



from the president
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When two agendas collide

- IR and VET!

At no other time in our recent history has the Federal Government's industrial relations agenda and the future of vocational education and training come together so closely.

The Federal Government's exploitative use of its industrial relations legislation to encourage employers to get rid of Australian workers in order to hire overseas workers at less than market wages and/or for poorer conditions is supposedly tied to the skills shortages in this country. The fact that this same Government has now introduced Trade Skills Training visas, where employers can bring in skilled migrants without having to ensure that there are any Australians able or willing to undertake the work, is of considerable concern. This is not a racist debate that is being engaged in by concerned unions and citizens, although it suits the Government to call it such, rather it is about ensuring the rights of all workers no matter where they come from, and preventing the creation of an 'under-class' of workers in this country.

The Federal Government continues to use the excuse of skills shortages to justify the implementation of appalling employment conditions in this country. So, you have to wonder if their continued failure to produce a real plan to address such skills shortages in the future is equally part of the IR agenda.

What is the Federal Government supposedly doing to address skills shortages?

1. Continuing to provide employer incentives to encourage employers to take on trainees in areas where there are no shortages—such as transport, retail, and IT
2. Providing apprentices with toolbox allowances, when many already receive tools as part of their training contracts
3. Refusing to lift apprenticeship wages, which could help to ensure apprentices were able to complete their training
4. Pushing for a variety of ways to shorten apprenticeships, including partial training of workers, rather than encouraging the

completion of full qualifications that include transferable skills and knowledge leading to careers not just jobs

5. Moving to create "skills sets" rather than proper qualifications
6. Continuing to under-fund language, literacy and numeracy programs, that could enable a greater number of people to gain higher qualifications and increase their skills
7. Creating unneeded bureaucratic structures, such as the Institute for Trades Skills Excellence, at a cost of approximately \$18 million over three years
8. Wasting \$343.6 million over five years on Australian Technical Colleges (ATCs)—with only four currently up and running, one of which (Gladstone) having only two students
9. Continuing to criticise and undermine the TAFE Institutes and TAFE teachers in this country, on top of continuing to underfund TAFE—there were no additional funds for TAFE in this Federal Budget.

And the list goes on!

At the same time, the Minister for Vocational and Technical Education, Gary Hardgrave, continues to use the funding agreement with the States and Territories, to further force this Government's industrial agenda. He moved this year to tie up State and Territory bureaucracies by demanding that they report on their "progress" against their VET Plans, four times a year, a requirement that was watered down slightly at the recent MINCO meeting, but not removed. In a recent media release, he threatened to reduce funding to NSW by \$200 million this year if NSW did not introduce school based apprenticeships at Certificates III and IV levels. The issue around State and Territory governments having to offer Australian Workplace Agreements or individual contracts to TAFE employees, is still to be tested.

At the recent World Skills Leaders Forum, this same Federal Minister, continued to spread misinformation about TAFE, when he claimed TAFE

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colleges were only open during daylight hours, four or five days a week. It's not just TAFE teachers who are fed up with this propaganda that the Minister indulges in at conference after conference, but many employers, bureaucrats and community members.

It's a shame more people don't take him on in relation to his lack of understanding of TAFE and TAFE teachers. It's a shame he did not stay around at World Skills long enough to hear former Prime Minister and patron of World Skills, Bob Hawke, quoting OECD figures that showed that Australian spending on tertiary education including vocational education and training, had decreased by 8 per cent over the last decade when in all other OECD countries it had increased by 38 per cent on average.

It is in this environment that TAFE Futures—the National Inquiry, will take place.

In its recent report, "World Class Skills for World Class Industries", the Australian Industry Group claimed that employer satisfaction with private providers was higher than with TAFE, across a range of qualifications. There are also claims from the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET), that private provision of VET in this country is larger than public provision.

If either of these claims can be substantiated,



then one needs to consider them in light of the Federal Government's changes, its under-funding of TAFE and its attack on public education for over a decade.

The National TAFE Inquiry gives the users of TAFE, and teachers and educationalists, the opportunity to tell the "great" TAFE stories and to provide the evidence to demand of governments

a commitment to public education in this country. The terms of reference for this Inquiry which are reported later on in this edition, are very broad. They will enable all those who participate in the Inquiry, either through written submissions or public forums, to engage in the debate and contribute to a report that will be critical to the future of TAFE in Australia. ❖



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