

The COAG Agenda and what

PAT FORWARD, Federal AEU TAFE Secretary, addressed the 2007 AEU National TAFE Council AGM, which was held in Canberra in January. This is a shortened version of her presentation, which cogently addresses the critical challenges currently facing VET and TAFE.

According to Paulo Freire, lifelong learning ought to be a place where citizen learner-workers develop the wakeful capacity for comprehending the new. He called this capacity critical intelligence:

To the extent that we become capable of transforming the world, of naming our own surroundings, of apprehending [or critically questioning], of making sense of things, of deciding, of choosing, of valuing, and finally of ethicizing the world ... our presence in the world, is not a neutral presence.
(Grace, 2004)

Freire's words are a timely reminder of the need for us, as teacher unionists, to assert and reassert a much more dynamic and sophisticated role for education and training in TAFE than the role being imposed on the system at the moment by governments.

Throughout 2006, state and territory governments worked with the Federal Government, through COAG, to develop a new reform agenda. This new agenda will be as important as competition policy, and is likely to have an even more direct impact on TAFE and education in general.

This epitomises and builds on:

- the complete ascendancy within VET of so-called 'skills shortages', which has led to an absolute and uncritical acceptance of human capital theory as the dominant paradigm of the moment by all players in the system, and particularly both major political parties.
- the unchallenged dominance of marketisation, and the permeation of the sector, and indeed of society, by the logic of the market and globalisation.
- the complete separation within VET of education and training, manifested by a disjuncture in the rhetoric between 'skills for work' and the so-called 'second chance' mission which was always historically been a part of TAFE's role.
- the ongoing decline in funding for TAFE and VET.

The 'playing out' of these issues can be seen in the funding crisis in the sector, the high levels of casualisation of the TAFE workforce, the unrelenting attacks of the Federal Government on the institution of TAFE, and the unprecedented link that the Federal Government has made between its preparedness to provide any funding for TAFE with coercive requirements on the states to enforce its

industrial relations agenda. These developments augur badly for TAFE.

The shift of the centre of the reform process in vocational education and training to COAG, rather than the education and/or training departments of the state and territory governments, or even DEST or MINCO, has resulted in changes to the role of education and training. These changes to the role see it being:

recast as an instrument of micro-economic reform within a broader program of reform that has redefined (and reduced) the role of the state, marketised many areas of public provision and commodified social relations through the development of consumer sovereign models of citizenship.
(Wheelahan, 2005)

The fact that this COAG agenda has been developed by the Labor state and territory governments and the Coalition Federal Government together, underpins the extent to which this human capital rationale is now the dominant orthodoxy.

But perhaps the most significant impact of the location of the authority for the reform process within COAG, has been to shift the debate away from public scrutiny, disturbing the traditional mechanisms used by groups like unions for influencing or lobbying governments. In VET, policy and strategic direction has been removed from those within government who have most knowledge of the system, and the influence of state and territory bureaucrats on policy has become, at best, contradictory. For the AEU, this means that many of the traditional mechanisms for influencing decisions have been undermined.

In 2006 state and territory Labor governments responded to the agenda of the Howard government in seemingly contradictory ways. The Howard government's abolition of ANTA immediately following the 2004 election, and its use of its minority funding share in the VET system to enforce industrial and other reforms, were all evidence of a 'show of strength'. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact reason for the extent of the states and territories' acquiescence to the Federal Government. While the threat to withhold money has been a powerful inducement for the states to go along with the Federal Government's demands, it must also be said that they are often seem to be none too reluctant followers, with their views on reform frequently appearing ominously similar. The vacuum in terms of alternative policy or ideas has helped

it means for TAFE



the Federal Government in an unprecedented way.

Commonwealth, State and Territory bureaucrats who have responsibility for implementing the COAG agenda in VET are united in enacting a very narrow skills formation agenda within a human capital framework, all set within the parameters

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of the Federal Government's industrial relations agenda. The focus of the system has entirely shifted to industry and the individual, and the benefits that might accrue to individuals as a result of education and training.

Much of the labour market work around the future skills needs in industry areas of the Australian economy is predicated on an acceptance of the impacts of the Federal Government's industrial relations agenda, including, for example, increased casualisation of the workforce. These assumptions have direct consequences for resourcing and funding, because they seek to shift a larger responsibility for resourcing the system onto individuals. This plays out as pressure from governments on individual students to pay a larger share of the cost of their education, and also in the shift to vouchers as the mechanism for allocating funding.

Human capital theory currently frames the skills agenda of all the major political parties in Australia. Human capital theory:

considers education relevant in so far as education creates skills and helps to acquire knowledge that serves as an investment in the productivity of the human being as an economic production factor, that is, as a worker. (Robeyns, 2005).

It is an economistic model, where the only benefits from education which are considered or counted are increased productivity or higher wages. It is a model which blocks out the cultural, social and non-material dimensions of life: "In human capital theory, as in other parts of mainstream economics, human beings act for economic reasons only." (Robeyns, 2005).

Human capital theory is entirely instrumental — it values education, skills and knowledge only

in so far as they contribute to expected economic productivity.

In many states and territories, the rigidity and narrowness of the conception of vocational training for industry and employers has rendered it easy to separate so-called 'second chance' courses out of VET. The push is now on to have so-called 'cheap' community providers 'deliver' literacy and numeracy and the education component of VET. In promulgating the false dichotomy of 'vocational' versus 'general' education, the separation

between the two has become entrenched. This has particular resonance in the context of the pressure from industry and the federal government to shorten (and effectively destroy) apprenticeships. In many cases what is removed from the apprenticeship, or what is lost in the segmentation of apprenticeships into smaller and narrower "bites" of technical skills, is the contextual knowledge and information about the trade which enables the worker to become an autonomous learner.

General and second chance education has been marginalised in VET over the last 20 years, but it was still present even if only residually. However, even this residual role is now defined out of existence, and it is likely that it will only be included if labour market outcomes can be demonstrated.

(Wheelahan, 2005)

Shortening apprenticeships is not about improving the opportunities or skills of young people. It is about imposing narrow, employer-determined technical skills, and removing the contextual and situated knowledge young people need to apply those skills in powerful or conscious ways. It is also about denying the working class access to powerful knowledge, and the capacity to continue to access education throughout their lives.

A critical part of the AEU's campaign in this election year is in promoting support for a broad and comprehensive role for TAFE institutes around the country. The TAFE Futures Inquiry was a good start.

We need to challenge the dominant paradigm of vocational education and training, asserting both the right and the need for TAFE to be more than simply an employer and industry driven vehicle for the transmission of narrow instrumental vocational

skills. We need to confront the dominance of the market as the only logic of the system. It is crucial that the union publicly articulate its own vision for the public TAFE system, for we are effectively the only voice of those who work and study in TAFE.

Teachers and their work are at the centre of TAFE. It is critical to the future of TAFE that teachers reassert their right to work collectively, both professionally and industrially. They have the right to work collaboratively in shaping their own working environment, and the learning environment of students. This is critical to the future of TAFE. Without a well educated, professionally trained teaching workforce which has access to supported, collaborative, professional networks, the system simply cannot go on.

TAFEs are public institutions. They play a number of complex and sophisticated roles in the community. They already have, often directly through the networks of teachers who work with them, fine relationships with their local industry and community groups. TAFEs need to be properly supported in this role. Their role needs to be expanded, and they themselves can help break down the silos of different layers of government and different departments within government. If their role in industry planning was expanded, they could play a much more useful role in assisting local communities to investigate the development of new industries. Their interest would be with communities, not just with businesses. They are social institutions, and they belong to the communities they serve. We should continue to assert this, and argue for real support for the role that TAFE plays. ❖

References

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