



**Pat Forward**

Federal President of the  
TAFE Division  
of the AEU

# Unmet demand, status and parity of esteem

TAFE is a curious entity. Consistent with the inclination in contemporary society to measure and quantify, label in arcane system-speak, apply acronyms, and then spend vast numbers of words and amounts of paper discussing and debating every last aspect, people in TAFE and VET communicate with each other in statistics and acronyms. It is easy sometimes to forget that when all is said and done, TAFE is really only about people.

At the Activists Seminar held in Canberra in late May, the AEU TAFE Division released to the media details of the ‘unmet demand’ in the system which is a result of years of under-funding. The most recent data estimates that about 40,000 people miss out on places in TAFE. In what could only be judged a commendable concern for such a large number of mostly young people excluded from our education and training system, the universal response of the media Australia-wide to the AEU media release was more than encouraging. They were concerned. This is encouraging for several reasons.

Whilst we in the system are used to bandying around statistics and percentages, the media outlets, predominantly radio and newspaper, immediately saw the point of the story — young people missing out on education and training and jobs. Not only that, they displayed a more sophisticated understanding of the work of the sector than many of the

politicians who were being lobbied by the seminar participants on behalf of TAFE teachers. Far from being the ‘forgotten sector’ many of the public commentators on education refer to when they discuss TAFE, interviewers on radio and print journalists knew their TAFE very well.

**‘TAFE is going to have to continue to turn away young people.’**

The issue that the Activists Seminar focussed on was funding, and in yet another critical year for the TAFE system, the link between growth funding and the capacity of the system to meet the needs of industry and society has never been starker. The Seminar occurred in a week when Education Minister Nelson, flushed with the ‘success’ of his higher education review, claimed that the federal government was offering funds for growth in TAFE and VET through the next ANTA agreement. As far as the AEU is aware no one has been able to locate any additional new growth funds in the Minister’s budget offer to state Ministers.

The long and short of it is that the TAFE and VET system which on current predictions is continuing to grow in excess of 5% per annum, is going to have to continue to turn away young people and deny them

access to education, training and eventually work. These young people are not just fodder for statistics and data gathering, nor the objects of research projects for academics. They are real people whose futures are being determined as we speak. And the answer from the federal government is an ‘offer’ which is too clever by half, and frankly insulting to the TAFE system.

The issue of unmet demand is really just the human face of the funding crisis in TAFE. The TAFE and VET system has grown at an extraordinary pace over the last ten years, but the costs have been great. In the midst of this growth were several years of a federal funding freeze — the era of ‘growth through efficiencies’ — which saw the strain on the system become almost intolerable. In some states, TAFE institutes struggle to remain financially viable. Most state systems labour under the impact of casual employment, with the resultant workload increase for permanent teachers, and lack of genuine career opportunities for the casual teachers themselves. In many cases, casual teachers struggle to earn an adequate income.

What then do we make of the debate about parity of esteem, and the preoccupation that TAFE and VET commentators have with the high regard in which the higher education sector is held? We have to be careful about this debate, because it begs the question of who actually holds the

TAFE sector in lower regard than university. The view of some that TAFE caters for the 'lower SES' is dangerous — TAFE is not for the poor or the stupid, and university is not for the rich and smart. But if you continue to speak in these terms, to bother the bone of parity of esteem, instead of listening to the millions of Australian people who choose TAFE as their first choice, then we run the risk of undermining TAFE's hard won reputation. More significantly, if the community is continually sent such messages, then the combined effects of the message and the lack of funding itself, will take their toll.

There is one last thing to consider about the messages sent to the

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community when TAFE is so poorly funded. TAFE's core business is education and training, its currency, if you like, is qualifications. Consider what is being said to students, the community and industry when they are told that TAFE teachers need the barest minimum of qualifications to teach and they deserve and need little or no access to professional development; that they need only be employed casually, because they are transient and dispensable; that their



**TAFE Activists' seminar, Canberra**

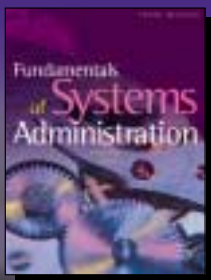
expertise need not be valued, so they should not be consulted in the development of training packages and the like.

As the negotiations around the next ANTA Agreement get fully underway, the AEU will be campaigning to ensure that the voices of TAFE teachers, and the TAFE systems they serve and defend, are clearly heard. ■

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