

## THE EMPEROR'S NEW SCREENS: RECLAIMING FACE-TO-FACE LEARNING IN TAFE NSW FOR SECONDARY STUDENTS

MELISSA O'MEARA

*Melissa O'Meara explains why face to face, relational teaching is so essential for students completing their secondary studies through TAFE NSW...*

In the evolving landscape of Australian education, TAFE NSW stands as a vital institution—one that not only equips students with vocational skills but also serves as a lifeline for those seeking alternate pathways to complete their secondary education. Amidst policy reforms and funding debates, the NSW Vocational Education and Training (VET) Review has reaffirmed the centrality of TAFE NSW in rebuilding a responsive, equitable, and high-quality education system.

Yet, a troubling trend persists: the push to replace face-to-face teaching with screen-based delivery models for Year 10,11 and 12 equivalent programs.

This article argues that such a shift is not only pedagogically unsound but also detrimental to student wellbeing, particularly for vulnerable cohorts. Drawing on current research, policy analysis, and mental health data, we call for the full funding and resourcing of TAFE NSW and welcome the abandonment of the Smart and Skilled funding model in early 2026.

The NSW VET Review (2024) outlines 21 recommendations, including the development of a needs-based funding model, improved support for equity cohorts, and stronger integration between high school and post-school training (NSW VET Review, 2024).

The Smart and Skilled funding model, introduced under the previous NSW Government, has been widely criticised for its contestable funding approach, which pits TAFE against private providers. This model has led to campus closures, staff reductions, and diminished student support (NSW Teachers Federation, 2023). It prioritises compliance and cost-efficiency over quality and equity. The review highlights the failure of marketisation and competition policies, noting that they have not improved access or outcomes. Instead, they have fragmented the system and undermined

public confidence.

TAFE NSW provides critical pathways for students who have disengaged from mainstream schooling due to trauma, mental health challenges, or socio-economic disadvantage. These students thrive in environments that offer flexibility, adult learning principles, and relational teaching—hallmarks of TAFE pedagogy (NSW Teachers Federation, 2023).

In recent years, the phenomenon of school refusal has emerged as a significant and growing concern across Australia. Defined as a student's emotional distress at the prospect of attending school, school refusal differs from truancy in that parents are typically aware of the absence and have attempted to intervene (Clark, 2023).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, rates of school refusal have surged, with Victorian data showing a 50% increase between 2018 and 2021, and national attendance rates dropping from 91% in 2021 to 86.5% in 2022 (Orygen, 2024; Parliament of Australia, 2023). A 2023 survey found that 39% of parents reported their child had experienced school refusal in the past year (ABC News, 2023). The impacts are profound: students experiencing school refusal often face anxiety, depression, and social isolation, which can lead to long-term disengagement from education and poorer life outcomes. TAFE NSW, with its inclusive and trauma-informed approach, offers a vital alternative for these students - one that prioritises wellbeing, connection, and personalised support. By recognising the complex emotional and psychological needs of students affected by school refusal, TAFE can re-engage learners in meaningful education and help restore their confidence and sense of belonging.

According to the Be You - National Mental Health in Education Survey (2024), 77% of teachers identified depression and anxiety as the top health concerns for students. Only 33% believed the young people in their

care were mentally healthy (Be You, 2024). Educators overwhelmingly agreed that mental health is a precondition for effective learning, and that face-to-face relationships are essential for building trust, engagement, and emotional safety.

A key strength of TAFE NSW historically has been its ability to contextualise learning to meet the needs of local cohorts, tailoring curriculum and delivery to reflect the unique cultural, social, and economic realities of the communities it serves. Contextualised learning enhances engagement by making content relevant to students' lived experiences, increasing retention and comprehension (Liddell, 2023). For example, lessons that incorporate local industries, community issues, or cultural practices allow students to see the direct application of their learning, fostering deeper understanding and motivation. In contrast, the push toward a statewide delivery model, where a single teacher delivers content remotely to students across NSW, undermines this local responsiveness. This model assumes a one-size-fits-all approach, ignoring the diversity of student backgrounds, learning needs, and community contexts.

Research shows that standardised statewide models often fail to engage students meaningfully, particularly those from regional, rural, or culturally diverse communities (AERO, 2023). The lack of local contextualisation can lead to disengagement, reduced academic performance, and a diminished sense of belonging. Moreover, teachers in local settings are best positioned to adapt content, build relationships, and respond to emerging needs—roles that cannot be fulfilled by a remote instructor on a screen. As Steve Liddell notes, 'Putting time and effort into contextualising your lessons is a great way to increase the confidence and enthusiasm of your students' (Liddell, 2023). For TAFE NSW to continue serving as a lifeline for disengaged students, it must preserve and prioritise locally contextualised, face-to-face education over centralised, remote delivery models.

The current push by TAFE NSW to reduce face-to-face delivery in favour of a teacher-on-screen model is reminiscent of Hans Christian Andersen's fable *The Emperor's New Clothes*. In the story, the emperor is deceived into believing he is wearing magnificent garments, when in fact he is naked. Similarly, the

ideology that screen-based delivery is 'innovative' or 'efficient' ignores the reality that students need teachers—not just content (Brown, 2023).

Reductions in face-to-face educational provision have profound and far-reaching consequences for student welfare, particularly among vulnerable cohorts who rely on relational and responsive teaching environments.

Face-to-face learning is not merely a mode of delivery—it is a pedagogical foundation that fosters connection, engagement, and emotional safety. When students are taught primarily through screens, the absence of direct interpersonal interaction can exacerbate feelings of isolation, disengagement, and anxiety. According to the Be You - National Mental Health in Education Survey (2024), teachers overwhelmingly identified mental health as a prerequisite for effective learning, with 77% citing depression and anxiety as the most pressing concerns among students. The shift to remote, or hybrid, models often removes the protective factors that in-person education provides, such as routine, peer interaction, and the ability for teachers to notice and respond to subtle signs of distress. Moreover, pedagogical research consistently shows that students—especially those in alternate education pathways—benefit from multimodal, adaptive instruction that is best delivered in person (Smith & Jones, 2024).

The erosion of face-to-face teaching risks turning education into a transactional experience, where content is delivered but connection is lost. It fails to recognise that teaching and learning is inherently a social exercise, a real-life demonstration of social mores and bi-lateral communication in practice. For students completing their secondary studies through TAFE NSW, many of whom have already faced barriers in mainstream schooling, this shift can be particularly damaging. It undermines the very principles of inclusive education and contradicts the evidence-based practices that support student wellbeing and academic success.

At the centre of this debate is a simple truth: teachers are the heart of teaching. They are not interchangeable with screens or algorithms. They bring expertise, empathy, and adaptability to the classroom. They notice when a student is struggling, offer encouragement, quickly move to provide additional support and learning adjustments in the safe learning spaces they have

nutured (Aristotle, quoted in Smith & Jones, 2024).

TAFE NSW must be fully funded, fully resourced, and its management fully committed to face-to-face delivery for secondary students. This is not a matter of allegory, human folly or nostalgia—it is a matter of evidence, equity, and educational integrity. The imminent abandonment of the Smart and Skilled funding model must be replaced with a needs-based, direct funding approach; guaranteeing face-to-face delivery for Year 10,11 and 12 equivalent programs which further supports the 83.1 million dollar investment to reinvigorate the teaching workforce previously decimated by a flawed people culture philosophy that persists as demonstrated by consistently poor results in the People Matter Employee Survey. In rebuilding TAFE, equity programs must be reinvigorated and accessible along with the embedding of mental health support into all aspects of TAFE delivery, starting with the return of Disability Teacher Consultants to the Equity Branch and for them to be amongst their teacher colleagues in staff rooms

Let us not be fooled by the illusion of innovation. Let us see the truth, as the child did in the fable, and say aloud: 'The emperor has no clothes.'

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa O'Meara is a proud TAFEie and the Post Schools Organiser for the Western Region. Her specialities include neurodiversity and Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Digital. The youngest daughter of migrants, Melissa came to teaching late in life, finishing her first teaching degree in 2018, after having spent 20 years wasting her life as a financial planner, bank manager, and corporate numpty. Melissa has been active in the NSW Teachers Federation since joining the teaching profession and credits her sanity to activism and the collegiately, compassion, focused rage, and collaboration that it enables.

