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DELIVERING Skills

TAFE NSW, the country's largest vocational training institution, steps up to new business challenges and innovation in workforce skills development.

Images by Scott Ehler

Following a career that has spanned all sectors of education within Australia and overseas, Pam Christie took on the role of Managing Director of TAFE NSW in October 2012. Having worked in both vocational education and government policy, she is intimately familiar with the significant changes underway in Australia's tertiary education industry and has maintained an abiding focus on connection to industry and changing lives through education.

While Pam is proud of the numerous things TAFE NSW has achieved over recent years, such as TAFE's first enterprise agreements and the introduction of its first degree programs, she notes these achievements haven't come without significant challenges. "These initiatives involved forging new relationships and partnerships as well as establishing understanding among our staff of the significant changes in our market and the implications for our workforce.

"My greatest challenge today is to position TAFE NSW for success in an intensely competitive tertiary market. TAFE is in transition from

a largely government-funded organisation into one operating in a much more commercial and contestable environment. We need to compete not only with universities but with other training organisations both for government dollars and for commercial business. That means leading a major transformation of our governance, business, workforce, and our asset portfolio."

Pam believes that TAFE NSW has a very positive future despite a lot of talk in the media about TAFE cuts nationally. "We have never been more relevant as a business as we are today: our economy needs more highly skilled people in the workforce, and that includes technical and trade skills and high-level vocational skills. So increasing participation and productivity levels is the difference that we can add to business and to the economy.

"We help businesses to upskill their workforces so they can be more competitive and successful. We also give people who might have dropped out of the education system a second chance and help them get into work. We really believe we make a positive

contribution to the economy and to individuals starting out or developing their careers.

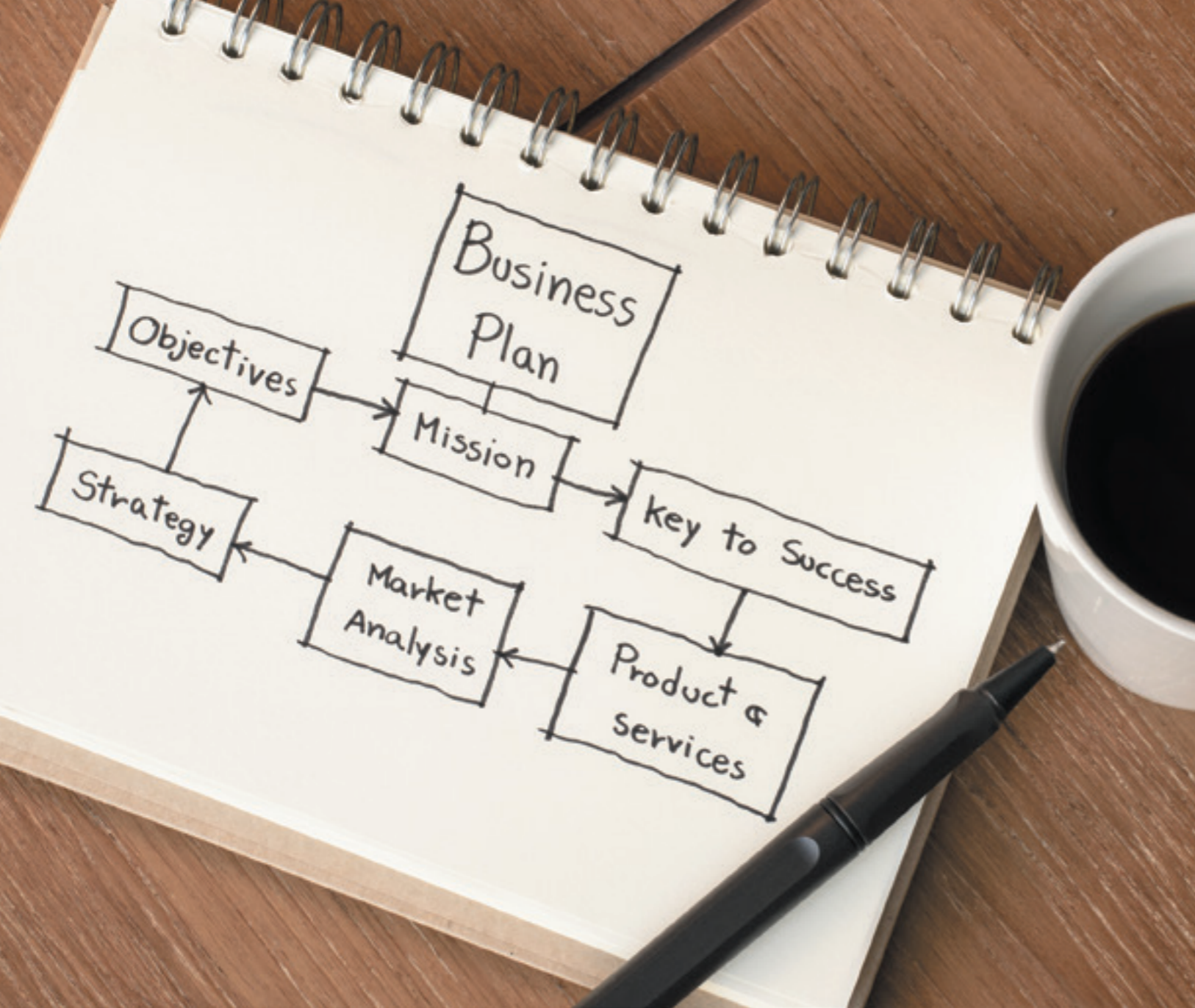
"Our TAFE NSW board commissioned work last year and Newspoll conducted a survey for us that found TAFE is very highly regarded, and that 96 per cent of people surveyed thought our services add value to businesses and communities. I'm absolutely determined to ensure that as we work through this period of reform, our value to industry, community, and the government is strengthened through that process.

"It's a really exciting time for the leadership team across TAFE NSW. I have a fantastic executive team of institute directors and other business team leaders and a depth of leadership across all our institutes. The TAFE NSW board and the minister are also committed to our future success and managing this major transformation."

TAFE NSW strives to differentiate itself from other organisations and educational institutes through its values. "Our people are very passionate, and I think that's the strongest value that drives who we >

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are and what we do because we really believe in the difference that we make to people's lives through education. I think another unique thing is that we're a connected organisation. We have 10 institutes across the state, and they're quite different in profile in terms of both the industries and the communities they serve, but each draws on the expertise of the whole system. We're connected to industry and with our partner organisations as well, so we're able to innovate and be creative and deliver services in a different way that perhaps other organisations can't.

"Another defining value and capability of TAFE is our practical approach; we're known for the expertise of our teachers and our hands-on approach to training. We're focused on practical, real industry experiences that help shape and define who our graduates are, and the skills and reputation that they have with their employers. I would also say we are a trusted brand; we've been around for more than 120 years and we're proud of our reputation as a quality, government-backed institution that has a reputation for delivering the skills that are relevant to a dynamic and changing economy."

Collaborating closely with other educational institutions means TAFE can deliver a more comprehensive learning experience.

"While we deliver our own degrees, we also collaborate with universities to ensure seamless pathways for our students. A good example is the associate degree in accounting that we offer in partnership with the CPA and four partnering universities: Macquarie University, University of New England, Australian Catholic University, and Charles Sturt University. It was a fairly ambitious initiative, but we knew we had a capability to develop pathways right across the state through our multiple-campus-based approach. CPA were saying to us, 'We like your graduates; they're ready for work, they're hands on,' and they came on board to work with us

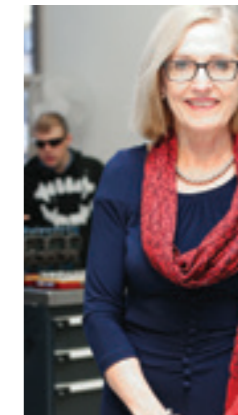
and the university partners to map out this new approach which provides direct links to employment and a degree outcome for people who traditionally would not have had access to university."

Online technology is also reshaping the way TAFE NSW is delivering its services to customers. "Like all businesses today, we're embracing technology. Our students and other customers are very busy people, and they're demanding more personalised and more flexible services, so technology provides us with an opportunity to deliver services in different ways. More and more of our delivery now includes flexible options, and we do a lot of what we call 'blended delivery', where students can do part of their studies online and part of their studies in a workshop or in their workplace face to face. That is becoming a bigger driver for the way we offer our services.

"Our online delivery is also growing; we've had more than 30-per-cent growth in demand over the past couple of years for pure online learning. Another thing that we're finding is that engaging with our market, our potential, and existing students through social media is becoming a very powerful and important way of connecting with and staying connected with our students and other customers."

The tertiary education sector in Australia is continuing to evolve. The federal budget announcements made earlier this year bring new opportunities for TAFE to offer government-subsidised, or HECS, places for its higher-education students. At a state level, there are also new opportunities and challenges.

"An important announcement in the recent state budget was TAFE's separation from the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities from July this year. TAFE NSW can now operate as a separate government agency with greater independence. This greater independence also brings increased visibility and responsibilities. The government



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has made clear to us its expectations as the state's public provider. We recognise we need to operate more like a business with greater efficiency and less dependency on government funding. Overall, our budget for 2014-15 is forecast to be \$1.86 billion, with an additional \$77 million for capital expenditure. But our funding model is changing.

"From next year, more of our government funding will be contestable with the introduction of the government's Smart and Skilled policy changes. Students in New South Wales with an entitlement to government-funded training will have greater choice of provider, and the funding will follow the student. So it's even more critical for us to put our students and our customers at the centre of everything we do and to be more responsive to their needs.

"Our governance and business model will continue to evolve so that our institutes have the autonomy and capacity to respond more quickly to local customer needs—to extend their markets and grow revenue.

"Our ambition is to break new ground as the brand in global demand. We will continue to innovate so we build the skills needed for success in today's and tomorrow's world." •