



from the president

Linda Simon, Federal President of the
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The Skilling Australia's Workforce Act has been proclaimed and now becomes law. At this time three governments, Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory have signed up to the VET funding agreement 2005-2008 and to the requirements that are prescribed in the Act.

Although they signed, these states along with the rest continue to voice their reluctance and opposition to the Act. Queensland has indicated that it is still committed to enterprise collective bargaining, and plans to offer individual contracts to only 25-30 senior staff, according to reports.

The Western Australian Minister said that her government was not happy to sign but had no choice given the funding on offer. She is reported as saying: *'The arrogance of this Federal Government never ceases to amaze me.'*

In the week that the Bill was being debated in the Senate, a group of TAFE teachers from NSW spent three days lobbying in Canberra—the NSW state report in this edition provides further details. But there were some significant issues raised by politicians during that time. One senior government member said that that Bill was about ideology and rhetoric, and Howard's industrial obsession. He went on to say that the Federal Government wants to take some of the credit for vocational education and training instead of leaving it all to the states, and questioned whether the Government would really deny funding to the states and territories if they remained firm.

It is unfortunate that state and territory governments did not heed this message and continue to fight the 'bullying' tactics of the Howard government with one voice. With three governments having folded, the unity in opposition that we know so much about as a union movement, has been weakened.

When you trace the moves by the Howard Government from the elections, it is clear its policies on Australian Technical Colleges, toolbox allowances and living away from home allowances for apprentices, and the proposals considered by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in relation to the apprenticeship system, signal strongly its desire to control significant parts of the VET sector.

In its campaign, the AEU has been questioning the rights of a government to tie funding for education and training to workplace changes. Surely the young and not-so-young people of Australia have a right to access necessary training for their work and careers without that being put in jeopardy by the 'industrial obsession' of the Prime Minister.

A number of politicians rationalised this move by claiming that the Government had the right to

increase accountability for the funding they put on offer. The Government wanted to ensure that states and territories were putting funding into education and training in skills shortage areas. You don't have to look much further than the Queensland Government's Green Paper to know that this is already the focus of state governments. I'm sure the training profiles of each of the states and territories would bear this out.

But the myths continue to be broadcast. Another senior government member wanted to know if we still taught basket weaving! Unfortunately for many small rural and regional communities, it has been a long time since TAFE has had the funds to run courses that the community might want, as opposed to those that industry and governments demand. However, it is a worry that many of our government representatives are so short-sighted that they do not understand the skills and training that have led to the establishment of many successful small businesses in this country. Perhaps not basket weaving, but in many of the health, sport, horticulture and recreation areas, students undertake courses that may eventually lead to new career and business opportunities. After all, look at the number of bank managers who are reported to have given up those stressful and unsatisfying jobs to establish lawn mowing and horticulture businesses. Their first skills in this area probably started with a TAFE 'taster' course.

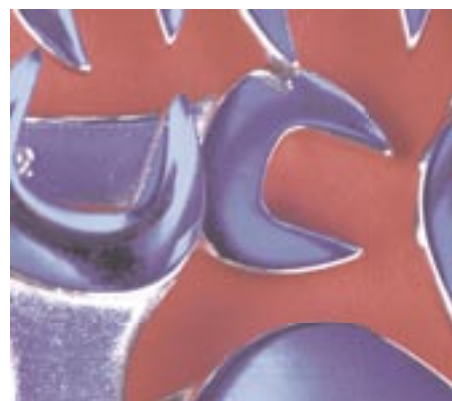
'Surely the young and not-so-young people of Australia have a right to access necessary training for their work and careers without that being put in jeopardy by the 'industrial obsession' of the Prime Minister.'

We have to be very careful as well in TAFE that we don't allow this Government's rhetoric to so skew the state and territory training profiles that we do not run the courses that provide so many second chances for people. The day we don't invest in people and the development of human capital will be the day Australia becomes a country we won't want to live in.

The dangers inherent in the Bill were further demonstrated by a government member who said to one of the delegates, a Metal Fabrication and Welding teacher: *'You know, you would be better off under an AWA; you're in a skills shortage area and we would pay you more.'* The teacher's answer demonstrated the significant gap in the different ideologies. He said: *'That would mean that*

other teachers in TAFE who are just as dedicated but work in other areas would be paid less, and that just wouldn't be right.'

The challenge ahead of the AEU is to effectively wage a campaign that can be sustained for a number of years—however long it takes to change the Federal Government. This campaign must involve our communities, especially our students, and industry. Our strength will be our quality provision focused on our students and our belief that public education is the best—a belief based on student and employer satisfaction, something that is not just ideology and rhetoric. ❖



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