



‘...ten years of industry dominance in the VET sector which has overseen unprecedented levels of skills shortages’

# Australian Technical Colleges

**T**he Howard Government announced the establishment of 24 Australian Technical Colleges during the 2004 election campaign. \$289 million is to be expended over the next four years to establish the colleges throughout the country.

Each college will provide places for 300 students, a total of 7,200. While purportedly to address the skills shortage crisis, the colleges will be required to be industry driven, with a College Governing Council run by local business or an industry representative, offer staff Australian Workplace Agreement's and performance pay and embed employability, enterprise and small business skills throughout their curriculum, writes **PAT FORWARD.**

Australian Technical Colleges are not about seriously addressing skills shortages, or about lifting the status of trade training and traditional blue collar work.

They are an attempt to promote the Government's agenda of increasing privatisation and competition in education, further destabilising the public education system, undermining the work of state governments and other stakeholders in addressing the skills crisis, and removing the influence of trade unions both in education and in society.

Solutions to skills shortages and the disengagement of young people from education, particularly in the middle years, depend on the capacity of a society to provide a comprehensive public education to all its citizens. Strengthened partnerships between key stakeholders, which must include State and Commonwealth governments, as well as key unions, community and industry groups, are the only way to address both the skills shortage crisis and the disengagement of young people from education. A number of initiatives within the states, including improved access to reliable careers counselling and a strengthening of the role of the local community in encouraging young people to remain in education and training, are all important steps in addressing the problems.

The danger in initiatives like the ATCs is that they encourage competition between education and training sectors for already scarce resources, and encourage simplistic solutions to complex problems which require a whole of community response. State governments will be forced to redefine their work in these areas in order not to publicly appear to be "anti-trades" and other groups will join the scramble for money.

While the involvement of industry in preparing young people for a future in the workforce is clearly important, it is critical that such preparation is balanced in such a way as to ensure that students maintain

their autonomy, and their capacity to make informed decisions about their rights and their responsibilities.

Ironically, the Howard Government's emphasis on making the education and training system, and ATCs in particular, industry focused and led, comes after more than ten years of industry dominance in the VET sector which has overseen unprecedented levels of skills shortages across the whole Australian economy.

The government released a paper in mid-January outlining the ATC proposal. This paper called for expressions of interest, and was followed up with a roadshow by Minister Hardgrave, who visited each of the twenty four proposed locations throughout February and March. By mid-February, DEST claimed to have 160 Expressions of Interest from a range of different organisations, including employers, employer and industry associations, local government organisations and education and training providers.

It is unclear at this stage what form the colleges will take, with a range of options being proposed by the organisations and consortia currently involved in the expression of interest proposals. The government is claiming that it will have approved the first series of proposal by midyear and that colleges will be up and running by next year.

While the current interest in vocational education through the skills shortage debate is welcome, the Australian community will only be properly served if well resourced public education and training providers are able to offer opportunities to all young people to develop their skills and knowledge. The proposals around the Australian Technical Colleges will be a real test of the government's capacity to set aside a narrow ideological agenda, and attend to the real needs of Australia's young people to access a broad and varied educational experience. ❖

*Pat Forward is the Federal TAFE Secretary.*

