



from the president

Linda Simon, Federal President of the TAFE Division of the AEU

Regulation in the VET Only when it suits?

For over a decade TAFE teachers have had to listen to words and phrases such as *increased competition, flexibility, markets and deregulation*, in relation to changes in their workplaces. Their workloads have increased, working conditions been undermined and salaries not increased in line with professional expectations. Governments of all persuasions have pushed the line that regulations supposedly restrict innovative practices and that the market should be allowed to govern. Unfortunately it has taken something as far reaching as the Global Financial Crisis to highlight the problems with this approach, and the Federal Government amongst others has made it clear that Australia's experiences have been aided by the financial regulations that still operate in this country.

It has taken another crisis, this one in provision of vocational education and training to international students, to highlight the regulatory problems of the VET sector. The private VET sector has grown enormously over recent years. In the decade 1997-2007, funding to private providers increased by 135.6% nationwide. With increased tendering for public funds through Productivity Places and other funding sources, the number of private providers has increased, as has the competition between TAFE Institutes. The amount of funding on offer for many of the courses through the Productivity Places Program is lower than that needed by TAFE Institutes to run quality education. Consequently the pressure is on TAFE to lower standards and undermine quality, and for private providers to tender at lowest costs.

When it comes to providing data around their operations for quality assurance purposes, many private providers will claim that the matters are 'commercial in confidence' and that unlike public providers they operate as 'for-profit' businesses. This is the case for some of those identified international colleges which have sacrificed the education and welfare of students for profit, with some appalling practices. And whilst the issues of residency and visas may not haunt the domestic sector in the same way, the issues of 'for-profit' businesses still do.

Regulation has become the talk of the day. Through the COAG Working Group, Skills Australia and most interested stakeholders, consideration is being given to the best way to ensure consistent and high quality standards in the VET sector. Do we need a national regulator or should we continue to operate with supposedly consistent standards at the state and territory level? Of course, the answer could be simpler and far less costly than that, and relate to government funding being targeted at TAFE. TAFE should not have to continually be undermined by competition and decreased funding. The real question is, what do the Australian people want? If it is a high quality, consistent and accessible provider of vocational education and training, then TAFE and public VET is what they want.

It will be interesting to see what position is taken by the ministers at the Ministerial Council meeting in November, and also by COAG.

To ensure high quality and consistent standards, all Registered Training Providers in receipt of public funds should have to provide data that demonstrates how they meet the AQTF, and to provide information about enrolments, completions and student outcomes including employment uptake. If this information had been provided and validated for some of the international colleges, then surely there would have been earlier action, without the current damage to students and reputations.

Whatever sort of regulation is in force it must surely also do other things, such as set standards for qualifications of teachers, standards a lot higher than a current Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. Regulation must also ensure that vocational education and training remains accessible, not charging the fees currently being implemented in Victoria, with commercial costs of some \$10,000 being charged for retraining at the same or lower AQF levels. As was the case in NSW some years ago, those students most disadvantaged will endure the highest cost increases.

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Regulation must also ensure standards of student support including proper facilities, and disability, multicultural, and literacy and numeracy support. The sort of market failure that we have seen surely now requires the real setting and maintenance of quality standards.

Most TAFE teachers have experienced audits as part of the AQTF processes over the last couple of years. These audits have led to work overload, with teachers being required to produce ridiculous amounts of paperwork. So while private colleges can refuse to supply data and some not meet quality standards, many public providers are over-audited. Regulatory arrangements must address these issues.

At the other end of the spectrum, many state and territory governments appear to be determined to cut the regulatory requirements that currently protect apprentices and the apprenticeship system. Whilst there is strong support for considering ways in which out-of-work apprentices or those in ‘at-risk’ industries can finish apprenticeships and stay

employed, the union movement does not support moves to de-regulate the apprenticeship system. Reducing apprenticeships to of-the-job components and skills sets will only disadvantage young people working towards a career. Such de-regulation needs to be strongly opposed, and quality apprenticeships maintained.

Governments need to recognise that quality can cost, and one of our concerns would have to be that funding may again be taken out of delivery and invested in further bureaucracy. The AEU calls on governments to minimise the risk factors in delivery of vocational education and training. That they can do by investing in TAFE and putting an end to increased competition and marketisation. This is our message to the Federal Government and the Federal Opposition as we move towards another set of Federal elections. It is not too late to start taking that message out to your local Federal MP. Campaigning will intensify next year in the lead-up to the elections. ♦

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