

Welcome Event - Community Colleges Australia Annual Conference

Wednesday, 26 July 2017

Thank you, David, for your kind welcome and for the opportunity to open your annual conference this evening.

I note that the theme for this year is *Community Education: Investing in our Future*.

It's a powerful sentiment... and I couldn't agree more about the valuable role education plays in people's lives.

Of course, as Assistant Minister for Vocational Education and Skills, I'm sure you'd expect me to be passionate about the accredited vocational courses, certificates and qualifications that Community Colleges offer. And you'd be right.

But before I elaborate on that, I want to acknowledge the wonderful diversity of courses offered by community colleges.

From learning the basics of sewing, or an introduction to bee-keeping to courses in simple budgeting skills taught by deaf trainers in Auslan ... Community Colleges take a wonderfully wide view of education, embracing its whole spectrum, from fun, to thought-provoking, to life-changing.

A large proportion of the training you deliver is to migrants, Indigenous Australians, people with disabilities, the elderly, and people in regional areas.

Can I take this opportunity to congratulate all those in the running for Community Colleges' "Student of the Year" awards tomorrow evening.

These awards are a tribute to many who've overcome significant personal challenges through their study with community providers.

I understand one of the students in the running is from the Burleigh Heads campus of ACE Community College, which happens to be in my electorate on the southern Gold Coast.

Good luck to all of those nominated.

With an education and the skills learned through it, a person has the opportunity to gain independence, and a sense of belonging as an active and contributing member of their community.

And of course, community colleges allow people to upskill or reskill, giving them a very important opportunity: the chance to find a job.

Community Colleges flourish when they connect with their communities through local businesses.

And I'm pleased to say that there are some fantastic examples of that happening.

As I mentioned, one of those is ACE Community Colleges which operates a campus at Burleigh Heads in my own Queensland electorate.

ACE has an excellent reputation for forming partnerships with industry and that's resulted in great employment outcomes for their students.

I have seen first-hand the value this training has in equipping people with the skills they need to enter the workforce, contribute to the broader community and enrich their lives.

Another of your members, VERTO, won Large Training Provider of the Year at the 2015 Australian Training Awards .

VERTO goes out into the community, partners with businesses, learns what their needs are and, together with that business, provides on-the-job training that focuses on the skills students need to succeed in that workplace.

That is a great way to prepare a student for employment.

So there are some really positive things happening, which is very encouraging to me.

But there's more we can do.

One thing that has concerned me is the significant fall in the number of apprentices that began five years ago.

Since 2012, there have been sharp declines in the numbers of commencements and completions of apprenticeships across a whole range of industry sectors.

That's despite excellent work by many people ... including one of your keynote speakers, Professor Erica Smith.

Professor Smith was instrumental in having the Australian Apprenticeships Ambassadors Program recognised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and added to a UN technical and vocational Promising Practices Database .

I can assure you this Government is committed to ensuring our sector remains strong, that students can access the training they need to follow their passions, and that industry can employ the skilled workers they need to grow their businesses.

That's why we've established the new Skilling Australians Fund.

This new Fund will commit an estimated \$1.5 billion from the Commonwealth over the next four years to ensure Australians are supported to have the skills they need to meet the workplace and economic challenges of today and the future.

The Fund will give priority to projects that support apprenticeships and traineeships in areas of future growth, high demand occupations that rely on skilled migration, trade apprenticeships, targeted cohorts and rural and regional areas.

It will be ongoing to create certainty for the sector and, most importantly, its funding is targeted.

This way we ensure investment goes to projects that will have the greatest benefits for all.

The states will be required to match Commonwealth funding.

They will put forward proposed projects, with funding committed to those that meet set criteria.

This gives us confidence that investments will be made to projects that closely match the aims of the Fund.

I am encouraging my state and territory colleagues to engage with industry, business and employers to discover where opportunities exist.

It's not enough to just get more people to undertake apprenticeships --we have to make sure they see them through to completion.

To support apprentices complete their training, the government has announced the new \$60 million Industry Specialist Mentoring for Australian Apprentices program.

This initiative will provide mentoring support for up to 45,000 Australian Apprentices in industries experiencing structural adjustment.

Our mentors will be people with experience working in the same field as the apprentice, so they can provide the kind of industry expertise that is relevant to the work environment.

Put simply, this means apprentices will be getting advice and support from people who really understand the challenges they face.

The mentoring program will complement the already existing support services available to apprentices through the Australian Apprenticeship Support Network.

We're also putting an end to unscrupulous VET providers taking advantage of vulnerable students.

The start of July marked the end of the six month transition period to a more affordable,

sustainable and student-focused VET Student Loan program, replacing the former VET FEE-HELP scheme.

The providers approved to offer VET Student Loans have been assessed against stringent criteria.

This is designed to restore confidence to the sector, and to give students faith that the training they receive will lead to strong employment outcomes from industry-linked, value-for-money courses.

This is good news for all providers, including yourselves.

In order to have a robust sector, students and the community have to believe in the service we provide.

The introduction of this new student loans program is an important step towards achieving that.

I wish you the best with your deliberations and discussions at your conference.

I'm sure they will lead to the best possible outcomes for our students and those that support them.

Thank you again for your work in giving young people job readiness skills, and for giving people of all walks of life a chance to learn more about the world around them.

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