

# Profession and Identity

Pat Forward, Federal TAFE Secretary



The debate around TAFE teacher professionalism and identity in the contemporary TAFE environment has a profound impact on the union and its work. These issues lie at the centre of many of the current debates around the work of teachers in TAFE. Are TAFE teachers primarily trainers and assessors, or are they industry experts? Or are they teachers, whose first claim to a professional identity lies with their skills as educators rather than as industry experts? From these questions stems a whole raft of further issues such as the appropriate mode of employment, casualisation, workload and working conditions and qualifications. In many respects, the questions that these debates raise are neither as simple nor as clear cut as an either/or question. In the best of worlds, the issues would be resolved through critical analysis and debate both with and within the profession. But a decade of under-resourcing and exclusion of the profession from involvement in many of the key forums where these issues should be discussed has meant that the dichotomies we face are indeed still dichotomies, with no rational solution in sight.

One of the most significant ways in which a profession symbolizes its identity is through the qualifications which represent the skills and education that a particular job requires. It is also one of the most vexed and contested areas in the current debate. AEU policy is that “tertiary level, or equivalent vocational education and training teaching qualifications constitute the appropriate qualification level for TAFE teachers”. We gave very

reluctant and qualified support to the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training as a minimum qualification, so long as the last sentence ‘under the direct supervision of’ is deleted.

We support the establishment through ANTA of a national TAFE teacher registration body, administered by a registration board with at least 50% representation of registered TAFE teachers. We also support the establishment of an education industry ITAB (now replaced by Industry Skills Councils [ISC]), and the establishment of minimum standards for those who teach in

## ‘Are TAFE teachers primarily trainers and assessors, or are they industry experts?’

vocational education and training. We demand support for professional development and funding for retraining and upgrading of teaching qualifications and updating of industry skills and experience.

It is critically important that we review this policy and that we look at developing and refining the strategies for implementation as a matter of urgency.

We operate in an environment in TAFE where responsibility for many of the issues critical to the future of the TAFE teaching profession and the public TAFE system are shared between the states and the

Commonwealth. Funding is split between the two, and it has long been the tactic of both to argue that responsibility for the issues raised by our policies lie with the other party. We have no national statistics which tell us much about the TAFE teaching workforce and we cannot easily discover the mode of employment of TAFE teachers. We do not know how many have qualifications, or what those qualifications are. Some states have the figures and will not tell us, others simply do not have them. Our capacity to implement policy is limited by the fact that much of what we can achieve can only be achieved through industrial negotiation, and in the era of enterprise bargaining, the attack on working conditions has been so significant that merely holding the current conditions has been an achievement.

Ironically, at a time when we have Labor governments in each of the states and territories, there has been no move to act in concert to address some of the serious issues raised in our policies. Labor governments have moved in a number of states to establish or re-establish registration bodies for school teachers. To date, none of these have included TAFE teachers.

It is the job of the union to champion the cause of the profession of TAFE teaching because there is no intention and no will anywhere else to do so. It is a huge irony that an industry whose lifeblood is education and training and whose currency is qualifications should conspire through neglect or deliberate intent to refuse to support either the accreditation or on-going



professional development of its workforce. The now discredited Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training was foisted on the system with an assertion that it was lifting the standards of qualification of the workforce, when it was patently undermining the qualifications and experience of the existing workforce and reducing standards overall.

The questions we have to address revolve around the issue of who TAFE teachers are, how they see themselves and what role their work has in forming the contemporary TAFE environment. Are they teachers, or are they industry experts? For some the question of the so-called 'new VET professional' has become so rarified that the central role of the teacher and teaching and learning in TAFE has been removed, and the professional in TAFE is really anyone who works in TAFE, not just the teachers. This is a somewhat ham-fisted attempt to appeal to the divisions within TAFE between teachers and other workers – an artificial division, I would suggest.

The core of our policy reflects the view that TAFE institutions are educational institutions, and that TAFE teachers are, first and foremost, teachers. It is a critical aspect of the work that we do that we continue to assert this, because as the existing TAFE teaching workforce retires, we are in danger of losing the experience, expertise, knowledge and history of a whole generation of teachers. We must not lose our nerve in the face of the rhetoric which continues to spill out of ANTA and the state bureaucracies. Nor must we lose our nerve when faced with arguments,

especially from some of the newer and unqualified people who teach in TAFE, that industry knowledge and experience is all that counts, that teaching qualifications are unnecessary, that anyone can teach.

We have to acknowledge and work around the issues of the inadequacies of teaching qualifications and courses. There needs to be a TAFE teaching qualification, it should be appropriate to the contemporary working environment of TAFE teachers and the students they teach. It should be highly valued and rigorous, but accessible to those who come into TAFE from industry with no teaching experience. It should be a **teaching** qualification.

### 'We demand support for professional development and training...'

Governments need to accept some responsibility for funding both this initial teacher training and the ongoing professional development of the workforce. For almost ten years, in a climate where the majority of people who work in TAFE have no job security, individual teachers have by themselves borne the cost of professional development and on-going updating of qualifications.

We cannot and should not accept the notion of a core-periphery workforce of qualified on-going teachers, and poorly-paid, unqualified casuals. It is an absolute lie to assert that these workers are employed to bring to the industry current industry skills. They

are employed to do the same work that on-going teachers do, in some cases for half as much money. In some states these casuals have been employed as effectively full time casuals for more than ten years. They are used and abused by the system because they are cheap and seen to be compliant. Our strategies must be broad and clever enough not to trade off additional support for casuals for professional development when the major concern of casuals is their mode of employment.

Finally, we must continue the lobbying around representative structures. It would be useful to have some debate around the issues of an education industry ITAB, or ISC, and registration bodies. There are advantages and disadvantages with either, but it would seem critical at this stage, however difficult it is to achieve our policies, that we are clear about what we want.

It is clearly outrageous that there is no teacher-unionist on the ANTA Board and that the AEU has to struggle to be heard within the state bureaucracies. Clearly the Training Reform Agenda would have been different if the voices of teachers had been heard. As this generation of teachers moves out of the TAFE system, we must continue to work so that their accumulated experience is not lost; so that there is another generation of TAFE teachers and their voices are heard.

*Pat Forward is the Federal TAFE Secretary. This is an edited version of a paper given at the 2004 TAFE Council AGM. See [www.aeufederal.org.au/TAFE/index2.html](http://www.aeufederal.org.au/TAFE/index2.html)*