

Keeping the “E” & the public

Dr. John Kaye

‘The only antidote to the marketisation agenda is re-igniting a widespread understanding that education is a crucial underpinning of successful skills formation and that only public provision of vocational education and training can secure the economic, social and environmental future.’

Australia as never before needs a well funded, vibrant, public provider of Vocational Education and Training. Yet proposed market-based changes to the funding and regulation of the sector will inevitably undermine the nation’s TAFE systems and with it the ability of working people to adapt, innovate and participate in the nations’ political, cultural and economic life.

It is a matter of urgent national priority that the marketisation agenda be reversed and that the nation’s politicians and population be reminded that the ‘E’ in both TAFE and VET stands for Education. The delivery of quality education as an integral component of vocational training will not survive the competitive funding structures being designed and implemented around Australia, yet it is essential to addressing the key challenges of climate change and global economic collapse.

The undermining of the public nature of TAFE and the consequent downgrading and elimination of education in skills training would not only impoverish Australia; it would weaken the democratic system under stress from economic and environmental pressures.

There is no economically successful response to climate change that can be based on repeating past patterns of production. The development of new industries in sustainable energy technologies and public transport solutions will require a workforce that is innovative and engaged.

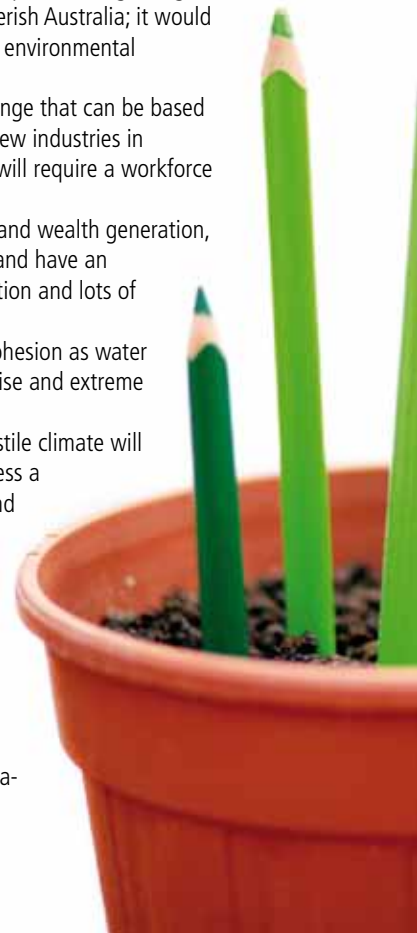
If reducing emissions is to produce a boom in employment and wealth generation, then Australia will require workers who can develop new skills and have an intellectual commitment to their workplace. This requires education and lots of it.

Climate change will also place enormous stress on social cohesion as water resources and food become scarce, disease spreads, sea levels rise and extreme weather events become more frequent.

Making complex decisions in the face of an increasingly hostile climate will require a citizenry that can weigh up complex choices and express a new collective wisdom. This too will require lots of education and not just for the elite and the traditional political classes.

A strong and economically buoyant Australia will not be built from the wreck of the global economic meltdown by simply boosting the numbers of work-ready young people with skills to immediately commence traditional jobs. What is needed is workers focused on problem solving, self-training and working collaboratively with workmates to build innovative solutions.

This is the worst of all possible times to separate skills formation from education.



in TAFE

in education



Yet that will be the inevitable outcome of the marketisation of VET. Australia's future economic success, cultural vitality, democratic health and social empowerment are being put on the line by the ideology that places competition ahead of cooperation.

Contestable markets for VET dollars will irresistibly converge to the cheapest solutions to training needs. Providers who focus on education outcomes, especially for students with diverse learning styles, will find their 'products' priced out of the market by the lowest common denominator profit-driven competitors.

The market environment will deliver bucket loads of narrow competencies but a poverty of education.

In post-school education, the word 'public' is tautological. The only institutions that can be sufficiently freed from the profit motive to focus on the development of the whole student are those that are publicly funded and have a culture of focusing on the needs of the individual and of society.

It is criminally naïve to expect to derive the same benefits from private providers whose focus on bottom line profits. Marketisation will leave behind students with diverse learning styles, special needs or who live in rural and regional Australia.

Federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations official Jim Davidson, speaking at the January 2009 AEU National TAFE Council AGM, identified a number of challenges to TAFE, including the bargaining power of customers, the threat of new entrants, the bargaining power of suppliers and the threat of substitute products and services.

He missed, however, the greatest threat of all; the development of a market that forces TAFE to contend for funding against private providers that can lower costs by ignoring educational and social justice objectives.

It is the competitive environment itself much more that the private players within it that places at risk the ability of TAFE to deliver quality public benefits.

The euphoric celebration of the defeat of the Howard government on the evening of 24 November 2007 was profoundly soured by the words of the then Prime Minister-elect in his victory speech:

"I want to put aside the old battles of the past, the old battles between business and unions, the old battles between growth and environment, the old and tired battles between federal and state, between public and private. It is time for a new page to be written in our nation's history."¹

This was no call for an outbreak of dialect peace but a warning that his government would deliver victory to one side and one side alone. For Kevin Rudd Labor it was the articulation of a manifesto that pays preference to business over unions, growth over environment, federal over state and private over public.

For the campaigners for a just and sustainable future, it was a laying down of the gauntlet to defend the values of unionism, environmentalism, decentralised decision making and public undertakings.

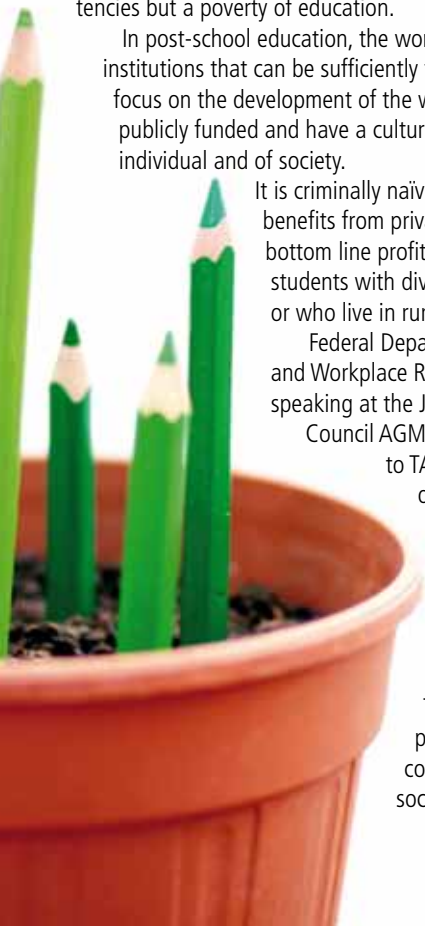
This is the battle for the next decade. It is the battle for who determines Australia's future and what it looks like.

The response of the progressive movements to Kevin Rudd's challenge will determine if it is a decade of greed or ten years of generosity of spirit. It will decide if competition triumphs over the values of cooperation.

The response will decide if market forces and large multinational corporations make the key decisions affecting the future of all Australians, or if it is all of us, acting collectively for the common good.

In 2019, the movements will look back on either the achievement of public education and training or a wasteland of a privatised, market driven training industry.

In January 2007, AEU Federal TAFE Secretary Pat Forward in a well researched and thoughtful report² identified the key challenges facing TAFE as marketisation, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and human capital theory. The significance of the latter two only became



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apparent to many observers some time after Pat’s presentation.

For many this did not happen until October 2008 with the leaking of a discussion paper from the COAG Working Group on the Productivity Agenda.

This was the nation’s leaders’ perfected embodiment of human capital theory, where producing armies of specific job focused workers on the cheap takes precedence over the long term values of an educated society.

The document called for a National Partnership that would ensure that:

“All public funds for the delivery of training within a jurisdiction are open to all RTOs registered within that jurisdiction.”³

In COAG’s nightmarish dystopia, TAFE would be forced to compete for every dollar of public funding. The discussion paper advocated competitive neutrality in which the vestiges of public focus are beaten out of TAFE lest it appear to offer unfair competition to private providers.

COAG also wants to introduce HECS-like income contingent loans for all publicly subsidised courses. Apprenticeships are to be further undermined by causing training packages to ‘[move] beyond occupational standards’.⁴

When the Greens received the leaked document, we worked hard to expose the consequences it would have for TAFE and for Australia’s future. Reactions from state ministers to the ensuring media coverage can be paraphrased as moving from, “what COAG paper?” to, “oh, you mean *that* COAG paper”, and finally settling on, “don’t be silly, we would never do *that*”.

The Ministerial Council on Vocational and Technical Education in late November 2009 finally took the heat off the issue with a “dog ate my homework” excuse. In light of the global economic crisis:

“the National Partnership on VET Market Design will not be considered at the next COAG meeting and Ministers agreed further work would be undertaken on the national partnership on VET reform.”⁵

It would however be a grave mistake to think that COAG has abandoned the marketisation agenda.

VET market design is just one of many facets of the political erosion of TAFE. From salaries and productivity offsets to casualisation, undermining teacher qualifications and constant restructures that reduce teacher autonomy and support, Australia is in the grip of a conspiracy reduce TAFE to a shell.

The inevitable consequence of these ‘reforms’ would be TAFE systems that at best act as purchasers of training and on-selling it to students. At worst it would see the complete privatisation of TAFE.

The motivations of the state and federal leaders range from a naïve faith in markets to deliver social outcomes to slashing costs for governments that thrive on tax cuts to the wealthy. Underpinning each and every politician involved in this conspiracy is an ideological obsession with

destroying public ownership.

The only antidote is re-igniting a widespread understanding that education is a crucial underpinning of successful skills formation and that only public provision of vocational education and training can secure the economic, social and environmental future.

This is much more than arguing for a massive boost in TAFE funding to address unmet demand and boost per student expenditure. It is more than pushing up salaries of TAFE teachers to be commensurate to the importance and difficulty of the task. It is more than removing the threats of destructive competition. It is more than teacher workforce development and mechanisms such as an ombudsman.

While all of these and many more are central to the future of TAFE, the breakthrough will only come when the passion for public education is reignited.

That passion begins with the collective commitment and dedication of TAFE teachers and grows into a vision for the future of Australia that transcends the smooth words of bureaucrats and duplicitous politicians.

It is a vision that says that the future is too important to be handed over to the short term profit fixations of corporate board rooms.

It is a vision that says that the future should be determined by all of us, acting collectively for our common good and for the good of our children and grandchildren. ❖

1. Quoted in Lisa Carty and Heath Gilmore, “King Kevin the new conqueror” *Sun Herald*, November 25, 2007. Available at <http://www.smh.com.au/news/federal-election-2007-news/king-kevin-the-conqueror/2007/11/24/1195753379913.html>

2. Available at <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Tafe/AGM2007/patspeech.pdf>

3. Council of Australian Governments Working Group on the Productivity Agenda “Discussion paper: Skills and Workforce Development”, September 2008, section 3.4, page 14.

4. *op. cit.*, p. 21; see also proposed market action to implement this: ‘developing appropriate definitions of competency’.

5. Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education Communiqué, Darwin, Thursday 20 November 2008. Available from http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Releases/Pages/Article_081128_094506.aspx

Dr. John Kaye is a Greens member of the NSW Legislative Council. This article is based on a speech delivered to the Australian Education Union TAFE Annual General Meeting, Melbourne in January 2009.

