

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

According to Paulo Freire, lifelong learning ought to be a place where citizen learner-workers develop the wakeful capacity for comprehending the new. He called this capacity critical intelligence:

To the extent that we become capable of transforming the world, of naming our own surroundings, of apprehending [or critically questioning], of making sense of things, of deciding, of choosing, of valuing, and finally of ethicizing the world ... our presence in the world, is not a neutral presence.¹

Freire's words are a timely reminder of the need for us as teacher unionists to assert and reassert a much more dynamic and sophisticated role for TAFE, and for education and training in TAFE than the role being imposed on the system at the moment by government. I want to frame the report I have written for this AGM by elaborating a number of critical issues which are shaping the vocational education and training sector.

The single most significant development this past year is I believe, the development by COAG of a new reform agenda, as important as competition policy, and likely to have an even more direct impact on TAFE and education in general.

This epitomises and builds on:

- The complete ascendancy within VET of so-called "skills shortages", which has led to an absolute and uncritical acceptance of human capital theory as the dominant paradigm of the moment by all players in the system and particularly both major political parties.
- The unchallenged ascendancy of marketisation, and the permeation of the sector, and indeed of society, by the logic of the market and globalisation
 - The complete separation within VET of education and training, manifested by a separation in rhetoric between "skills for work" and the so-called "second chance" mission which was always historically a part of TAFE's role
 - The ongoing decline in funding for TAFE and VET

¹ Paulo Freire quoted in André P. Grace *Reflecting critically on lifelong learning in an era of neo-liberal pragmatism: Instrumental, social and cultural perspectives* 2004

While these issues are not the only issues we have to deal with at the moment, they represents the key strands in the contemporary debate, and elaborating what they mean provides insights, and possibly directions, for how the AEU should take its campaign into the future for the public TAFE system in Australia.

The funding crisis in the sector, the high levels of casualisation of the TAFE workforce, the unrelenting attack of the Federal Government on the institution of TAFE and the unprecedented link that the Federal Government has made between its preparedness to provide any funding for TAFE with requirements on the states to enforce it's industrial relations agenda - these things represent the "playing out" of the issues I have outlined above, and they omen badly for TAFE.

I want to spend a short period of time discussing the issues I have outlined above.

The National Reform Agenda agreed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in February 2006, seeks to:

improve the skill levels of the Australian population (and thus increase the level of human capital), to continue competition reforms and reduce the regulatory burden on Australian business.

One effect of this has been to shift the centre of the reform process in vocational education and training to COAG, rather than the education and/or training departments of the state and territory governments, or even DEST or MINCO. This has sent a very strong signal to the Australian community about the significance to the national economy of reforms to the VET sector in the context of arguments that the establishment of a national, industry-led system had faltered. In a broader sense, the shift of the agenda to COAG is also consistent with the neo-liberal agenda which since the 1980s in Australia has seen the education systems broadly reconstructed consistent with the principles of human capital theory. This has resulted in the role of education and training:

recast as an instrument of micro-economic reform within a broader program of reform that has redefined (and reduced) the role of the state, marketised many areas of public provision and commodified social relations through the development of consumer sovereign models of citizenship.²

² Wheelahan, L *How Markets distort decisions to undertake education, vocational knowledge, provision and qualifications* p1

The fact that this COAG agenda has been developed by the Labor state and territory governments and the Coalition Federal Government together underpins the extent to which this human capital rationale for TAFE is now the dominant orthodoxy.

Another significant effect of locating the authority for the reform process within COAG is to shift the debate away from public scrutiny, disturbing the traditional mechanisms used by groups like unions for influencing or lobbying governments. In VET, policy and strategic direction has been removed from those within government who have most knowledge of the system, and the influence of state and territory bureaucrats on policy has become, at best, contradictory. For the AEU, this means that many of the traditional mechanisms for influencing decisions have been undermined.

In 2006, we saw state and territory Labor governments respond to the agenda of the Howard government in apparently contradictory ways in the context of a "show of strength" by the Federal government. The Howard Government's abolition of ANTA immediately following the 2004 election, and its use of its minority funding share in the VET system to enforce industrial and other reforms to the sector are all evidence of this "show of strength". This is not to romanticise the role that ANTA played in implementing the National Training Reform Agenda, and acting as a gatekeeper for neo-liberal reforms of the sector. ANTA oversaw the marketisation of VET, and from the perspective of the AEU, the complete exclusion of teachers from decision making.

However, ANTA was symbolically at least, a repository of a shared notion of a national VET system, with a buy in of some dimensions from all levels of government, industry broadly defined, and some sections of the community. That the model was imperfect is obvious, that it was better than nothing is equally clear. In some respects, if a commentator had observed five years ago the extent of the Federal Government's grab for power in the sector, they could not in their wildest dreams have foreseen the scope and extent of the Federal Government's victory. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact reason for the extent of the states and territories acquiescence to the Federal Government. While the threat to withhold money has been a powerful inducement for the states to go along with the Federal Government's demands, it must also be said that they are often none too reluctant followers. This underlines that their views on reform are often worryingly similar. The vacuum in terms of alternative policy or ideas has helped the Federal Government in an unprecedented way.

Commonwealth, State and Territory bureaucrats, who have responsibility for implementing the COAG agenda in VET, are united in enacting a very narrow skills formation agenda within a human capital framework, all set within the parameters of the Federal Government's industrial relations agenda. For example, the focus of the system has entirely shifted to industry and the individual and the benefits that might accrue to individuals as a result of education and training. Much of the labour market work which has led to a range of predictions around the future skills needs in industry areas of the Australian economy is predicated on an acceptance of the impacts of the Federal Government's industrial relations agenda, including, for example, increased casualisation of the workforce. These assumptions have direct consequences for resourcing and funding, because they seek to shift as a matter of common sense, a larger responsibility for resourcing the system to individuals. This plays out both at the level of the pressure from governments on individual students to pay a larger share of the cost of their education, and also at the level of the shift to vouchers as the mechanism for allocating funding.

While some commentators see the shift to human capital theory as an improvement on the rigid market logic which prevailed throughout the '90s, nevertheless, the current agenda of a number of state governments and the Federal Government combines in a sense the worst aspects of both human capital theory and neo-liberal marketisation.

Human capital theory frames the skills agenda of all the major political parties in Australia at the moment. Human capital theory:

considers education relevant in so far as education creates skills and helps to acquire knowledge that serves as an investment in the productivity of the human being as an economic production factor, that is, as a worker. Thus education is important because it allows workers to be more productive, thereby being able to earn a higher wage. By regarding skills and knowledge as an investment in one's labour productivity, economists can estimate the economic returns to education for different educational levels, types of education, etc.³

There are a number of problems with this model, and to a great extent we are seeing these problems emerge as we speak. It is an economic model, where the only benefits from education which are considered or counted are increased productivity or higher wages. It is a model which blocks out the cultural, social and non-material dimensions of life: "In human capital theory, as in other parts of mainstream economics, human beings act for economic reasons only."⁴

³ Robeyns, I *Three models of education: rights, capabilities and human capital*, November 2005 p4

⁴ IBID p. 5

Human capital theory is entirely instrumental – it values education, skills and knowledge only in so far as they contribute to expected economic productivity. For this reason, knowledge which is not seen to be immediately economically instrumental has no investment value from a human capital perspective.

In the prevailing political climate, VET bureaucrats and administrators struggle with any aspects of vocational education and training which are not captured by Training Packages. The “education” part of vocational education and training has been narrowed into “key competencies”, and then has morphed into “employability skills”. Employability skills are now being uncritically inserted into secondary curriculum around the country, and in some states are even being discussed in primary curriculum.

However, in many states and territories, the rigidity and narrowness of the conception of vocational training for industry and employers has rendered it easy to separate so-called “second chance” courses out of VET, and the push is now on to have so-called “cheap” community providers “deliver” literacy and numeracy – and really, the education part of VET. In accepting the false dichotomy of “vocational” versus “general” education, a dichotomy which we have in the past promoted as a way of keeping “education” in VET, we have in one sense allowed the separation between the two to become entrenched. This has particular resonance in the context of the pressure from industry and the federal government to shorten (and effectively destroy) apprenticeships, for in many cases what is removed from the apprenticeship, or what is lost in the segmentation of apprenticeships into smaller and narrower “bites” of technical skills is the contextual knowledge and information about the trade which enables the worker to become an autonomous learner.⁵

The separation in TAFE between vocational and general or further education, between second chance and skills training for industry, has paved the way for state and federal governments to effectively separate funding and organization of these areas. Once separated, it becomes increasingly difficult to find rationale, within a human capital or market agenda to continue funding “other” programs. In the current climate, several states are already withdrawing funds from these areas, and there is a danger that they will eventually wither and die, and disappear from TAFE altogether.

⁵ ‘General and second chance education has been marginalised in VET over the last 20 years, but it was still present even if only residually. However, even this residual role is now defined out of existence, and it is likely that it will only be included if labour market outcomes can be demonstrated.’ Wheelahan in *How competency-based training locks the working class out of powerful knowledge: A modified Bernsteinian analysis* _p.8

Human capital theory is a very limited and narrow way to frame a vocational education and training agenda, but its ascendancy in the sector is almost complete. Marginson (1997: 151) argues that education and training became subordinated to national economic policy through the policy reforms of the late 1980s and early 1990s:

Everywhere, education was seen as crucial to economic competitiveness, mobilised for economic reconstruction, and embedded in micro-economic reform, corporatisation and marketisation. The formation of citizens in education was subordinated to its new economic mission....this time the objective was not so much the broad development of the skills and talents of the nation, as in the late Keynesian period, but the development of those specific aspects of education and research that assisted national economic competitiveness.

Tony Blair has been quoted as saying that education is 'the best economic policy that we have.' And all this in the context of 'less public ownership and even less direct forms of state intervention in the economy.'

Thus human capital theory combines with that other great bi-partisan theory of modern time - the neo-liberal market. The neo-liberal extension of market relations to all spheres of social life, and not just the economy, has changed the nature and outcomes of education and training. Education and training has been marketised and commodified. Public policy has transformed education into a "quasi-market" where "customers" exercise "choice" based on self-interested and self-maximising decisions.

Market behaviours are to be instilled in individuals through the education and training system. Curriculum has been reshaped to be aligned with employer requirements, not just in terms of specific skills, but in shaping world view of its 'products' (students). Look no further than employability skills to understand how complete the revolution in the VET system has been.

Both neo-liberal market theory and the human capital agenda enjoy widespread bipartisan support. The Federal Government's industrial relations agenda and the state governments' casualisation of the sector represent an overt attack on TAFE teachers and on their professional lives.

Equally, the push by governments and employers to shorten apprenticeships, a large component of the COAG agenda, is not about improving the opportunities or skills of young people. Shortening apprenticeships is about imposing narrow, employer-determined technical skills, and removing the contextual and situated knowledge young people need to apply those skills in powerful or conscious ways.

It is also about denying the working class access to powerful knowledge, and the capacity to continue to access education throughout their lives.

Within this depressingly uniform view, one of the key roles the AEU must play is in developing and gaining support for alternative ways at looking at the role of TAFE. A good contribution to this has been the TAFE Inquiry run last year.

The work of the union in the next period needs to be about challenging the dominant paradigm of vocational education and training, asserting both the right and the need for VET, and TAFE to be more than simply an employer and industry driven vehicle for the transmission of narrow instrumental vocational skills. We need to confront the dominance of the market as the only logic of the system. It is crucial that the union publicly articulate its own vision for the public TAFE system, for we are effectively the only voice of those who work and study in TAFE.

There will be four workshops sessions based on some of the findings of the TAFE Futures Inquiry which provide you with the opportunity to develop some of the ideas and actions for the AEU's work in the lead up to the next Federal election, and beyond. Within this context, I think there are several key themes which have emerged this year.

1. Teachers and their work are at the centre of TAFE. For TAFE teachers, the goal of their work is the development of the human beings they teach. In shorthand terms, it is about what Freire calls the citizen learner-worker. Teachers do not make skill formation, or human capital formation or economic growth their goal. Teachers do not see students as bundles of skills or inputs into the supply stream of the economic system. Education is a social process. Teachers are not merely deliverers, and students are not bundles of skills.

It is critical to the future of TAFE that teachers reassert their right to work collectively, both professionally and industrially. In this context, it is particularly important that we advocate and articulate the need for networks of teachers to be established, and where they already exist, to be supported, both economically and industrially. TAFE teachers have responsibilities to their students and to the system. They have the right to work collaboratively in shaping their own working environment, and the learning environment of students. This is critical to the future of TAFE. Without a well educated, professionally trained teaching workforce which has access to supported, collaborative, professional networks, the system simply cannot go on, for it will have no heart and no meaning.

2. TAFEs are public institutions. They play a number of complex and sophisticated roles in the community. They already have, often directly through the networks of teachers who work with them, fine relationships with their local industry and community groups. TAFEs need to be properly supported in this role. Their role needs to be expanded, and they themselves can help break down the silos of different layers of government and different departments within government. If their role in industry planning was expanded, they could play a much more useful role in assisting local communities to investigate the development of new industries. If they were supported adequately, the strength of the relationships which they currently have could be built upon and developed. Their interest would be with communities, not just with businesses. They are social institutions, and they belong to the communities they serve. We should continue to assert this, and argue for real support for the role that TAFE plays.

3. There is no turning back for TAFE, and there is very little to be found in the past. Despite what we may want to believe in a world where markets dominate, and economic rationalism is the only rationalism apparent in debates, the past was not all good. We need to initiate and encourage debate around the teaching and learning that goes on in TAFE. TAFE is not just about narrow technical skills determined by industry, signified by Training Packages and verified by audits. It is also not about a deficit model of second chance education. It is about an education that all people have a right to enable them to participate as citizens in contemporary society.

Leesa Wheelahan picks up some of the themes developed by Freire. She argues that we need to rethink the nature of vocational education and training to go beyond employability skills, however broadly these are defined, and industry-derived competencies. TAFE needs to engage students in critical thinking and knowledge creation. The focus on a limited definition of employer-defined skills is poised to have an unprecedented impact on the education of young people, particularly in TAFE. I quote Wheelahan again:

By ignoring the wider contexts in which people live, and in focusing only on skills for work, policy helps to create an impoverished education that is not able to develop high-order skills needed for work, let alone for work and life.⁶

⁶ *The core values of the traditional apprenticeship are worth preserving*, James Doughney and Leesa Wheelahan, ETU Submission to the Victorian Inquiry into Vocational Education and Training, (p.10)

If we are to move the debate about the future of TAFE forward, we must reject the false dichotomies between general and vocational education foisted on the sector, assert the essential role of a public provider, and fight for the rights of all students in the sector to education. Critical to this is the struggle for the industrial and professional rights of TAFE teachers.

Pat Forward
Federal TAFE Secretary