

from the president



Pat Forward

Federal President of the TAFE Division of the AEU

The national TAFE campaign

The most positive aspect of the triennial struggle to negotiate a new funding agreement for the national TAFE system is that it focuses attention on the sector's mammoth achievements in the last decade. The most disappointing aspect is the familiarity of the arguments. Despite continued growth in participation, despite a developing maturity and confidence which rightly sees the sector as one of the most responsive and sophisticated in the world, at the end of the day it all comes down to money.

The need to balance unprecedented growth and increased demand, both in terms of student participation but also the growing weight of accountability and other administrative requirements against a shrinking funding base, means that the system is suffering. The AEU's call to restore growth funding in the new ANTA agreement is neither overly optimistic nor frivolous. It represents what all in TAFE know to be the case. The system simply cannot continue unless the issue of funding is seriously addressed.

The impact of under-funding and growth in the system is felt in fundamental ways. For teachers, massive increases in casual employment combine with reduced funding of professional development and increased use of un- or under-qualified teachers, to place incredible strains on those working in the system. These combine with the

growth in auditing and compliance requirements to increase workload. Most who currently work in TAFE freely admit that teachers have shouldered the accountability demands of the system at huge personal and professional cost.

For students, the quality of their educational experience in TAFE is now in danger of being overshadowed by auditing. The education for which TAFE is so well regarded is coming under increasing threat from a system obsessed with monitoring itself.

'...at the end of the day it all comes down to money'

The 2003 ANTA Agreement campaign has an urgency which those who work in TAFE understand. Increasing numbers of highly qualified, experienced teachers will be retiring from the system over the next ten years. This is the generation which is continuing to navigate a transition to competency based training and training packages, delivering a revolution in vocational education and training in the workplace, and in on-line delivery. The combined knowledge of the current workforce is extraordinary, but with an almost complete breakdown in the collaborative and

cooperative culture of teaching and learning which was a defining feature of TAFE's early years, we must surely fear for the future. Even basic professional development, let alone teacher training, has fallen by the wayside in the contemporary TAFE environment.

It is in this context that the AEU's funding claim highlights the need for funding of quality improvement programs, including a national curriculum development program, staff and professional development, applied research and innovation projects, and a national TAFE/VET teacher registration body. Apart from addressing the neglect of the last few years, these initiatives will go some way to assisting the management of generational change. Unless there is a proactive and cooperative approach to this reinvestment in the system, TAFE nationally stands to lose the intellectual capital of a whole generation of TAFE teachers.

The development of these programs must be set in the context of a genuine partnership with TAFE teachers through the union. The past ten years have been marked by a complete exclusion of teachers from involvement in any of the decision-making fora of the VET system. The impact of this has been profound. Leaving aside the obvious alienation from a system that so clearly and publicly turned its back on the teaching profession, the system was denied input from teachers at points

where their experience and expertise would have contributed greatly to the process of change. Ironically, few industries have operated in such a cavalier fashion, deliberately turning their back on the workers.

Representation is not just about participation in formal decision-making bodies. It is about putting into practice a mechanism for genuinely developing the culture of collaboration and cooperation that is a critical ingredient of any education and training system. It is about seeking input from the people who do the work, who forge the relationships with students, industry and the community. It is about building on the relationships and partnerships that develop naturally in an industry such

as ours. It is about saying that the workforce in TAFE is valuable enough to be given the responsibility for the education and training needs of the current and next generation of students. It is about seeing such debate as may occur as contributing to the overall maturity and sophistication of the system.

The continuing exclusion of a teacher voice on the ANTA Board is something that makes the system itself look foolish.

The AEU's 2003 funding claim can be accessed on www.aeufederal.org.au. There is another aspect of the claim. TAFE's challenge is to meet the skills and education needs of those in new and emerging industries, and those in traditional industries and occupations.

It is TAFE's business to assist people to acquire knowledge and skills central to active participation in society, and in the labour market. This includes meeting the training needs of existing workers.

As a sector in its own right but also a meeting point for the other education sectors, TAFE is perfectly placed to enact the AEU's 'youth training guarantee'. This would ensure that every young person leaving school who is unable to gain employment or access to a higher education place would be entitled to complete at least a Certificate IV or Diploma level qualification in the industry or occupational area of their choice. In many respects – a very modest demand ... ■

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