

Contestability

‘The core of the Rudd agenda is a continuation of a mean spirited attempt to reduce government funding in the sector, and force those least able to fund a much narrower and restricted educational experience.’

By Pat Forward

IN delivering the Mick Young oration to the TDA Conference in Canberra in September, Julia Gillard made the following comments about Young:

But Mick knew not everyone would be lucky enough to move in the circles he did.

He knew that unless people like him built a platform for those people to stand on, so they could see the expansive opportunities ahead of them, many would accept the limited horizons they could see from ground level.

The irony of Gillard’s words will not be lost on the majority of people who work and learn in the country’s public TAFE Institutes. TAFEs are institutions established and driven by a mission the essence of which is the offering of educational opportunities to every person in the community. TAFEs are about social inclusion, and meaningful pathways to further education and further training.

TAFE’s whole identity, its core, its essence, is premised on it being a public institution.

For all its talk about an ‘Education Revolution’, with social inclusion at its core, the Rudd government appears intent on achieving what a decade of conservative government was unable to accomplish. The Rudd government, in cahoots with a number of states, is making TAFE so captive to the logic of the market that it is indistinguishable from a private business. However much it attempts to cloak its reforms in the rhetoric of increased opportunity, the core of the Rudd agenda is a continuation of a mean spirited attempt to reduce government funding in the sector, and force those least able, and frankly least responsible, to fund a much narrower and restricted educational experience.

That is why, for many in the sector, the last nine months have been so perplexing. The undermining of TAFE as a public institution founded on an egalitarian notion of the ‘public good’, started many years ago, with those who led the National Training Reform agenda complaining about “provider capture”, and heralding industry leadership of VET. Neither was a particularly sophisticated or considered concept. “Provider capture” became synonymous with ensuring teachers and educa-

tionalists were excluded from any of the decision making forums established for the new VET system. “Industry leadership” quickly and unproblematically morphed into “leadership by business”, with unions unceremoniously relegated to a place “outside the gates”, looking hopefully in.

During the Howard years, the attack on unions and teachers was as relentless in VET as elsewhere. The government pushed a competition agenda, using exactly the same arguments that are currently being used by the Rudd government; the “hidden agenda of reduced government funding and “government by the market”. The artificial promotion of public over private providers achieved a curious and polyglot thing which was Australian VET. Betwixt and between, neither one thing nor the other, public TAFE Institutes with reduced government funding at all levels, struggled to continue to be what the community wanted — institutions of vocational learning, open to all, available to all.

Private providers cherry-picked those courses which were cheapest and easiest to deliver. Why would they not? When the market is used to determine what and when and where, its sole driver is profit. Why would private providers choose to offer

courses from which they cannot make a profit? That is not what they have been established to do.

The logic is clear. Forced to compete for ever reducing government funds, providers participate in a race to the bottom, where the only logic which exists institutionally is the logic of reducing costs. And this is what remains at the heart of the current Rudd agenda. In the cold light of day, it is what lies at the heart of the COAG reform process.

A close look at the Victorian Skills Reform shows clearly that its central tenets are reduced government funding, increased individual costs, and the opening up of all funding to competition from all providers as a way of driving costs further down. The haste with which the Federal Government moved to support the Victorian model, with an announcement that they would facilitate the introduction of an income contingent loan scheme, shows how critical the establishment of a template for how their own reforms could be implemented was to them.

There is no evidence that increased competition will produce the outcomes that the federal and Victorian government claim for it. None whatsoever. Instead there is a decade of growing “skills shortages”, and a significantly under-

IN mid 2007, before the last election, the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) was commissioned by the Commonwealth and State and Territory Vocational Education and Training (VET) Ministers to assess the effectiveness of the Skilling Australia’s Workforce Commonwealth State VET Funding Agreement.

This agreement is the mechanism through which Commonwealth and State and Territory governments fund the TAFE and VET system. The *Skilling Australia’s Workforce 2005-08 Mid-Term Review* — Boston Consulting Group, 22 October 2007 (the BCG Report) and its findings were kept secret, until a copy of the Executive Summary was leaked late in February, 2008. At this time, despite repeated requests, Minister Gillard refused to release the report, or to make clear the Federal Government’s attitude towards it, other than to say that it was one of a range of documents being considered by the government, and also to reaffirm the ALP’s commitment to competition. The Boston Consulting Group Report was not made public until several months later.

The BCG Report recommends, amongst other things, the creation of a fully competitive training market, competitive tendering of all government funding (between TAFEs and between TAFEs and private providers) and the application of competitive neutrality principles to public TAFE providers. The BCG Report also canvasses the introduction of an income contingent loan scheme for TAFE and VET.

and the race to the bottom



funded sector casting around to respond to the next hairbrained scheme to emerge from recycled government bureaucrats who seem to be driven by agendas which have patently failed overseas, and which have clearly failed here. There is nothing new in the Rudd agenda — it is simply more of the same.

And perhaps this is why the Rudd government absolutely refuses to engage in debate about its proposed reform process. Two months ago, the Productivity Working Group — the group charged under COAG with the responsibility for delivering the next SPP for VET — announced both a series of consultations, and a discussion paper around the proposed reforms. This was welcomed by some in the sector as the first public airing of the Rudd agenda.

It has not eventuated. As with everything associated with the VET component of Rudd's Education Revolution, it has been conducted behind closed doors, protected from public scrutiny

and hidden from any serious analysis. Indeed, those in the sector critical of the government's reform process have been told that they are either "in the tent", or outside. To be "in the tent", presumably, requires a degree of collusion with the reform process which many would find both unprincipled and unpalatable.

This, perhaps, is the point. What is occurring at the moment is a frustratingly one-sided 'debate'. The government will not engage in a serious way with its critics, or with those who work and learn in TAFE. Until they do so, they leave themselves open to allegations that they are fearful of public scrutiny, that they do not have the courage of their convictions, and that they have no enduring vision for vocational education and training.

During the Mick Young oration referred to above, Julia Gillard announced that the government's Education Investment Fund will be open to public and private providers. The significance of this announcement will be better understood

over time, but it makes the Federal Government's intentions in the sector as clear as they could possibly be.

Those who support the public TAFE system should vigorously oppose using the market and contestable funding as both a disciplining tool for the sector, and a way of organising it. It is lazy and shallow policy. John Spierings says: 'The fundamental task of creating a skilled economy and society must rest on a bedrock of public institutions committed to the long term advancement and capacity of citizens. It is simply not realistic to expect private RTOs to carry this responsibility. Public institutions offering broad and deep vocational skilling and critical thinking are crucial to the development of the trades and professions.'

Competition and marketisation are policy constructs which deliberately exclude a range of other considerations in determining how education and training should occur. They reduce the process and content of learning into outputs, they place a monetary value on all forms of human exchange, and they exclude those engaged in the learning process — teachers and students — from any participation in policy decisions. The rhetoric of industry "leadership" facilitates this. Only business knows and can determine what is needed in the workplace. Only they can have a voice.

Julia Gillard is wrong to evoke Mick Young's "platform". A competition driven, marketised, business-led VET system will have no room, nor any time or funding allocated for the construction of "platforms" for those who want to see the opportunities ahead of them. Instead, the reproduction of social disadvantage, the exclusion of whole sections of society from educational participation, and the consigning of young workers to a narrow and instrumental training and working life will be the legacy of the Rudd Education Revolution in TAFE. ❖

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