocus the education industry away from export and insecure employment, towards more stable business models that are tailored to the needs of Queensland and Queenslanders and enable secure employment in the sector
3. establish objectives specific to creating secure employment
4. ensure that the state's economic response to COVID-19 secures the future of TAFE as an essential service through its state budget
5. develop and implement policy initiatives that deliver quality learning in the VET sector.
6. ensure that its economic response to COVID-19 includes an investment in the state's training sector and that TAFE, as the public provider, receives an increased proportional share of the state's training budget
7. remove limits that apply to students receiving subsidised training
8. ensure the protection of TAFE students, industry, and the reputation of the training sector
9. continue to provide funding to foster engagement in education for students across all year levels across the state, including in rural and remote locations
10. ensure that the response provides an investment in people and their wellbeing including prioritising support mechanisms for workplace health and safety, including prevention of occupational violence and harassment against both staff and students, whether online or in workplaces
11. ensure access to higher education for all Queenslanders, acknowledging the financial aspects of university are a barrier
12. address an investment in education as a priority, both in state schools and through TAFE as the public training provider and support it with funding.

Post COVID-19 economic recovery

Historical learnings in economic recovery

The Hawke and Keating Labor reforms of the 1980s are often credited with setting Australia's economy up for 29 years of economic growth. While the commentariat often focus on trade liberalisation and the accord as achievements of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, it is worth noting that economic conditions were not the same as those currently facing the Queensland economy. The recession of the 1980s came at a time of stagflation, that is high wages and high unemployment. The economic conditions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic more closely resemble the recession in the early 1990s, ie. low wages and high unemployment. The response to the 1990s economic downturn was a program of increased investment in public infrastructure and micro-economic reforms, including in the vocational education and training sector.

Parallels between the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and the COVID-19 pandemic have been drawn as the response continues. Lessons from the past reflect actions of the government and the subsequent outcomes show the positive impact on the economy of stimulus spending in education. The response to the GFC saw stimulus provided initially as an injection of funds into the economy, followed by a longer-term investment in infrastructure projects. It seems that in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis too, the road to economic recovery will be long.

Proactive steps in the GFC response included \$14.7 billion spent on school infrastructure, \$6.6 billion on housing (social and defence), \$3.9 billion on energy efficiency (insulating existing homes), and \$890 million on road, rail and small-scale community infrastructure projects. Part of this increased investment in spending following the GFC, the Australian Government's Building the Education Revolution (BER) initiative, was a success in Queensland. The BER was a \$14.7 billion initiative that saw the provision of new facilities and refurbishments in schools. It was a critical component of the government's economic stimulus package following the GFC. Learnings from this prove that the largest fraction of this spending occurred almost immediately and could be maximised. School-based infrastructure spending could occur quickly as school buildings have standard design features and the land for construction of these initiatives was readily available. The investment in school infrastructure at this time also provided the benefit of stimulus to every population area in the country. The economy was weak in all areas of the state of Queensland, as is the case now, and the recovery from COVID19 stimulus should be spread broadly across all geographical areas, including areas that are rural, remote and low SES, for example. While the infrastructure initiative provided substantially refurbished or new facilities, there was a much wider benefit, in the creation of jobs and for the economy more widely, from this federal government initiative. Therefore, an investment in similar stimulus spending in education as part of the economic recovery from COVID-19 would provide support for jobs and infrastructure projects in every community across the state of Queensland.

Investing in Queensland and Queenslanders

The aim of the economic program of the 1990s was to stimulate demand by investing in public infrastructure and people. Stimulating economic demand results in increased economic activity and growth. Investing in public infrastructure delivers economic stimulus in regions through the employment of workers who spend their wages in their local economy. The resulting public infrastructure projects, such as schools and TAFEs, renewable energy generation and community housing, will have long term benefits for Queensland.

Public infrastructure

An opportunity exists for a visionary Queensland Government to take advantage of the historically low cost of borrowing and embark on a program of public infrastructure development. Moreover, new and creative partnerships with major super funds can provide long term benefits to Queensland workers by increasing their retirement savings. Such a commitment to a program of public infrastructure projects, manufactured and built by Queenslanders, will stimulate the domestic economy through jobs and wages, support the restoration of the manufacturing sector, and lead to long-term improvements in productivity. **The QTU calls on the Queensland Government to increase investment in public infrastructure.**

Education and training

A program of developing public infrastructure also provides opportunities to invest in apprenticeships and traineeships for Queenslanders, creating a supply of qualified workers to meet workforce demands as private sector industries recover. The QTU reaffirms its longstanding position that public investment in education and training delivers social benefit and an excellent rate of financial return.

The QTU celebrates the essential role that education and training play in the development of skills and knowledge in our communities. Moreover, education and training have a social, emotional, and economic impact throughout Queensland's communities. QTU members, employed in the education and training sectors, were frontline respondents to COVID-19, not just through revolutionising teaching to ensure continuity of learning, but by performing social and emotional labour to support students, their families and communities. Queensland's teaching profession has a history of putting others first, even in the midst of a crisis.

The current challenging social and economic circumstances need more than short-term relief to recover from the crisis of COVID-19. Education and the funding to continue to provide equitable access and opportunities for all Queenslanders needs to be maintained across the state and nation while progressively working towards a more sustainable future.

The QTU calls on the government to continue to provide funding to foster engagement in education for students across all year levels across the state, including in rural and remote locations, through the establishment of additional alternative education facilities and programs, such as positive learning centres.

The QTU observes that Queensland's education and training sectors in the pre-COVID economy were increasingly relying on exporting education to full fee-paying international students. However, the growth of business units like Education Queensland International and TAFE Queensland International have failed to deliver secure jobs and have led to excessive workload for relevant employees.

The QTU calls on the Queensland Government to refocus the education industry away from export and insecure employment, towards more stable business models that are tailored to the needs of Queensland and Queenslanders and enable secure employment in the sector.

An alternative approach

An alternative approach to public investment is the privatisation of state-owned assets and the introduction of austerity measures. The former was part of the Bligh government agenda, in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis. The Newman government, guided by the recommendations of the Queensland Commission of Inquiry, accelerated privatisation of state-owned assets and introduced austerity measures that included sacking public servants and closing schools and TAFE colleges.

Queensland voters have rejected privatisation and austerity in two Queensland elections:

- In the 2012 Queensland election, the Bligh government lost 44 seats and government.
- In the 2015 Queensland election, the Newman government lost 34 seats and government.

Secure employment.

As Queensland rebuilds its economy from the crisis of COVID-19, it is vital that secure employment is supported with secure conditions and appropriate wage growth to ensure that the result is an economy that will work to support all workers. The QTU calls on the Queensland Government to establish objectives *specific to creating secure employment*, rather than job creation. Halving the current number of insecure jobs is a starting point. Further, the increases in wages and living standards will support the workforce and the community as we rebuild. Lifting wages and living standards

The QTU believes that notions of restoring the economy to pre-COVID-19 policy settings ignore the fact that, for many Queenslanders, the economy was not working even before this crisis. Thirty years of neoliberal trickle-down economics have led to rising inequality, an erosion of the social safety-net, record low wage growth, and the rise of insecure

employment. Trickle-down economics fails to adequately recognise the basic principle that money in workers' pockets drives business, creates jobs and lifts living standards.

Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis has revealed the structural weakness of that model of economics and the very real human costs of such an approach.

The QTU believes that Queensland's economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic must reform the enterprise bargaining system. There is an urgent need to increase workers' bargaining power so that wage growth occurs across whole industries and lifts both domestic demand and living standards. As one of the state's largest employers, the Queensland Government has a vital role to play in ensuring fairness in wage settings. Artificial wage caps for public sector employees drag down wages. Injecting stimulus into the economy through public sector employment and wage growth lifts the living standards of workers and market expectations of wages.

Investing in public sector workers is vital for the state's economic recovery.

A note of optimism

Following the recession of the early 1990s, Queensland's economy shrank by 0.3 per cent, but over the next decade Queensland's economy grew by an average of 4.47 per cent. At the same time, Australia's economy shrank by 0.4 per cent, before growing by an average of 3.3 per cent over the next decade.

Backing Queensland's teachers

Investing in people ensures they are skilled and well. Investing in people across the state through fair wages, education and secure employment is a vital economic response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Wages

The Queensland Government's *Unite and Recover* campaign pledges support for jobs and job security to keep our state and nation moving, yet cuts to wages of workers in the public sector is an obvious contradiction to this. When the economic situation is not positive, the government needs to invest. An investment in people and their work is needed more now than ever.

When a pay freeze was first announced in early April, without notice or consultation, the QTU asked the government to explain how the money saved would be used to directly assist those members of the community adversely affected by the pandemic. If a reasonable case had been made by the government, the QTU could have balloted its members to amend the enterprise bargaining agreements by agreement.

To defer the wages of those who have continued to hold the economy together and continue to stimulate the economy in all regions across the state serves no economic purpose.

Taking away from the public service and hundreds of thousands of workers by way of a public sector wage deferral is morally indefensible. Teachers know this is not right and they will not be silenced on this issue.

The QTU has opposed the pay deferral because:

- it is undeserved by teachers and principals, who as front-line workers have been working harder than ever and enabling others to continue working in the middle of a pandemic
- it is a unilateral breach of an enterprise bargaining agreement reached between the QTU and the government less than a year ago
- it is bad, forgetful economic policy that will delay, rather than assist, recovery from the economic recession triggered by the restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Further, agreements are the method through which workers secure improved working conditions and certainty around their employment over an agreed period of time. The strength of unions in negotiations for agreements has provided hard-won improvements in wages and conditions for employees over time. The workload of teachers has increased, and its inclusion in the latest agreements has prompted the government to begin to look at reducing it. The QTU's workload campaign continues to highlight the matter, and to empower members to act.

An employer can take no more grievous action than breaking an agreement it has made with its employees and their union by refusing to pay the salary increases agreed for work done.

For a government employer to do so by legislation adds salt to the wound. Alas, this action is not unprecedented. The Newman government legislated to override conditions around permanent employment and workload protection, among other things, during its brief time in power.

On 17 June 2020, the Queensland Government legislated the wage deferral, pushing it through Parliament. Under this legislation, teachers, principals and TAFE educators will be denied the 2.5 per cent wage increase that was due on 1 July 2020. The wage deferral means that QTU members will take a 2.5 per cent cut to their salary for a period of 18 months. The salary will not be reinstated until January 2022. The estimated cost to QTU members is \$100 million, while the total estimate is that \$500 million will be lost by public servants as a whole.

The \$100 million being taken out of circulation in the economy, disposable income that would be spent in shops, on holidays in Queensland and in local businesses, cannot be easily replaced. COVID-19 has seen many businesses fail and people lose their jobs. Businesses and jobs can be saved if people like teachers spend their money in businesses that are at risk, particularly those in regional and remote locations. A pay freeze contributes to a downward, worsening spiral.

The impact of the deferral on our members in schools and TAFE will be reflected as below.

Table 1:

Schools – wage deferral		TAFE – wage deferral
PAID	1 July 2019 increase	PAID
No increase	1 July 2020 increase	No increase
1 July 2020 increase	1 July 2021 increase	1 July 2020 increase
1 July 2021	1 January 2022	1 July 2021 increase
New agreement due	1 July 2022	1 July 2022 due
	1 July 2023	New agreement due

The department has not responded to requests for details of the savings this will make. The QTU calculates that it will result in at least \$100 million less going into the pockets of 48,000 teachers and principals over the life of the agreement. While those covered will be paid the same salary at the end of the agreement as originally negotiated, they will be paid less than agreed for 18 months of the three year agreement.

QTU members are not immune to the social and economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis. They realise the impact of a wage deferral, on themselves, their families and the economy. Teachers and principals are fast becoming sole breadwinners, or are helping family members affected by the pandemic. QTU members relied upon the forthcoming pay increase due on July 1, with many of their families impacted during COVID-19. QTU members continued to deliver during the crisis, working on the frontline to deliver for students and support their families. Teachers across the state banded together, providing sweeping changes to the way in which education was delivered, much needed reassurance for students and their families and stability at time when they did not even have this themselves.

The argument that the pay deferral should be accepted is one that has been raised and discussed by some QTU members. Some believe they are lucky to have a job given the situation in their communities in the midst of an economic recession and with unemployment figures rising rapidly. While being grateful for their good fortune in maintaining secure employment and income, however, QTU members can improve the lives and economic prospects of the communities in which they live and work through spending.

While it is within the capacity of the government to make changes to industrial agreements, it is clear to QTU members that this is not the right choice. This decision does not communicate to teachers their worth as the professionals they are and as essential workers within our state and nation. If teachers are essential workers and their role has been so critical during the pandemic, a message continually reinforced by government, why then has the employer broken the deal and deferred payment? The previously agreed pay rise on 1 July being spent in the local economy would have been of greater economic benefit. For a Labor government to override an agreement through legislation amendments in Parliament sets a dangerous precedent that a future government will be tempted to exploit at the expense of workers' pay and working conditions.

The government's arguments that all public sector workers are protected and have security of employment and will be treated fairly and consistently do not match the action that has been taken in the deferral of the pay increase due to QTU members.

There is no doubt that the economy is in trouble, that unemployment and underemployment have doubled, and that the revenues of the state budget have been significantly affected. But this has historically proved to be bad policy and the state government has not made an economic or budget case why this is not so now. If there had been clarity about the freeze, time and an arguable case, the QTU would have balloted its members. But there has not been.

Interestingly, teachers employed in the Catholic education sector will be getting their pay increase on 1 July, with their employer committing to neither freeze nor defer any increases in their agreement. This is particularly hard to swallow for QTU members, as the state government continues to fund around a quarter of the salary of Catholic education teachers and most of their schools receive more combined state and federal funding per student than the local state school. The decision of this state government to defer wages of state school teachers means that they have purposely chosen to pay QTU members less for up to 18 months.

The QTU Executive have rejected the pay freeze and the QTU continues to oppose it in all discussions between the government and public sector unions. The government action is manifestly unfair to teachers and principals, who have been working harder than ever on the front line and whose staffing of schools is essential to re-starting the economy. The decision is industrially unconscionable, in that it requires unilaterally breaking an agreement approved less than 12 months ago. Further it is economically unsound, as it will remove \$100 million from circulation in an economy during a recession, at a time when stimulus, not cuts, is required.

Impact on colleagues considering retirement

Since the announcement of the pay deferral, the QTU has raised concerns related to those members who are planning on retiring over the course of this agreement. The final salary calculation would be affected, resulting in a reduced retirement benefit. Quite an unfair outcome over the course of a career.

The state government has confirmed that workers who retire will not be disadvantaged by these arrangements in relation to their Defined Benefits Superannuation plans. The assurance that people who are approaching retirement will not be drastically affected by the deferral does not change the QTU's opposition.

Secure work – supply teachers

QTU members have experienced first-hand the nature of insecure employment during the COVID-19 crisis. The QTU understands and appreciates the stress and uncertainty that supply teachers were faced with.

Supply teachers provide essential relief for permanent employees and support sick leave and other leave in schools. During the COVID-19 crisis, schools were not needing their regular number of supply teachers to support their school operation, which further extenuated the insecure nature of supply teaching.

Historically, supply teachers are often engaged quite regularly during the end of Term 1 and across Term 2. With little to no demand, supply teachers were left abandoned, with the advocacy of the QTU the only lifeline many teachers had left, as they were not eligible for JobKeeper.

By the nature of the role, there is no guarantee of continuity of work and while the daily pay rate for supply teachers has a casual loading applied (23 per cent) this does not have an impact when teachers receive no work at all. No work means no income and no access to payments, including JobKeeper. If not for the pandemic, supply teachers would have had a steady stream of supply work across Term 1 and Term 2.

The QTU continued to advocate for supply teacher members with the Department of Education during the pandemic crisis, and has taken part in a range of key stakeholder meetings. In these forums, the QTU has been actively advocating for temporary work to provide financial remuneration to supply teachers who have lost work as a result of the crisis.

The QTU understand that some supply teachers have continued to struggle in accessing engagements, even with all students returning to school. As a result of our advocacy with the department, the QTU secured extension of temporary work to ensure this group of members would not have contracts terminated in the pandemic climate. This, combined with a high withdrawal of leave applications, has resulted in contract teachers being used by schools for the provision of local relief, consequently lowering the need for schools to engage supply teachers. The QTU calls for the government to provide a degree of certainty of employment for all workers.

Queensland's education sector's response to COVID-19

Response in schools

From the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, QTU members in schools across the state have continued to deliver education and training for students amid a global crisis. Not only have QTU members continued to plan, prepare, teach and assess, they have gone above and beyond for the students they teach in the communities in which they live and work. QTU members have taken to school websites, Facebook pages and the like, teachers and school leaders delivering messages pertaining to learning and also sending well wishes to their students during the crisis.

The professionalism and solidarity of many teachers during this time has been unparalleled. While details of COVID-19 cases, infection rates and control measures were continuing to emerge, teachers anxious about their own health and that of their families continued to teach. **The QTU calls on the Queensland Government to provide an investment in people, their wellbeing and development.**

Teachers adapted almost overnight to new measures aimed to stop the spread of COVID-19 in their schools and classrooms, including but not at all limited to, hand hygiene, social distancing and an awareness of high touch surfaces.

The additional labour required to transform what was face to face teaching and learning into delivery of the curriculum via online platforms was unpaid. Teachers worked tirelessly for many more hours than they were paid to ensure learning could continue in a different form and that this new way of teaching and learning was accessible to all students. In what can only be described as an incredible feat, teachers banded together to revolutionise education and its delivery in a matter of days, moving from face-to-face teaching to online delivery.

As essential workers, teachers and school leaders supported each other and their school communities to implement health guidelines, departmental guidelines and learning at home materials to enhance the direction of the response to COVID-19 from schools.

Education as the way forward

The recent announcement by the Federal Education Minister Dan Teehan of a proposal to overhaul university education causes concern for the road to recovery. This proposal does not support education as a way forward in the recovery from COVID-19.

A reduction in the Commonwealth's overall financial contribution to university degrees from 58 per cent to 52 per cent and the lifting of student fees from 42 per cent to 48 per cent is not what is needed now. An investment in education, including tertiary education, will provide ongoing benefit into the future. Increasing university places is great, provided the funding is there to support it. Increasing student fees on the back of a pandemic does not ensure equity of access. An additional 39,000 places over three years, to be covered by student fees along with cuts to teaching and learning budgets, does not support education as the way forward for this state and nation. Reliance on increased fees and budget cuts would be better replaced with an investment in the sector now to bolster participation and increase the education and skills of people.

Everyone deserves access to affordable tertiary education – no matter what field of study.

An increase of university fees for humanities, arts and communications will have a devastating impact for years to come. These sweeping changes by the Morrison government, doubling the cost of some courses while slashing the cost of others, is not supportive of our economy. Provision of education is critical for the long-term success of our economy and future of our nation. The success of our economy does not solely rely on the work of certain professionals. The COVID-19 and associated responses have proven that. The increase of university fees for humanities, art and communications will have a devastating impact on the teaching profession and education more broadly, highlighting socio-economic disadvantage.

Far from giving Queenslanders the skills they will need for the future, these changes are ideological, opportunistic and prohibitive. Students paying more, reduced equity of access, no additional funding for universities – none of this translates into providing an educated and skilled workforce.

Reducing access to education serves no purpose in trying to kickstart and stabilise an economy. It is an investment in education that is needed now more than ever. A well-educated state and nation would have the skills and capabilities to continue to prosper. **The QTU calls on the state government to ensure access to higher education for all Queenslanders, acknowledging the financial aspects of university as a barrier**

Securing TAFE's future

The 1990s micro-economic reforms in vocational education and training are no longer fit-for-purpose and need an urgent review. Industry has increasingly been handed policy control of vocational education and training (VET), which has resulted in the isolation of communities that were vital in the establishment of TAFE. The addition of the user-pays philosophy, supported by VET FEE-HELP, continues to shift the provision of services from embodying an ethical and high quality teacher-student relationship with education at the core, to a buyer-seller economic paradigm with reduced educational benefit.

The QTU believes an economic response to COVID-19 requires state government leadership in the VET sector, rather than adopting a position of responsiveness to the needs of industry. The danger for Queensland's future economy is that a government that abandons its

leadership role in VET leaves decision making to profit-driven industry, which ignores the training needs of the jobs of the future and instead focuses on inserting workers into present jobs in existing industries. **The QTU calls on the Queensland Government to ensure that the state's economic response to COVID-19 secures the future of TAFE as an essential service through its state budget, Further, the QTU calls on the Queensland Government to develop and implement policy initiatives to deliver quality learning in the VET sector.**

Fair funding for an essential service

The QTU is the proud professional and industrial voice of TAFE teachers in Queensland, and we believe that restoring the funding of TAFE is essential in Queensland's economic recovery from COVID-19. TAFE offers the highest standard of vocational education and training (VET) at all levels, with nationally accredited programs and a highly qualified and experienced workforce.

TAFE teachers and education support staff have already made a significant contribution in support of Queensland's response to COVID-19. TAFE educators:

- reimagined VET programs for modes of online delivery with very short timelines, in line with public health restrictions
- resumed face-to-face delivery, with new pedagogy, in accordance with the public health restrictions
- delivered webinars on cash flow management and business planning
- developed COVID-safe online training short courses and delivered these free of charge for employees in the beauty and hospitality industries
- delivered free online micro-credential courses in a range of skill sets and areas of focus in the community care, customer engagement, food service and medication assistance sectors
- developed micro-credentials and skill sets to promote job opportunities in high-demand industries and delivered these free of charge.³

The QTU calls on the Queensland Government to ensure that its economic response to COVID-19 includes an investment in the state's training sector and that TAFE, as the public provider, receives an increased proportional share of the state's training budget.

The VET funding model that is being delivered by the Queensland Government was first designed and implemented by the former Newman government and largely cost-shifts VET funding responsibility from the state to individual students. The taint of the former state government's ideological obsession with contestability in the Queensland economy, specifically the VET sector, colours any attempts to tweak a fundamentally flawed approach by the current Queensland Government.

³ Queensland Parliament, (Economics and Governance Committee). Public briefing - Inquiry into the Queensland Government's economic response to COVID-19, 1 June 2020
<https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/documents/committees/EGC/2020/COVID-19/I02-trns-pb-1June2020.pdf>

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The negative impacts of competition and market reform on Queensland's VET sector are well documented, and the introduction of market reforms has resulted in:

- increased reliance of a large proportion of private providers on government funding and unnecessary duplication between private and public providers
- increased provider failure and subsequent intervention costs to government
- increases in low-cost online delivery of training that leads to student disenfranchisement
- increases in low-quality training and unethical practice
- decreased standing of the VET sector and VET qualification reputation
- no decrease in training delivery costs.

The QTU believes that the current funding model presents a barrier to Queenslanders' access to VET. The QTU understands that cost is the single largest barrier to participation in certificate IV and above qualifications, and this is demonstrated in the falling enrolment numbers in these qualifications. As a matter of economic priority in response to COVID-19, **the QTU calls on the Queensland Government to remove limits that apply to students receiving subsidised training**, particularly for those students whose individual circumstance or community demonstrates financial hardship, for example low socio-economic status. The QTU believes that access to VET is a fundamental tool to improve employment and quality of living outcomes for individuals and their communities. Implementation of mechanisms to supply state-based assistance that both supplements and remedies the failures of the federal funding system will increase uptake of diploma and above level qualifications.

Protecting the quality of Queensland's VET sector

The QTU applauds the Queensland Government's initiative to establish a training ombudsman. The Queensland Training Ombudsman plays an important role in strengthening Queensland's training sector by working across the sector to improve protections for apprentices, trainees, and students. **The QTU calls on the Queensland Government to ensure the protection of TAFE students, industry, and the reputation of the training sector by:**

- mandating a minimum number of hours of delivery for any VET course that receives public funding
- auditing inputs to learning, including curriculum, teaching, and assessment
- applying even more stringent regulation of RTOs' marketing and student recruitment practices
- banning the subcontracting of course delivery to unregistered providers
- guaranteeing that a minimum of 70 per cent of the state's training budget is delivered by public providers
- capping funding to private RTOs and restricting access to state training funds by non-profit RTOs.

Reimagining VET curriculum

Leadership in the state's VET sector needs transformational vision.

More than an economic response to the current COVID-19 pandemic, the QTU supports a reimagined VET curriculum that prepares workers for the jobs of tomorrow. A post-pandemic, restored global marketplace will demand skills that enhance industry productivity, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, self-management, commitment to lifelong learning, and understanding of and respect for difference. While new and emerging industries might develop niche training to meet the demands of the day, the QTU holds that the public provider is best placed to meet the skills needs of industry and the next generation of Queensland workers.

A curriculum that delivers the training needs for the state's future workforce needs transformational vision beyond the training packages of the 20th century, which have resulted in a narrow selection of atomised work tasks that are soon redundant in ever-changing workplaces. One of the inefficiencies of the current VET sector is the myopic nature of a national training system that is incapable of meeting the future needs of new and emerging industries because of its retrospectivity. National training accreditation is achieved through RTOs demonstrating how they teach and assess prescriptive skill sets that reduce training to compartmentalised and decontextualised units. The process for identifying requisite skills and developing a relevant training package can mean that, by the time courses are being delivered, they are already out of date.

The QTU does not support training that fails workers by preparing them for a lifetime of insecure work, casualisation or sub-contracting without access to fair and decent conditions like superannuation and leave entitlements that come through permanent employment.

Public providers are well placed and have the knowledge and industry connections to work directly with industry to develop qualifications that meet future needs. This would include education and training that teaches holistic and transferable capacities. Moreover, the QTU believes that VET curriculum must embed knowledge and understanding of employment rights, Australian and Queensland employment standards, Fair Work provisions, and International Labour Organisation conventions.