

Towards TAFE Australia: Challenges for Australian

‘After a decade of neglect by the Howard Government the VET sector is in stark need of significant reforms.’

PETER KELL argues for the Federal Government to work in partnership with the states to ensure a co-ordinated national response to training and education that allocates a national role to TAFE.

The forthcoming Federal election and the possible election of a Labor Government led by Kevin Rudd offers the potential for a revitalisation of TAFE. The vocational education sector is in stark need of significant reforms after a decade of neglect by the Howard government. There is a new role for the Federal Government to work in partnership with the states to ensure a co-ordinated national response to training and education that allocates a national role to TAFE. The beginnings of the development of a national network of TAFE could be a new direction by the new Rudd government.

The Need for a National Response

There is an urgent need for a national response because the Howard Government has reduced resources by 18% to the VET sector since 1996 and has started Australian Technical Colleges (ATC) in direct competition to the TAFE system. These policy failures have seen some of the hastily developed ATCs become expensive, botched and flawed mistakes.

But of greater concern is the critical skills shortage that sees industry, unions and employers in agreement about an estimated shortage of over 200,000 workers. The Howard Government has failed to acknowledge and fund TAFE's important role as the public provider of training and the legacy of this is seen in the existing skills shortages.

A new Federal Government needs to renegotiate a compact with the states to ensure that TAFE fulfils its role in developing a co-ordinated and systemic response to Australia skilling needs. This needs to be done as a matter of urgency because Federal Government neglect has eroded the capacity of TAFE to respond on a national basis. Finding a national response is vital because globalisation of the economic, social and cultural aspects of society means that what TAFE does and how it is organised must be changed.

Courageous and Visionary Leadership

There is a critical need for a national effort for better support to students to enable them to participate and complete training, as well as better development of professional support for teachers and the modernisation of TAFE resources and capital resources to enable a response to the swiftly changing learning and training environment of the 21st century. Courageous and visionary leadership is now urgently required as the 'more of the same' formula will only see TAFE dwindle to being a residual provider. A sustainable and quality public provider is needed to take on the global responsibilities of a public training provider and the federal government has a duty to take this challenge up.

Boosting Participation in TAFE

The biggest barrier for the students is the growth in up-front fees for courses. To boost participation in publicly funded training, a new Federal Government should abolish fees or negotiate with the states for non-income contingent loan schemes for students. Private providers are currently eligible for such FEE-help schemes and TAFE students should not be discriminated against because they go to a publicly funded provider. A new Rudd Government should enable TAFE students to apply for assistance on fees if they continue.

The TAFE Futures Inquiry found student poverty was a big issue across the country and this means that the Federal Government has to lift support to students to cover accommodation, transport and material costs. Fees for TAFE courses are out of control and the Federal Government should exert its influence to ensure that there is a rational and uniform approach to fees that is both fair and equitable and not just price gouging by ruthless State Governments.

The Federal Government could assist the development of some national networks that promote professional activities for teachers and leaders in TAFE. The TAFE Futures Inquiry has proposed a national TAFE Institute to be run and managed by

the next Government



teachers. The Institute would promote a culture of innovation and change in TAFE teaching and leadership through professional activities such as conferences, forums, professional development programs, fellowships and chapters of like-minded teachers to reflect on critical issues. This should be seen as a way to enhance the professional status of teachers and trainers, and help teachers who want to explore new ways of teaching and working with the diverse needs of industries and their students. TAFE Futures proposed some special chapters on trade teaching, leadership, and student learning as well as Indigenous teaching. Such an Institute, run and managed by TAFE practitioners, is vital to sustaining a culture of innovation and change, and could be sponsored by the states and the Federal Government to assist the national renewal of TAFE.

A Federal Government could also co-ordinate and broker developments such as an agency for international programs in the same way that IDP Education Pty Ltd co-ordinates international programs and students for Australia universities. There are also opportunities for a creative Federal Government in promoting the development of nationally consistent platforms for online learning, curriculum development and resources for student learning and job placements. There is significant demand for Australia's expertise in vocational education and its programs, and this needs to be managed at a national level to protect Australia's reputation as a quality provider.

A National TAFE Network

The Federal Government should work towards a cooperative partnership with the states. This can be done through a networked approach with all the state and territory TAFE systems. A national network of TAFE would also enable major corporations and potential clients to work with a single network rather than having to deal with seven separate TAFE

systems. States could still manage TAFE but they could also work more closely with each other to build strengths around a critical mass of expertise, shared expertise and economies of scale.

The under-investment in TAFE and vocational education over the period of the Howard government has been well documented. TAFE has been starved of funds and a massive boost of resources is needed to ensure that TAFE is a sustainable and quality provider of education and training. The Australian Education Union proposal of a boost of \$470 million is conservative and will simply hold the line. A massive boost, plus progressive annual rises doubling that amount each year, is needed to keep TAFE a viable public provider capable of a global role.

The quantum has to escalate exponentially but how the funding is distributed also needs to be changed. The TAFE Futures Inquiry found that many of the current funding processes are attributed with hindering the flexibility and responsiveness of TAFE. TAFE is seen as working at its best when there is a collaborative arrangement between industry, employers, the community and schools with TAFE. Many local arrangements are highly effective and there needs to be a way that such local arrangements can be developed, as well as initiatives that go across existing state boundaries and across international boundaries. A national fund is needed to develop such innovations at all levels of the system and to broaden the dimensions of delivery to include a partnership approach. This fund, managed by the Federal government and the states,

should link capital resources such as building and infrastructure more closely to employer and industry needs and the needs of students and not just be seen as concerned with 'bricks and mortar'.

All these initiatives could be badged under a cooperative arrangement between the states and the Federal government and called 'TAFE Australia'. It is an exciting prospect that a new national government under Kevin Rudd could take on.

TAFE Futures proposed a set of principles for how governments relate to TAFE. This was because most Australians are fed up with the bickering between governments and want a cooperative response to ensure people have access to training and education and that TAFE continues as a viable public provider. The principles proposed that all governments recognise the status of TAFE as the publicly funded provider of "first choice" training in developing a national response to training under the banner of TAFE Australia. ❖

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The TAFE Futures reports are available at www.aeufederal.org.au (in the TAFE section).