



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

2006 and onwards

Changes that affect the vocational education and training system in Australia continue at an alarming pace. The Skilling Australia's Workforce Act 2005, has set the scene for a raft of changes expected by the Federal Government this year in exchange for the state and territory governments signing up to receive their annual funding.

In their VET plans, governments have had to indicate how they will meet the requirements in the Act, including increasing user choice by 5 per cent per year, third party access of TAFE facilities and of course the requirement that Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) or individual contracts are offered to TAFE staff.

The whole impact of the Federal Government's industrial relations agenda has still to be felt by workers, a move that many believe is in order to undermine the unions' very effective campaign and to continue to create a false sense of security in the lead-up to the 2007 elections.

In a recent legislative move in NSW, 189,000 state employees, including TAFE teachers, have been moved from statutory corporations to become state employees. This will provide them with some immediate measure of protection from the Howard Government's IR changes, and continue to give them access to the state industrial relations system. The state Liberal Opposition put up a very cursory response, apparently not wishing to show their true colours and attempting to maintain their championship of public sector workers in NSW.

National TAFE Council considered its response to the offering of AWAs, at its annual general meeting in Brisbane in January. The need for unity was recognised, and a resolution around civil disobedience endorsed. The exact form of the action to be taken will depend upon the form of the offering of AWAs, but TAFE teacher union members across the country have indicated their preparedness to support each other in this fight.

The AGM also recognised the importance of partnerships with other organisations in standing up for public education and the rights of workers. TAFE teachers are called on to seek the support of community and employer groups in this campaign. Despite the appalling claims of the Minister for Vocational and Technical Education that employers do not like sending their employees to TAFE, recent NCVER statistics on employer satisfaction with TAFE tell us that this is not the case. Most employ-

ers are very supportive of TAFE and work closely with their local colleges and teachers.

Part of the work of TAFE teachers this year must be to ensure that our students are aware of the impact of the Federal Government's industrial relations changes on their working lives. AWAs currently being offered to apprentices in the hospitality industry indicate the attempts to lower the wages and increase the working hours of apprentices. Penalty rates are gone, and 12 hour shifts common. To ensure that students are aware of the impact of such contracts is surely a critical part of our responsibilities as teachers.

The Skilling Australia's Workforce Act is not the only danger to TAFE. The COAG agenda with proposed shortening of traditional apprenticeships, changes to licensing requirements and increased use of RPL, has been adopted with apparent enthusiasm in some areas. Both the recent VET reports in Queensland and Victoria reflect many of the main elements of the COAG proposals.

In the Queensland report entitled the 'Queensland Skills Plan', Premier Peter Beattie claims that since 1998, there has been a 60.5

per cent increase in the number of apprentices and trainees in Queensland. He aims to have an extra 17,000 trade training places and an additional 14,000 high level training places to meet the needs of emerging industries. This report in reality is about commercialising vocational education and training in Queensland. No wonder, Gary Hardgrave has come out praising it!

The Victorian report is called 'Maintaining the Advantage: Skilled Victorians', and it appears to put an additional \$241 million on offer for VET, and give a boost to TAFE. \$28.22 million will guarantee a place in a TAFE institute or other public provider to students under the age of 20 in order to complete a Year 12 or a Certificate III in TAFE. This concept is good, and in line with AEU policy. It increases pre-apprenticeship programs and allocates \$32 million over three years to establish Technical Education Centres

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(TECs) for senior secondary students linked to TAFE institutions. Gary Hardgrave claims that this demonstrates a failure on the part of TAFE, rather than recognising the strength in training and best practice in VET when schools and TAFE work together. He may really be worried that this initiative will further highlight the weaknesses in his Australian Technical Colleges proposal.

At the same time the Federal Government has again ignored the training needs of young people, and introduced a Trade Skills Training Visa designed, as it says, to help foreign nationals to undertake an apprenticeship in regional Australia. According to the government, it is to provide

regional Australian employers with an opportunity to fill apprenticeship vacancies, where they have been unable to find an Australian to fill the position. Yet there is no process to check whether there really is already a young person wanting to take on that apprenticeship. In speeches on the matter in federal parliament, the Member for Ballarat pointed out that in her electorate there was 20 per cent unemployment of 15-19 year olds. Rather than the Federal Government increasing the skilled migration program by 270,000 skilled migrants, the Labor Opposition is calling on the government to address the issue of the 270,000 students turned away from TAFE since 1998.

The TAFE Futures Inquiry this year will highlight the work of TAFE and involve teachers, the community and industry in discussing the future of TAFE. The Inquiry will convene forums and invite submissions from interested people across the country, seeking to discuss vocational education and training and TAFE's role in it. It will look at VET from all sides but seek to look at the scenarios that will result in a TAFE system that best serves its students, the community, industry and the TAFE workforce. After all, our role, and surely that of government, is to be building the best VET system possible for Australia. ♦



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