



from the president  
Linda Simon, Federal President of the TAFE  
Division of the AEU

# Let's make our voices heard



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**A** cartoon in the *Herald Sun* on 13 March depicted two queues of supposedly recent arrivals in Australia. One queue was for the 'Skilled Workers – Express Visa Lane' and the other a line of chickens entering under a sign: 'TAFE Funding Cuts, Chickens Coming Home to Roost Lane.'

This cartoon (see opposite) depicts part of the debate that has been raging since the Prime Minister apparently decided that it was time to acknowledge the issue of skills shortages, to suggest that it was not necessary for every young person to undertake a university education, and that to aspire to a trade was admirable. Hardly a day passes without another aspect of these issues being picked up by the media or the major political parties.

The recent *Skills at Work* report stated that there has been an increase from 200,000 to 400,000 in New Apprenticeships. The real story is that this expansion has been in short term traineeships, particularly in retail, clerical, transport and hospitality, rather than in trades apprenticeships. The report indicates that Federal Government subsidies have increased by about 100 per cent to \$433 million since 1998. The number of clerical, sales and service workers in training has grown by 415 per cent, and the number of advanced clerical and service workers in training has skyrocketed 2500 per cent, at a time when employment in that sector has fallen 6 per cent. Training subsidies for non-traditional apprenticeships now account for 78 per cent of all training subsidies.

In other words, there are even more questions to be asked of the Prime Minister who suggests that young people should leave school at Year 10, and who pours money into low level traineeships in areas of unemployment. What sort of class system does John Howard want to create in Australia, and is he really serious about addressing the economic problems caused through skills shortages in traditional trades areas?

### Funding cuts take their toll

There has been an apparent uptake in trades apprenticeships this year, and queues outside many TAFE colleges, but this in itself has raised issues around TAFE's capacity to meet these demands, with limited facilities and reduced access to trained teachers. Funding cuts, as we know, have taken their toll on TAFE.

All of this makes the Federal Government's election announcement of 24 Australian Technical Colleges even more questionable. These colleges will supposedly cater for 7200 carefully selected students in marginal electorates around Australia, when the allocated \$289 million could do so much more in TAFE colleges and help to cater for the unmet demand.

Gary Hardgrave, the Minister for Vocational and Technical Education, has been travelling

around Australia discussing the establishment of these colleges with interested communities and business. There is no doubt that the concept of the colleges appeals to many of these groups. It appears the main attraction lies in their supposed ability to meet the educational and employment needs of local communities. The educational providers of vocational education and training have been promoting the need for our national training system to more explicitly have the capacity to meet such local needs. It should not require the establishment of alternative educational structures, at much cost to the taxpayer, to do this.

**'What sort of class system does John Howard want to create in Australia, and is he really serious about addressing the economic problems caused through skill shortages in traditional trade areas?'**

Hardgrave has also been consulting with selected groups on his *Skilling Australia* paper. The outcomes will be announced in early April, and legislation defining the power and structures of the new Ministerial Council and other bodies, and the engagement of business and industry, will be in Parliament by July 2005. The paper states that there will be a new funding agreement, with bilateral agreements with each state in addition to the multilateral agreement. These will be considered at the April MINCO meeting.

Whilst this paper does not appear to herald major changes as ANTA disappears and major functions are taken over by DEST, there are a number of concerns. These include implied threats on the issue of the funding arrangements, such as national outcomes-focussed performance measures, module and qualification completion

rates, and obvious attempts to hamper state and territory unity around the new offer.

The proposals around funding and a new training system will occur with little time for debate or negotiation, given the plan for legislation by July 2005. The paper is heavily biased towards advice from business and industry, with no inclusion of providers or educationalists, and little input from the ACTU. One welcome inclusion is an attempt to hear the views of students and other clients, and both Indigenous Australians and people with a disability are explicitly mentioned.

Time-based apprenticeships come under considerable attack in the paper, and taken together with other government policies, must raise considerable concerns about quality. In summary, through 29 pages in this discussion paper on new directions for vocational education and training, TAFE is never mentioned; the structures and processes proposed take even more influence away from the unions; and teachers and their unions are completely ignored.

While much of this new agenda is only now being documented, the AEU TAFE Division, at its Annual General Meeting in January, determined to position itself to take up the fight for public education. This campaign will include the development of credible alternatives to the Howard Government policies, as well as highlighting where and how these policies will not address skills shortages. The AEU will seek to work in partnership with a range of bodies to highlight



public education and to fight the Government's anti-union moves. Branches and Associated Bodies will develop strategies to involve members in the campaigning.

In order to strengthen our ability to fight, and to address inequities, the AGM also focussed on precarious employment and the recruitment and increased activism of all members. Teacher union-

ists across Australia will work together to assist each other in this campaign, and will try to ensure that casual workers are aware of their entitlements and able to access them.

It will be an interesting year of campaigning in these two areas, and I encourage all AEU members to make their voices heard in support of a quality public vocational education and training system. ❖



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