



from the president

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What is happening to **access** and **equity** under the Rudd Government?

There may be no greater force that will lead TAFE teachers across the country to unite in common action than the current attacks on public education, teachers' working conditions and students' learning conditions.

It is quite extraordinary that we should be considering such action when the Rudd Government is still so new. But not only have we not seen any increase in funding and support to TAFE since the change in government, but indeed the path the Rudd Government is pursuing could truly lead to the demise of TAFE as we know it.

National TAFE Council Executive met recently in Canberra, and as part of our work, invited the Federal Minister for Education and Training Julia Gillard to our meeting. Unfortunately her office did not even reply. It is very difficult to engage the Federal Government in discussion of their policies and their impact on TAFE and TAFE students when the Minister will not even talk to us. It is with some irony that we remember the relatively easy access we had to Brendan Nelson, Gary Hardgrave and Andrew Robb, even though we had no influence over Howard government policy.

The Federal Minister did however attend a meeting with Federal Executive in March, and in answer to a question about the philosophical commitment of the Federal Government to increased competition and contestable funding in the TAFE sector, she informed me that there would be different funding arrangements with States and Territories on the basis of their commitment to contestable funding. In other words, the funding agreement with Victoria would be different from the funding agreement with NSW (her example).

Whilst she did not answer my question, one has only to look at the recent Federal budget to get the real picture. It says that the VET system requires further reform to deliver more responsive higher quality training that will contribute to a higher productivity growth, and that "More competition should be a goal in a more contestable

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training market”.

There are certainly three initial questions to be asked here:

1. How does such a statement align with the election policy commitment that the TAFE system would continue to receive funding for existing places?
2. On what basis is the supposed success of competition in the VET sector measured?
3. Who gets to decide what reforms are needed?

It appears that neither TAFE teachers nor TAFE students will be included in considering such changes. One only needs to look at what is happening around the country, in Tasmania, Victoria and South Australia for a start, to know that those closest to the delivery have not been involved in making changes. Unfortunately it is fairly apparent that reform is not based on higher quality training but rather lowest cost training, as evidenced through current tenders for the 20,000 new training places. Costs have been set so low that TAFE is being cut out of the market.

State and Territory governments have been reacting to the Federal Government's announcements in a fairly predictable manner. It would be good to see them take a stand in support of their public TAFE systems, but rather the trends in current salary negotiations show that working conditions are being attacked in a move to cut costs. Delivery hours, teaching weeks and workloads have all been put on the table across Australia. In other words quality delivery is being undermined so that TAFE can compete with private providers, without the student support mechanisms and facilities that TAFE provides.

What is also apparent across the country is that social inclusion is being sacrificed for training in cost efficient areas, and for training in those areas where governments can make a 'quick buck'. TAFE teachers in language, literacy and numeracy areas are being told that if they cannot make a profit their courses will be cut.

Maybe the contradictions are not apparent to governments, but they certainly are to us. Governments tell us that we have a critical skills shortage. Employer groups say it is having dire consequences for business. The Federal Government says we must target the unemployed and under-employed. And guess what skills many of these people will require in order to comfortably fill gaps in the labour market — language, literacy and numeracy! It is important that the impact of Government policy on social inclusion is drawn to the attention of Members of Parliament now.

The AEU and its members have been meeting with Federal MPs. In the day-to-day life in Canberra, many are not aware of these changes taking place. Education policy is tightly controlled by the Minister's and Prime Minister's offices and the education bureaucracy. It is up to us, once again, to create a climate in which the Federal Government will need to be clear about the intent of its policies, and allow for debate on their consequences. Most MPs believe their party went to the elections with policies that supported TAFE, not ones that would dismantle it.

In creating this debate, there is no issue that will cause more concern in the community than the lack of funding and support for those who most need it. If the Prime Minister claims that social inclusion is an important issue for him, and he has created this portfolio, then we must campaign to highlight the contradictions between the intent and the action. We must campaign to ensure that TAFE is funded to continue to deliver these programs and to meet its commitments to second chance and further education. ❖