

Tech college plan 'a waste'

Critics of the government's plan to introduce a new type of technical college say the plan is driven by an agenda more political than educational. **Suzanne Keen** reports.

The Howard Government says its \$289 million plan to establish 24 Australian Technical Colleges (ATCs) is the solution to skills shortages in traditional trades.

It says the colleges, with employability and entrepreneurial skills in the curriculum, will strengthen Australia's vocational education and training system and give students a head start in working life.

However, the AEU says the ATCs are designed as elitist institutions that would further undermine the public education system while doing little to address the real causes of skills shortages. The AEU is also concerned that the colleges' strong links with business and emphasis on particular trades will lead to students graduating with narrow vocational options.

"There is no doubt the plan is politically motivated. It's an industrial relations agenda and part of a privatisation agenda," says AEU federal president Pat Byrne.

The industrial relations plan for the colleges is likely to erode teachers' working conditions. The government says they will be run by

principals (who may not be qualified teachers) on performance pay and a "competitive remuneration package". The principals will be able to hire teaching staff on Australian Work Agreements (AWAs), including performance pay.

"It has nothing to do with skills shortages," says Byrne. "They want to expand the use of AWAs and deny workers in the colleges the right to bargain collectively. The Prime Minister said he was determined to bypass the unions."

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Although the colleges could initially offer higher salaries to attract teachers, the union believes the trade-off may be a demand for greater "flexibility" with regard to work hours and school holidays.

The schools, which are scheduled to open between 2006 and 2008, will each have 300 students and specialise in a particular trade from at least



four industries, such as metal and engineering, automotive, building and construction, electrotechnology, and commercial cookery. They will be established in regional areas which the government says have skill shortages and high rates of youth unemployment. The targeted areas are:

New South Wales—the Hunter, the Illawarra, Queanbeyan, Port Macquarie, Lismore/Ballina, Dubbo, Gosford, western Sydney.

Victoria—Geelong, Warrnambool, Bendigo, Sunshine, Bairnsdale/Sale, eastern Melbourne.

Queensland—Townsville, Gladstone, North Brisbane, Gold Coast.

South Australia—Adelaide, Whyalla/Port Augusta.

Western Australia—Perth South, the Pilbara.

Tasmania—northern Tasmania.

Northern Territory—Darwin.



Byrne says that, in some of the smaller areas, the new ATCs could almost wipe out the Year 11 and 12 classes in existing schools, having a serious impact on their ability to offer a range of subject choices. She says the money would be better spent enhancing vocational education and training in schools.

"VET in schools is hugely expensive. Teachers would feel that, despite the lip service being paid to it and the popularity among students, it isn't being properly resourced.

"The cost means the less expensive courses are being run—for example, hairdressing rather than those that need tools like heavy machinery. This is one of the reasons we have skills shortages. It's not clear what the future for VET will be."

Byrne is also concerned that the ATCs are being designed as a form of selective school, with the government stating that the "best and brightest"

students will win places. The students will do a normal leaving certificate course, and will also be expected to begin a Certificate III School-based New Apprenticeship while at college.

Meanwhile, the seriously underfunded TAFEs are wondering how the money allocated to ATCs will affect their budgets. The projected size of the technical colleges is "minuscule" compared with the TAFE network and they will do little to solve skills shortages, says AEU federal TAFE secretary Pat Forward.

"If it was injected into the TAFE system, \$300 million would have a huge impact, especially in traditional trades," she says. "It would benefit far more students and industry much more quickly if it was invested in the existing system. That's the most troubling thing—it's a wasteful use of resources."

Forward believes the key reason the government has chosen to invest in the new colleges rather than TAFEs or VET in schools is that it wants greater control over how the funding is spent and wants to increase the profile of businesses in schools.

The ATCs will be closely connected to one or two local businesses, with a person from business or industry as chair of the board. It has even been suggested that employment by the local firm and selection for the college may be linked.

Byrne and Forward say this raises the concern that businesses will have a role in the curriculum that should be the responsibility of the education system. "An educational institution's role is to educate people for work and society, not for work in a particular enterprise," says Forward. "You run the risk of narrowing the skills students learn...and that narrows their vocational options and reduces

AT A GLANCE

■ **The federal government plans to build 24 new technical colleges in areas it says have skills shortages**

■ **The AEU says the plan is really a way to expand the use of AWAs and undermine teachers' conditions of employment**

■ **The AEU says the colleges would have little impact on skills shortages, and the money should be spent on underfunded TAFEs and VET.**

their negotiating capacity in terms of pay and conditions. TAFE has tried to retain the notion of broad-skilling so people can move from one job to another."

The AEU argues that the ATC proposal is based on the fallacy that skills shortages are due to lack of training options, when, in fact, many other issues have contributed to the problem. Forward says employers ignored warnings 10 years ago about an impending skills shortage, and have failed to offer sufficient apprenticeships to meet projected industry requirements. There has also been little done to encourage young people to pursue traditional trades, including a failure to address pay and conditions, and there is a huge dropout rate among those who do begin apprenticeships, she says.

"Young people's expectations have changed considerably—kids are discerning. If pay and conditions were improved, it would make these trades a more viable option."

Other options for tackling the skills shortage include strategies to encourage older people and those who are semi-skilled or unskilled to retrain, says Forward. All levels of government, industry and the trade unions need to come together to develop strategies that are "consultative, not antagonistic and combative".

The drop-in-the-ocean ATCs won't go anywhere close to solving the skills shortages, she says. "There's no strategy to address the real reason behind the shortages."

The government's ATC plan is policy on the run, says Byrne. "They haven't considered the educational impact." ■

SUZANNE KEEN is a freelance writer.