



from the president

Linda Simon, Federal President of the  
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# The battle for public



**‘The Australian Education Union believes that it is a government’s responsibility to primarily fund public education, whereas the Federal Government appears intent on channelling funding to any organisation as long as it isn’t TAFE or public schools.’**

One of the sets of statistics currently being used by the Federal Government is that in the years ahead the demand for university level qualifications will be just over 20 per cent of the workforce, yet 60 per cent of jobs will require technical or vocational qualifications, and only 30 per cent of the population currently have these qualifications. These statistics are supposedly driving their new-found focus on vocational education and training. Whilst we might agree with the implications for increased funding and the awareness of what at least a decade of under-funding of the VET sector has caused, the similarities in our positions end there. Basically the Australian Education Union believes that it is a government’s responsibility to primarily fund public education, whereas the Federal Government appears intent on channelling funding to any organisation as long as it isn’t TAFE or public schools.

If an indicator of importance is how soon in a speech a topic or issue is mentioned, then we should have a quick look at what Andrew Robb, the new Minister for Vocational and Further Education had to say in his address to the National Press Club on 14 March. By page one he has mentioned Australian Technical Colleges and he focuses on them as ‘lighthouses’ and ‘beacons of excellence’ for the next couple of pages. On page four he states that he is ‘very supportive of the role of private training organisations and community training organisations’. On page six, he describes the ‘increasingly strong role’ that community organisations will play in skills development.

TAFE rates its first mention on page seven, when the Minister states: “While I have only been in this job a couple of months, it’s clear to me that Australia’s TAFE sector would benefit from greater microeconomic reform.” He acknowledges that

TAFE continues to teach more than 75 per cent of all VET students, but, like his predecessor gives no recognition of the amazing work of TAFE teachers, but rather continues to present his views on how TAFE must change and adopt more autonomous governance models. In suggesting that TAFE Victoria is the most outstanding performer, he pays tribute to the Kennett government for bringing this about. TAFE teachers in Victoria may have a different perspective on this matter.

As he is the new Minister, I hope that he will take the opportunity to visit a few TAFE colleges and talk to a few TAFE teachers before his next address to the nation, so that he can represent all parts of his portfolio. The AEU will continue to raise with him the issue of under-funding of TAFE, and its impact on teaching and learning.

In his media release in reply to the Minister’s address, Stephen Smith, the new Shadow Minister for Education and Training, said: “In 1997 the Howard Government cut funding to TAFEs, reducing Commonwealth investment in vocational education by 13 per cent in the three years to 2000. Furthermore, Commonwealth investment only increased by 1 per cent between 2000 and 2004. According to data from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), real expenditure per hour of TAFE curriculum has fallen by nearly 24 per cent since 1997.” The Federal Government claims current record expenditure in the VET sector, but we would have to question how much of this has actually reached TAFE, and how much has in fact ended up in Australian Technical Colleges, toolboxes, employer incentives and the costs associated with competitive tendering and individual vouchers? The Labor Opposition must take up the challenge and demonstrate its commitment to TAFE as the priority area for vocational

# education

education and training.

In a recent visit to South Australia, I heard of lack of investment in the engineering areas and lack of support for teachers to do their jobs. The concerns about continuing employment and the effects of tendering processes in the English language services area, were also highlighted. What does it take for a government to realise that they are running their public education systems into the ground, both through lack of funding for infrastructure and equipment, and lack of investment in its teachers?

How do these stories of funding shortfalls that are echoed around the country line up with the Federal Minister's boasts that his Australian Technical Colleges will be "beacons of excellence" and that the 7,500 apprentices they could train if they operated as planned, will train on "state-of-the-art equipment"? What happens to the 1.3 million students who study at TAFE each year? Surely the Minister has to answer as to why they also are not funded to have such facilities. The creation of a two-tier system of education that we have seen becoming so widespread in our schools system is

now being replicated in the VET system. Yet, this month in Federal Parliament, the Government asked for and received another \$112 million to bolster up their 'beacons of excellence', their Australian Technical Colleges. \$456 million has been allocated to Australian Technical Colleges, and they have currently enrolled about 305 students.

Demonstrating the importance of TAFE is a critical part of our campaign this year. The report from the Kell Inquiry in 2006 demonstrated the regard in which TAFE is held by the community and local industry. This support must be harnessed so that all these groups are heard. The AEU's successful 'Enrol to Vote' campaign will be rolled out again this year, and the students urged to take action and 'Vote 1 TAFE'.

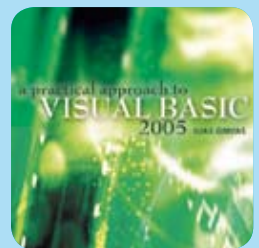
In the week of 7 May, TAFE teachers and educationalists will be lobbying Federal politicians in Canberra. Our message to them will also be 'Vote 1 TAFE', and we will be presenting a case for additional funding for TAFE based not only on past under-funding but also on the basis of future student growth of at least 5 per cent. How else can we ensure that 60 per cent of the Australian

population has the technical or vocational qualifications that they need, and that we can address the current skills shortage in trades, and the predicted future shortages in paraprofessional areas?

This also is the year when we need to take the message to the community and industry that the Howard Government must be defeated. Not only is public education in jeopardy if this doesn't happen, but the rights of Australians to decent wages and proper conditions in the workplace. The Howard Government's Industrial Relations legislation continues to attack these basic workplace rights. TAFE teachers may have weathered the first part of the attack waged through the Skilling Australia's Workforce Act, but we should also note what else Andrew Robb had to say in his address to the National Press Club, when he acknowledges that the Federal Government is endeavouring to drive change in TAFE through the VET funding agreement, change that will involve increased competition and more performance-based employment contracts.

The battle for public education is critical. ❖

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