



from the president

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



So, what is TAFE's role?

Recognition of the critical role of TAFE in education has been one of the major aims of the AEU over the last decade of the Howard Government. And whilst we must be the most restructured and over-analysed educational sector, there appears to be little unanimity from vocational education and training (VET) stakeholders as to TAFE's actual role.

If we were to listen to Andrew Robb, another in the line of highly critical Federal Ministers, we would assume that whatever TAFE's role is, that it isn't doing it well. But also, if we were to listen to this Federal Minister, we might believe that TAFE has a role in apprenticeship and traineeship training, but little else. Yet, as we know, only a small part of TAFE's work is in this area. Whilst the Certificate III may be our most commonly taught qualification, TAFE continues to deliver a critical number of access programs and to train in areas well beyond those identified as current skills shortages.

Yet government announcements at the Federal level and, by and large, at state and territory levels, continue to chip away at TAFE's success story and seek to hive off parts of TAFE to schools, universities or any other provider but public TAFE.

At the June MINCO Vocational and Technical Education meeting a resolution was successfully moved that the Federal Government seek to strengthen the pathways and articulation arrangements between TAFE and universities. This move was related to the Federal Government's budget announcement on Fee Help for Diploma and Advanced Diploma courses which articulate with university courses. If this move was related to articulation arrangements, the Ministers suggested, then let's genuinely address the issue from that angle.

Improving pathways and partnerships within the education sector is a strong part of AEU policy. The AEU raised this issue with Brendan Nelson, when as Federal Education Minister he was reviewing university fees, and consequently fees for higher level VET courses, yet the reality is that the Federal Government has done little to improve these pathways.

At the other end of TAFE's work, the inter-relationship between TAFE and schools has become far more complex, with the introduction of Australian Technical Colleges, Trade Schools, and school-based apprenticeships and traineeships. If in reality these new structures gave increased options for young people they could be applauded, yet there appears to be nothing they can do that properly funded and supported TAFE/Schools partnerships could not do already.



And what is even more bizarre is that at a time when the education sector attempts to redefine the qualifications it must deliver for an ever-changing world, we have a Federal Education Minister and Prime Minister who mourn the loss of technical high schools and are trying to reinvent such structures. Surely one of the reasons we moved to a comprehensive secondary education system in this country was to maximise opportunities for young people, and to avoid streaming them too early in life before they had a chance to explore all the options.

It appears that once again the Federal Government's ideology is driving education policy, rather than good education practices.

Recent information from the Senate Estimates Committee showed that only 1800 students are currently enrolled in an Australian Technical College at a cost of around \$25,000 per student, compared to \$9,000 - \$12,000 for a TAFE student. And as it turns out, about two-thirds of the ATCs are now outsourcing their training to TAFE or private providers. As West Australian Education and Training Minister Mark McGowan says, it is "staggering to think that the Howard Government has spent \$343 million on what is essentially a duplicate bureaucracy." (*Australian* 8/6/07)

These contradictions in views and priorities are quite apparent in the recent report from the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) "*Skills for a Nation — A Blueprint for Improving Education and Training 2007-2017*." The key principle of this report supports "a comprehensive education and training system which enables all Australians to contribute to a comprehensive,

democratic and prosperous society, in which the attributes and skills of individuals are fully developed." Yet according to ACCI, these will be achieved by student vouchers, learning bonuses, full implementation of user choice and performance pay for TAFE teachers. The report appears to do more to support the Federal Government's current policies than to really set out a blueprint for the future. If this is a blueprint, it is one in which TAFE has only a very minor role.

Another recent paper gives a different view on TAFE's role, and of the importance of TAFE teachers. Ian Conford, from the University of Technology, argues in a paper presented to an Adelaide Conference in November 2006 entitled '*Australian VET Policy and the Role of Business and Industry*':

... there is no other group in the country that is better placed to make assessments about the maintenance of skills standards than this group who have generally at least a minimum of five years industrial experience and teacher education qualifications. ... There is an additional problem that government policy makers appear to have little or no understanding of what is involved in effective learning, or what is needed to achieve the learning outcomes desired by business and industry.

As the Federal election looms closer, we look to Federal Labor for a clearer idea of good government policy that can clarify and support the role of TAFE in the education sector. But to add to the confusion, Labor has announced \$2.5 billion for Trades Training Centres in all Australia's 2,650 secondary schools. We can only hope that the 'still to come' TAFE announcement will be more in keeping with the needs of the VET section.

The AEU has laid down the challenge to the political parties, with a claim in four main parts, including:

- 6% growth in funding to TAFE based on 2005 operating revenue, with a claim for \$1550 million by 2011.
- the establishment of a Quality Improvement Fund to address casual employment, workforce transition and renewal, and professional development of \$555 million by 2011.
- the need for a national review of infrastructure and capital requirements.
- a national summit on TAFE fees and charges.

This edition of *The Australian TAFE Teacher* is important in laying the groundwork for our claim and for our campaign in the lead up to the elections. This edition also highlights the important work that TAFE is undertaking around sustainability; a further area in which the role of TAFE is critical to Australia's future. ♦