



NSW TAFE trifecta at training awards

by Elizabeth Heath

Collaborations, innovation and focusing on student outcomes saw TAFE NSW Western Institute take out the Large Training Provider of the Year at last week's 2007 Australian Training Awards in Hobart.

The Australian Training Awards are the peak national awards for vocational education and training.

In a trifecta for NSW TAFE, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student of the Year, Shilo Barker, studies at the Western Institute Dubbo campus and Marion Fitzpatrick from the North Sydney Institute was named the inaugural Institute of Trade Skills Excellence Trade Teacher of the Year.

Western Institute covers 60 per cent of the state, with 24 campuses and over 60 associated centres. Last year, it delivered training to 34,000 students, including 2257 apprentices and 1,406 trainees.

Fourteen per cent of its student population is Aboriginal, making it one of the largest single vocational education providers to indigenous people in the country.

Institute director Adrian Mitchell said the institute had worked hard on building and maintaining relationships with industry, private training providers and indigenous groups, as well as Charles Sturt University and the school sector.

"We have a long way to go and we have to stay relevant," said Mitchell. "But we primarily won because we were able to demonstrate that our approach is about focusing on students' best outcomes."

"For example, we are also working closely with NSW Health and the prison system to provide training to their clients, which allows people with mental health issues or criminal records to participate in the community and seek employment. Now that's a challenge to our teachers, but that's why we are in the business."

Paying tribute to his teachers, Mitchell acknowledged that life isn't always easy for a TAFE teacher in a rural or remote community.

"We won because of their passion, and they should take all the credit," he said.

"It will give them a sense of pride. It will give them a chance to say, 'We are working in rural and remote Australia, but we are right up there with the innovation, and many of our practices can be adapted by our city counterparts. Necessity brings about innovation.'"

Certainly the institute battles enormous logistical challenges: excessive travel on often poor roads, difficulties in recruiting staff, and the drought. The

institute has developed video conferencing and satellite technology delivery to try and ease the burden.

"It's a tough region out there. Everything's changing direction, going from agriculture to mining. And when the drought breaks they'll probably have to go back to agriculture again."

Mitchell is proud of his institute's record on indigenous training, and on implementing a range of successful initiatives to increase training in skill shortage areas and to address issues affecting the local area. For example, it recently pioneered two courses to help farmers learn about renewable energy sources.

"We are leading the way in delivery of sustainable practices, natural resources, environmental management," Mitchell said.

Marion Fitzpatrick, the inaugural Trade Teacher of the Year, went straight from the awards ceremony in Hobart last Thursday night to Japan, where she's a judge at WorldSkills (formerly the Skill Olympics) in Numazu City.

Fitzpatrick, who teaches commercial cookery at Ryde College, is "an exceptional person," according to Janet Elms-Smith, manager of hospitality at Northern Sydney Institute of TAFE.

"She's incredibly energetic, enthusiastic and committed. She gives everything, more than 100 per cent, whether in her teaching, her family, or volunteering."

Fitzpatrick impressed the judges by her commitment to actively promote and develop excellence in cookery students, especially through mentoring, said the CEO of the Institute for Trade Skills Excellence, Brian Wexham.

"She's very focused on improving quality of delivery and better resources and more effective means of teaching," said Elms-Smith.

As well as mentoring and coaching students for WorldSkills, Fitzpatrick has created training programs for the Australian Navy, Telstra Stadium and Corrective Service training in jails.

