

## Federal TAFE Secretary's Report to the AGM (2005)

2005 will be a critical year for the public TAFE system, and the future of our sector and our future as a union depends in many ways on how we respond to the challenges of the next few years. We have chosen as the twin focuses of our annual general meeting what may at first blush appear to be an inward looking theme – casual employment and recruitment – and an outward looking theme – campaigning after the election. I want to argue that this is in many respects an artificial dichotomy, for the future of both our campaigning for the public TAFE sector, and our organising and recruitment as a union are inextricably linked, and our success in either endeavour depends on our attention to both.

Ten or more years ago, under a Labor government, Australia's vocational education and training system was set on a path which radically transformed it. Those who would defend the revolution then, when looking at the somewhat bleak landscape which confronts us now, argue that the revolution was betrayed or hijacked by an incoming conservative government, who took advantage of the changes which had already occurred, and turned the nascent system into something much more aligned with the neo-liberal agenda which they sought to impose across the whole political landscape. Others more cynical amongst us believe that the seeds of the neo-liberal agenda were planted with the original reforms.

Throughout 2004, the issue of skills shortages emerged, and became an issue in the election. The Australian Industry Group has described the skills shortages in the Australian economy as "catastrophic". James Baron, CEO of Group Training Australia argues that it is an undisputed fact that 'Australia has skill shortages in every traditional trade. All essential, residential, commercial and industrial services are suffering - all the engineering trades, all the vehicle trades, all the construction trades, all the food trades, as well as electrical/electronics, printing, wood, hairdressing and furniture upholstery.'

He says that two things have contributed to this deplorable state of affairs - culture and attitude. 'Business in this country has for decades lacked a genuine training culture.' The irony of these skills shortages coming after more than ten years of the vocational education system being "industry led" is not lost on us. Neither is the irony that the Howard government's solution to these skill shortages is to give even more control of VET to big business, to the apparent exclusion of every other stakeholder in the system. Frankly, it beggars belief.

The prominence given to the skills shortages agenda meant that TAFE, and vocational education and training became an issue during the election campaign. We developed a very positive election campaign, in partnership with the rest of the trade union movement, around the strategy of encouraging TAFE students to vote. The campaign was constructed to give us the opportunity to promote the issue of under-funding and under-resourcing in the context of a very real need to engage TAFE students in issues of their own education and training.

Our union has established itself as a defender of the broad public TAFE system in a climate where many believe, even on our side of politics, that there is no longer a

public system, but rather a system of registered training organisations. While it is difficult in a climate where the victory of the Howard government is a disaster for public provision to acknowledge what small gains we made, it has to be said that the AEU's staunch defence of the system, and our promotion of issues around the quality and integrity of teaching and learning for all VET students are all that stands between working class students, and an entirely bleak future. It is important that we acknowledge this.

The Howard government gratuitously exploited the chord that vocational education and training had struck in the community, and put together of suit of tawdry reforms which captured the imagination of the electorate. Ironically for us, the emphasis on VET probably helped Howard win the election.

Within weeks of the election, what many see as the last symbol of the Keating Accord was swept away in an announcement directly out of the office of the Prime Minister. Nobody in ANTA was told, the Education Minister has told some state ministers that he was not told about the decision until it was announced. Despite concerns from some that ANTA had lost its way, almost no-one predicted such a momentous event.

And it is a momentous event. While many teachers and many of our members may have ambivalent feelings about ANTA, it has to be said that its position at the centre of a political compromise always made its position an ambivalent one. Make no mistake that certain segments of big business saw it as no friend to them, despite the criticisms that we have levelled at it over the years that it was too narrowly industry focussed.

The decision, unformed and ill conceived as it is, to establish 24 Technical Colleges, the Centre for Trade Skills Excellence which will effectively create a big business owned instrument for the allocation of commonwealth funds if the government fails to reach new agreements over funding with the states – these decisions have the potential to fragment the existing system, and in a classic “baby out with the bathwater” scenario – to undo the existing system and replace it with something unrecognisable to supporters of public education.

For young workers, portable qualifications and recognition of these qualifications across state and territory borders are incredible important. For these people, some assurances around the quality of the training that they are receiving are crucial. These are the things we now stand to lose, as narrow enterprise specific training consigns young people to a working life with little or no bargaining power with unscrupulous employers. To add insult to injury, the Commonwealth government will finance this training – public funds will be accessed for narrow, enterprise-specific training effort.

These are the things which are now under threat if the current system crumbles.

For our members, unfettered User Choice if it is further unleashed on the system will exacerbate the pressure on funding in a system where there is, literally, nothing more to give. If the market is opened up further, if private providers are allowed unencumbered access to public TAFE facilities, if public TAFE is further edged out of the parts of the training market which potentially provide profit to private providers, then the system will have difficulty surviving.

For the TAFE division of the AEU, the intersection between policy changes and our members' work is clear. Already struggling under unsustainable workloads, with a core – periphery model in place in many of the state systems, the threat of casualisation to the survival of TAFE is clear. In few other sections of the Australian workforce has casual employment reached the proportions that it has in TAFE, and in private providers.

We have to develop strategies for recruitment which build on the activist culture and traditions of our union, and we have to unashamedly draw the links between the work that the AEU has done in defending and enhancing the public TAFE system, and our own survival as a union. There is no question that the AEU has been at the forefront of defending the sector, and that our activist members have played crucial roles in ensuring that the quality of teaching and learning, through the maintenance of our influence, and the defence our members' working conditions. But we have to focus on developing better strategies to engage the whole TAFE teaching workforce, building our influence in the crucial areas of our professional work, for the next period will see further attacks on the integrity of education in the VET sector.

Where casual employment now constitutes the dominant mode in the majority of states and territories, ranging from 50% – 80% in some cases, and where the AEU's success in recruitment of casual teachers is negligible, the situation is critical. In the next 5 years alone, many of our ongoing TAFE teachers will retire from TAFE, and we are simply not replacing them. Our future as a union and the future of the TAFE system rests on our capacity to develop effective campaigning strategies to recruit new members.

We have always argued that TAFE is much broader than skills training. While funds for student support, and indeed for a whole range of courses within TAFE have been whittled away, while increasingly attempts have been made to shift costs onto those least able to afford them – the student – we have had an on-going battle asserting and maintaining the integrity of TAFE as a rich site of post-secondary education. Instead, industry has argued that we must move away from the newly labelled “residual” system, and turn TAFE into an entirely instrumentalist play thing of industry.

It is crucial in the campaigns that we pursue, in the alliances that we forge, in all of the work that we do with our members and with those whom we want to persuade to become our members, that we hold firm to the view that in every possible context, it is the breadth and depth, it is the richness of the public TAFE institution which contributes to the success of our students, and the place that TAFE occupies in Australian society.