

**Speech by Linda Simon, Federal TAFE President, at opening of 2005 NTC AGM  
Tuesday, 11 January 2005  
Fremantle**

Delegates,

Over the next three days we have some important issues to consider and decisions to make. We will be considering the what and how of our campaigning that will take us through at least to the next Federal Elections. When we met last year, we knew 2004 would be critical for us, critical in raising the issues around TAFE, AMES and public education in general. We ran an effective campaign, and helped to make vocational education and training an important election issue.

Over a year out from the elections, the ALP made a commitment to TAFE of an additional 20,000 student places a year. As we approached the elections, the ALP promised a Youth Guarantee, places for mature aged workers needing to upgrade their skills, and dedicated places to increase apprenticeships in areas of skills shortages. There was to be more, and if they had won government we would have expected the introduction of those additional commitments by the ALP.

If the ALP had won government, this would be a very different AGM, focussing on discussion about how TAFE would cater for these increased student places and the renewal of confidence in the public education system.

But as Anthony Albanese, former Shadow Minister for Training and Employment Services said, it's been a good year apart from the elections. The ALP did not win government, and we have lost the opportunity to work with new policies that would have enabled us to move forward in addressing those problems that prevent us from delivering the best education possible to all our students and meeting the needs of potential students.

We now face four years of a Federal Government apparently determined to not only further undermine public vocational education, but also to attack our union. It is with this background that we will need to consider the strategies we must adopt. The Howard Government has made it clear, through its announcement of 24 Technical Colleges, which are non-union workplaces, and an Institute for Trade Skills Excellence, in which we have no role, that they will continue to pursue strategies to allocate funding to providers other than public providers. Proposed changes to the industrial relations laws will attempt to undermine our effective representation of our members.

However, the Howard VET agenda is also a very confused one, and the reactions of our state and territory governments are uncertain. ANTA will disappear in July, many responsibilities will be taken over by DEST, and we still do not know how the different roles of Brendan Nelson and Gary Hardgreaves will be carried through. When we met with Brendan Nelson following the elections he did not mention his new VET Minister once.

Our first task at this AGM will be to consider the Howard agenda, and the effective strategies we can employ to ensure the pre-eminence of TAFE, AMES and public education. In November 2003 the ANTA Ministerial Council, made up of state and territory Ministers and Dr Nelson, agreed that discussion of resourcing requirements for VET affirm the predominant role of TAFE in the Australian VET system. Does such a statement mean anything today, or will all such decisions disappear with ANTA?

Discussions that have already taken place within the AEU have identified the importance of our working with other union, industry and community groups to strengthen the role of public education. Our deliberations at this AGM will need to consider how we do this effectively, not just once but on a substantial basis.

Our strategies will also need to allow for the lack of clarity that now surrounds the VET agenda. Federal funding has been allocated to states and territories until the end of 2005; what happens then? Dr Nelson did not appear enthusiastic about the new funding model now being developed by ANTA. How do we influence this government to not only maintain but increase funding to TAFE and AMES? How do we stop increased allocation of funding to open tender or straight to providers other than TAFE and AMES? How do we ensure that state and territory governments will continue to fight for public education and maintain their own funding allocations? We need a plan for tomorrow and a plan for the next four years, one that is flexible enough to address the unrolling of this new agenda.

One of the crimes of this election was the loss of the opportunity to really address skills shortages in this country. To quote Adele Horin, from the Sydney Morning Herald, “the industry-led training agenda that was supposed to usher in a new area of skills has failed to produce the results. We privatised the training market and diverted government funds from TAFE into training firms and big corporations with training arms, and to subsidise any company with ‘trainees’ on the payroll. Australia turns out about 300,000 trainees a year, about the population of Canberra, people who have done short and cheap courses mainly in bar work, retail, hospitality or basic business studies. Half the trainees, for whom business gets a subsidy, were already employed by a company, according to researcher Phil Toner”. How do we continue to address this issue of skills shortages now that the hype of the elections is over? How do we ensure that funding goes to support proper apprenticeships rather than short-term traineeships in areas where they are not needed? How do we divert a training and skills agenda to one that will benefit all Australians and not just serve the narrow political desires of some employer groups such as ACCI, BCA and the Farmer’s Federation?

And how will we continue to maintain the quality, consistency and professionalism of vocational education and training in this country? The national strategy developed by ANTA, *Shaping our Future*, for 2004-2010, is surely being undermined by this Howard agenda. The ANTA vision had three aims – VET works for Australian businesses making business internationally competitive; VET works for people giving Australians world-class skills and knowledge; VET works for communities building inclusive and

sustainable communities. Yet, within that national strategy, the focus of this Federal government has instead centred on the needs of only one group, as defined by the favoured employer associations. When did we hear during or following the elections the Federal Government talk of meeting the needs of communities and regions, of indigenous Australians, of students with a disability or special needs, of education not training? At what time was the quality and professionalism of our teachers recognised and promoted? The ANTA strategy uses the terms 'sustained investment in TAFE' and 'sustainable mix of funding'. Yet the specific Howard government policies seek to undermine that sustainability. The lack of clarity and the confusion that now surrounds the future of TAFE and vocational education and training will not enhance quality or lead to sustainable education and training programs.

And after considering at this AGM what we now need to do, we also need to consider how we can effectively bring TAFE and AMES members with us, and how we can continue to increase membership within our sector. Precarious employment and casualisation will remain one of our most critical concerns, given the impact on individuals and sustainable TAFE and AMES systems. But, as important, we need to consider how we ensure our current membership of over 13,100 members is enthused and actively working within the union to support public education and to protect their own working conditions and salaries. Constant change, constant attacks from all governments, and the constant undermining of their professional role and status, has taken a toll on our members. Yet without their work, we can't succeed. This AGM needs to develop strategies to ensure that our members are kept informed, involved and believe that we can make a difference.

We all look forward to walking away at the end of the AGM on Thursday, having developed effective and sustainable strategies to ensure it is our agenda for vocational education and training that predominates in Australia, an agenda that is focussed on quality education, and meeting the needs of all individuals and industry/community groups.

Thank you.