

# TAFE must take strong



enormous change — a lot good, some bad, some diabolical. The market is now the medium and public and private training and employment providers work and live in various forms of harmony and disharmony. Through it all, TAFE has been constantly challenged — some even questioning its very existence. Yet, here we are in late 2007, and guess what? TAFE is alive and kicking, and still delivering over 70% of all training in the country. It is fundamental to our national skilling effort — to skill future generations Australia needs a strong, vibrant and healthy TAFE system.

The unique and vital role that TAFE has in our national skilling effort gives it a 'rails run' ride in the national VET leadership stakes. It must grab this opportunity with both hands. Indications from senior TAFE players are that this leadership role is now being embraced enthusiastically. Yet with opportunity comes challenge — and TAFE must meet this head on.

For most people in the wider community, mention of vocational education and training automatically conjures up images of the one thing they probably know about 'VET' and that is TAFE. In the minds of many, TAFE is indeed VET. Of course, for those of us who work within the VET sector, we know there is much more to VET than the public provider. More and more, the private sector, via registered training organisations, is delivering a range of services, products and outcomes, directly competing with TAFE.

The opening up of the vocational education and training market represents one of the more significant policy reforms of the past few decades. Yet despite this, Australia now confronts a critical skills and labour shortage which will have ramifications for years to come, given our rapidly ageing population.

The simple solution to this policy challenge is to train up literally thousands of Australians

by Jim Barron, Chief Executive Officer, Group Training Australia

In writing about a subject as 'general' as the 'future of TAFE', I believe I have the freedom to cast my net as wide as possible. To me, the future of TAFE is as much about its ability and capacity to 'teach' as it is to 'lead'. In that context I will also couch my comments vis-a-vis TAFE's relationship with the group training network.

## To Teach and To Lead

For better (and not worse) vocational education and training is now firmly on the political agenda of all major parties. The reasons for this are many and varied and have fuelled much heated debate. Those who for years have operated in a virtual political wilderness, desperately seeking any political attention for all things VET, could surely not complain about this change in political fortune. Yet this change requires all key stakeholders to change as well.

Leadership is a critical factor in this regard, and TAFE itself must lead from the front.

When talking about leadership, it is instructive to ask: what exactly is it? Leadership means many things to many people. It is risk taking, vision, wisdom, foresight, boldness, bravery, taking a position. It is leading a debate, shaping opinion, thinking outside the square, a preparedness to state a position and hold firm — and equally a preparedness to change, a capacity to be out with the old and in with the new, to challenge and to question the status quo and prevailing wisdom.

In our own backyard, GTA has sought to embrace these very elements of leadership as we seek to shape and influence the VET debate as it applies to group training and beyond our own boundaries.

For the past two decades, the vocational education and training landscape has undergone

# leadership role

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across all aspects of the VET sector, not just in traditional trades, but in key areas like the service, finance and retail sectors as well as the aged care, child care and hospitality sectors. To do this successfully, Australia needs the appropriate training infrastructure.

Despite the opening up of the training market to private providers, and in particular the introduction of Australian Technical Colleges and the recent re-introduction by many State governments of so-called Trade Schools, the training infrastructure that will provide the great bulk of opportunities in training for the short to medium term is that of the public provider – TAFE.

To ensure that TAFE plays a critical part in the future skilling of our country, TAFE must look after itself and be looked after. Neglect on many levels will see it atrophy and with it, much of this nation’s future skills base. All of us committed to skilling must equally be committed to securing TAFE’s future.

I firmly believe that TAFE is in need of significant additional financial support to allow it to provide relevant and appropriate vocational education and training. TAFE funding must be expanded to enable: development of modern and appropriate facilities and equipment; more focus on flexible products and delivery; a greater concentration on entry level training; a greater capacity and ample course space; meaningful and relevant processes for recognition of prior learning; and recruitment of future generations of TAFE teachers and trainers.

Don’t get me wrong though – I am not advocating that TAFE receive financial carte blanche courtesy of Joe and Jill Tax Payer. If TAFE is to receive it must also give – and this fact is critical to the future success and place of TAFE within a modern VET landscape.

All TAFE operations must be commercially

sustainable; the same standards used to apply to private providers must apply to public providers as well. Often this is not the case.

Operating costs exceed revenue gained. There is too much bureaucracy. A level playing field must be instituted between public and private training providers. Yet this is nigh on impossible given the current state of terms and conditions applicable to the trainers/teachers in the public sector compared to those in the private sector — this issue alone greatly distorts the training market.

The future of TAFE is also connected to another f-word: flexibility. It is a heated debate and I do not intend to throw more fuel on the fire here except to say that an unwillingness to be flexible in training delivery will not serve any TAFE well going forward. Or to put it another way, being inflexible is not an option for TAFE.

When we talk flexibility in training delivery, we are not talking rocket science. Nor are we being unfair or overly demanding. What people expect of TAFE vis-a-vis flexibility is often nothing more than meeting short term responsive flexible training needs — needs that often are not being met by many public training providers unless given months of notice.

TAFE’s future is intertwined with understanding industry training needs and trends and implementing them at the local level. The leaders of TAFE across the country and TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) well understand this and are making it a touchstone for future planning and strategising. These leaders and TAFE Directors are to be loudly applauded and encouraged. It cannot be easy some times and in some places.

TAFE’s leadership role should go hand in glove with its teaching role. Yet if we do not fully support the public provider in financial terms, both roles will be fundamentally compromised. Moreover, the private training

market must continue to be allowed to grow and flourish but not at the expense of the public sector. In policy terms, there must not be a version of apartheid where one sector is discriminated against while another is favoured.

In seeking to achieve a genuine and properly resourced level training field, quality must not be sacrificed. Both sectors must complement each other. A decent funding model which allows each TAFE to deliver cutting-edge, flexible, quality training outcomes by a modern and well-resourced teacher/trainer workforce must surely lie at the heart of a future TAFE.

The group training network works closely with TAFE across the length and breadth of this nation. Many of the 42,000 apprentices and trainees under group training arrangements receive their training via a TAFE. In many respects, the future of TAFE will mirror the future of group training. Like every dedicated and committed TAFE worker, group training wants nothing but the best for its apprentices and trainees. And equally, like so many in the TAFE system, group training organisations want a thoroughly modern TAFE that is flexible, responsive, accountable and competitive.

The future of TAFE will be assured and bright if we all take the necessary responsibility – federal and state governments, industry, business, employers, providers and TAFE itself. It is up to all of us to demand that all players own that responsibility and deliver the goods. ❖

*Before taking on the role of CEO of Group Training Australia, Jim held a number of senior positions within the Howard Government, notably Chief of Staff to Dr David Kemp. His major focus now is to advocate to government and stakeholders alike the need to lock in future skills development, solve skill shortages and build a training culture in Australia.*