

TAFE



It is ironic that in the mayhem which surrounds the reorganisation of the vocational education and training system, there has emerged something very familiar to TAFE teachers and workers, writes **PAT FORWARD.**

More than 15 years ago, a Federal Government of a different political persuasion engaged in a process of setting a policy agenda in vocational education and training which had at its core a new value system of corporatist and managerialist approaches to government. State and Federal Governments adopting an economic and instrumentalist view of education and training led to the embracing of rhetoric which cast the public TAFE system as profligate and unresponsive. This despite the fact that, warts and all, evidence from industry at the time showed that the system was held in high regard.

In the current debate around the abolition of ANTA, the greedy grab for complete control of the VET system by the Commonwealth and the establishment of the 'back to the future' Australian Technical Colleges, what emerges consistently, and with absolutely no evidence at all, is the pathetic lament from the Commonwealth that the public TAFE system is unresponsive, cumbersome and inefficient. Whenever the AEU is interviewed for the media, it has to answer the obligatory question about the alleged inefficiency of the TAFE system—the single justification oftentimes for the 'reforms' offered by the Howard Government. So poor, allegedly, is the performance of TAFE that the Federal Government is attempting to force the states to offer their TAFE teachers the liberatory mechanisms of AWAs!

The rhetoric supporting marketisation of the VET sector in the 90s had at its core an undermining of the institutionalised public TAFE system and all that it represented. TAFE had to be deconstructed in order for the new training market to be established. An integral part of that training market was unfettered User Choice and the logic of 'growth through efficiencies'. Despite some serious soul searching from the states in recent times in relation to the deplorable state of funding of the TAFE

system, one senior state bureaucrat proclaimed loudly and publicly recently that his state's price per student hour was a testament to efficiency. Mutters of 'cheap' went unacknowledged.

In the current circumstances, nothing less than a rigorous and honest engagement in debate and dialogue is going to save the system from a pointless journey up a blind alley. In attempting to drive reform, or push the vocational education and training system on to its next stage of development, there are arguably two necessary preconditions to the dialogue which should ensue. These preconditions should be: an honest appraisal of the system as it currently is, and a real attempt to engage all those who have some genuine interest in the system. Under this Government's agenda, neither of these preconditions is being met.

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Increasingly, those with vested interests are being excluded from any say in decisions—notably the labour movement, students, the broader community and those most badly affected by the impact of market reform—equity groups. We are currently inundated with propaganda and half truths about the state of the system to justify what can only be seen as an almost maniacal push towards increased competition, reduction of government investment, greater deregulation and the denial of basic industrial rights. And the justification—the lie that TAFE isn't up to it.

In a recent trip to a TAFE college, I was fortunate to be taken around a plumbing department where teachers and managers displayed their facilities with enthusiasm and passion. It was a bleak day, but inside the building it was hard to get a word in edgeways. I didn't initially appreciate the incredible fervour that pipes and gas can elicit from the believers. By the end of the tour, I was converted.

Diversity is one of the great strengths of TAFE. In reality, I wasn't surprised by the passion of the plumbing, the electrical and the auto teachers.

Works

Those who have waxed lyrical about teaching often focus on the work of English, history, sometimes even maths teachers! It is rare for those who teach in vocational areas to have the opportunity to pass their love of their work into the public domain.

It is even harder now, because the last decade of narrowing and 'production-lining' the work of teachers in TAFE has left many wondering why they ever bothered to put their heart and soul into such a thankless profession. The passion and warmth of the teachers in the plumbing department left me wondering how we are going to make sure that their energy and commitment survives the battles ahead.

The defining features of the work being showcased by these teachers were their overwhelming enthusiasm and professionalism. These were enriched by the depth and breadth of the department's relationships with industry; partnerships which provided state of the art equipment and shared access to facilities, so that the interaction between the institute and industry enriched and made very real and tangible the experiences of students.

In the next few years, the faceless bureaucrats will attempt to do their worst; narrowing the focus of education and training, cutting back on time and facilities, endeavouring to replicate fordist production lines in classrooms and workplaces. For the Union, the initial focus has been on the significant attack on the rights and working conditions of its members. A decade of underfunding, demoralisation and neglect of the public TAFE system has left little meat on the bones.

The experience in the plumbing department was a poignant one. A generation of young workers stands to lose decades of achievement by the union movement in terms of on-the-job occupational health and safety, the development of decent career paths and the establishment of relevant and accessible education opportunities. These plumbing

teachers have developed improved units on occupational health and safety in their training package, and they demonstrated the safety improvements they have made in the design of their roofing facility. They are also powerful advocates of the apprenticeship system, concerned about the push to deconstruct the system, and leave young workers with very narrow, enterprise specific skills.

Their worry is not only about the intrusion of base opportunism into the debate but also about the true agenda, in the push to segment and make enterprise-specific elements of trade apprenticeships and adopt shortened training times. This is not just the pride that they feel in their trade, but a genuine apprehension for the next generation of workers.

TAFE works. Time will show that market reforms of the training system have produced very mixed results, but nowhere more profoundly than in TAFE. TAFE works in spite of what has happened in the last ten years, not because of it.

The Skilling Australia's Workforce Bill 2005 had one amendment go through in the House of Representatives. It

was proposed by the ALP opposition, but tabled by the Howard government as a 'drafting error', which read:

'providing capacity for TAFE institutions to develop entrepreneurial and commercially oriented business plans that will enable government funding to be reduced.'

It was amended to delete the last clause—'that will enable government funding to be reduced.' It's hard to believe that the amendment will make one iota of difference to the federal government's barefaced attempts to destroy TAFE. ♦

Pat Forward is the Federal TAFE Secretary.



'...a genuine apprehension for the next generation of workers.'

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AEU National TAFE/VET Conference

Friday, 19 August 2005

(AEU SA Branch, 163 Greenhill Road, Parkside)

TAFE: Just a 'Casual' Affair?

This full day Conference will deal with the post-election national scene, new IR legislation, the workforce and the impact on TAFE.

Speakers: Linda Simon, AEU Federal TAFE President; Pat Forward, AEU Federal TAFE Secretary; Adrian Marron, TAFESA and Mark Cully, NCVER.

Workshops will include lobbying, media, organising and recruiting and casualisation. More details available from Alan Wilson, AEU SA TAFE Organiser, awilson@aeusa.asn.au, 08 8272 1399