

Federal TAFE President's address to 2007 National TAFE Council AGM

Good afternoon Council. Welcome to an important AGM and a critical year for us. This year we must help to ensure the defeat of the Howard government, and ensure that in its place is elected a government that is primarily committed to TAFE and public education and to working with the Australian Education Union and its members. We have been working toward this occasion for many years now, and together with the rest of the union movement must make it a reality.

The attitude of the Howard government towards TAFE, and towards TAFE teachers and students has been appalling. Remember the funding freeze and the policy of 'growth through efficiencies', which continues to have repercussions in terms of state and territory policies and funding. This set in train the determination of these governments to make educationalists do more with less, and opened the way for higher TAFE fees and the shifting of the costs of education away from government to individuals.

Remember the way the Howard government has exploited the use of 'competition policy' in TAFE, and opened up greater numbers of courses for open tender, and demanded increased implementation of 'user choice'. Third party access challenges TAFE's ability to be able to use its own premises for its own courses, and the Federal government daily demonstrates its pre-occupation with channelling public funds into any other educational structure as long as it is not a TAFE college or public school. \$343 million has been allocated for the 25 Australian Technical Colleges, and there is a rush to try and set them up, especially in marginal electorates, prior to the Federal elections this year. The Western Sydney college was recently announced as a consortium led by the Master Plumbers Association of NSW and the Anglican Schools Corporation, in the marginal seat of Lindsay.

The Howard government is determined to undermine the strength and effectiveness of the union movement in this country, and this is very evident in our sector. The attack by Gary Hardgrave on Industry Skills Councils, and the procedures to establish alternative structures, such as the Institute of Trade Skills Excellence that exclude union involvement, signal a next move in this process. There was once a time when we talked about the industry parties and meant both employers and unions, but more and more the word industry is becoming synonymous with the employer organisations only. The AEU is rarely invited to the table in its own right and as we see different groups scrabbling for a position of influence in the training sector, we see attempts to further marginalise us. An area of concern to us has to be the move by TAFE Directors Australia to compromise some of their previously strong positions on TAFE and public education, to ensure that they are invited to join the 'discussions'. They acknowledge that they want to see themselves as a key player. But at what price will that come? And what will be the confused message on TAFE then given out to the public and to governments?

The last year or so has seen the increase in the influence of ACPET in the training sector, and their claim to a position on representative bodies. They now claim to deliver a majority of the training in Australia at this time, but do they? There is no real measure of what they do deliver, nor accountability for the way it is done.

One of the problems that we face is that there is no combining of opposition forces against the Howard government's agenda, and by that I don't just mean political opposition parties. Our educational concerns are not always shared by other unions, and employer groups, many of whom were previously supportive of TAFE. They are being more often bought off by government incentives. An example is the Master Plumbers Association in NSW. And the state and territory Labor governments, that we might have once expected to form a coalition to fight for TAFE and TAFE funding, appear quite divided in their views at MCVTE and at the national level. At the recent Quality Council meeting, the issue around skills sets was debated and was not opposed by any state or territory government. NSW, which had previously indicated its opposition when lobbied by the AMWU and us, didn't vote, claiming that they couldn't win and therefore abstained. In an environment where the Federal Government counts lack of opposition as agreement, or at least acquiescence, this is not a useful move.

Following the recent state government elections, *Campus Review* noted that Carmel Tebbutt in NSW was the most senior of the education and training Ministers across the country. It was a shame to lose such fighters as Lyn Kosky and Paula Wriedt at this time. The loss of Kim Beazley and Jenny Macklin at the federal level, also makes our job more difficult in terms of ensuring a good opposition policy on TAFE. It had taken a long time, but we had at last got Kim talking TAFE, and when he went out to TAFE colleges and talked to apprentices and other students, he knew what he was doing. We will have to work to ensure that the type of policy and positions that we had discussed with Jenny Macklin are retained by Stephen Smith in his taking over of the portfolio. One of the good things that the Labor Opposition has been including, is policy around supporting TAFE teachers, both in their professional development and in renewing the profession. These matters are important to us, and must be maintained in Federal Labor policy. I would like to place on record our thanks to both Kim and Jenny for their work, but particularly Jenny for being a great listener and being willing to come to our meetings and talk to us about the directions of TAFE and VET policy.

When we consider our position and our strategies at this AGM, we will need to consider a fairly sophisticated approach in opposing the government's policies. The Howard government claims a record amount being spent on training and expanding the skills base of Australia. Those are messages that will resonate with the Australian people at election time, and our statements about lack of funding for TAFE at the expense of increased employer incentives and vouchers, will not have a lot of mileage. Yes, we know that the public cares about TAFE but do they really distinguish in such a confused market between what is TAFE and what is not?

The recent media release from Julie Bishop on the implementation of Work Skills and Business Skills vouchers which came into operation from 1 January, states that they can be used at public, private or community training providers. At the recent TAFE Directors Australia conference, Jim Davidson from DEST made a number of telling statements about further government directions. One of these was that community providers such as ACE would be supported to take over a lot of work previously undertaken in TAFE, especially at the lower certificate levels. The consequence of this support for a sector which is largely deregulated, almost totally dependent on casual and not necessarily teacher qualified labour, and relatively ununionised with wages and conditions below those in TAFE, is of considerable concern. The effects of loss of traditional market share can be quite disastrous for TAFE. The examples from AMES demonstrate this, as is indicated by the ACT with the recent loss of the AMEP program. The more that our educational programs are put up for tendering, the more difficult we as a union will find it to fight for permanent as opposed to casual teaching staff.

And in the Skills for the Future package from the Government, the only acknowledgement of the role of TAFE, is the reference of TAFE as just one of the providers where you can use your vouchers. In themselves, the operation of these vouchers will make an interesting year for us in TAFE. A number of government MPs have indicated their interest in finding out what happens, and I think that we should make sure that they are aware of any negative effects as early as possible.

One of the other comments that Jim Davidson made at the TDA conference, was that he told the assembled TAFE Directors that they should be aware that funding for TAFE is unlikely to be provided again in the traditional ways that they were used to. The signalling of increased use of vouchers and funding of individuals and employers was quite clear. For a public system dependent on stability to be most effective, this is quite problematic for us. These assumptions by the Howard government that they can simply forge ahead with changes that will undermine and ultimately destroy the public TAFE system in this country, must be challenged.

This is part of our job at this meeting to start to develop the strategies to do this, and to ultimately help to ensure the defeat of the Howard government.

The results from the National TAFE Inquiry will help us significantly to do this.

The stories told to the Inquiry by teachers, students, community, industry and others, give an incredible rundown on what is happening in TAFE, and peoples' hopes for a future TAFE.

The recommendations that you make by the end of the AGM will guide us over the year and set our priorities. They should outline the sort of TAFE we want for the future, how we work effectively with our students, maintain our profession, and ensure that TAFE is properly funded and resourced. Your decisions will build on the findings of the Inquiry.

Peter Kell makes an important point in his report when he says that TAFE works most effectively when it is partnered with industry. Strengthening those relationships with a whole range of people and groups is critical for us, to ensure we can present a united and strong point of view as we campaign around TAFE issues this year.

I am sure I join you in looking forward to a productive and interesting AGM.

Linda Simon
Federal TAFE President