

Federal TAFE Secretary's Speech to 2008 National TAFE Council AGM

There is no doubt about the significance of the election of the Rudd government on November 24, 2007. The defeat of the Howard government signals the end of a period when combative and confrontational politics, at all levels, impeded the development of considered responses to the challenges thrown up by globalisation and technological change. It should also be acknowledged that in the analysis of the Rudd victory, most commentators agree that the role of the union movement was an important, if not the most important contributing factor. Indeed, many believe that the *YourRightsAtWork* campaign was pivotal.

In considering our work as a union over the next few years, and in determining strategies to shape the future of the public TAFE system and the working lives of our members, we need to make an honest assessment of the current situation. We need to describe the world as it is. In so doing, the key challenges that lie ahead are both stark, and unfortunately, remarkably familiar.

Neo-liberalism and market reform have been the key drivers in economic and social policy in Australia for more than twenty years. Both the ALP and the Coalition are driven by the twin imperatives of competition and commercialisation. In this climate, the public education system, and TAFE particularly, has been the object of underfunding and diminishing levels of resourcing. However, underfunding and inadequate resources are only the most tangible signs of the damage done to public education.

The election of the Rudd government has left the vocational education and training sector in a state of flux. It is clear however, that this will not last long, and that the union must proceed with a sense of urgency to develop strategies to influence the development of vocational education and training policy in Australia.

At a most profound and insidious level, the logic of the market has permeated the vocational education and training sector, turning students and young workers into "consumers", and teachers into "trainers" and "deliverers". Commercialisation and competition drive the behavior of "managers" in TAFE. Teaching and learning have been replaced by efficiency and profit, and teachers are increasingly forced to perform in an environment where they are held accountable to performance criteria which have nothing to do with teaching and learning, and over which they have no influence or control. Increasingly, teachers' work has been overtaken by administrative and accountability requirements, their work environment determined by budgets and fiscal constraints, and their job security in the case of at least 50% of TAFE teachers, non-existent. For a profession whose core defining feature is the relationship between teachers and students, little time now remains to develop and sustain such relationships. Indeed, there is no time to develop the professional

relationships between teachers which are such a crucial component of the work of education.

For students, their vocational education and training experience has become defined exclusively by the needs of employers and the economy. Denied access in the current environment to a broader vocational knowledge, and the educational resources to operate critically and autonomously in an increasingly complex society, students in TAFE and VET are being cheated of their rights to a broad education. It is simply not empty rhetoric to argue that the vocational education and training sector is in danger of turning out powerless factory fodder, reproducing social disadvantage and denying the next generation access to the knowledge and resources which enables them to participate confidently in society.

The question for us today, and in the next few months, is how we can operate effectively in the post election hiatus to promote a reevaluation of the direction of policy in the vocational education and training sector, and how we can harness the considerable strength of our members to make sure that genuine reforms occur.

Throughout 2007, in the lead up to the federal election, TAFE Directors Australia campaigned with intensity around the issue of TAFE autonomy. The final communiqué from their convention in October 2007 read:

The autonomy of TAFE Institutes is essential to meet the needs of learners, industry and the community, and enforce accountability for the geographically wide and extensive TAFE network and infrastructure.¹

TDA argues that TAFE institutes need to be “liberated” from the chains of governments’ control in order to function flexibly in the training market. The ALP is sympathetic to this view, and a number of state ALP governments have acted to increase the level of autonomy for TAFE institutes. In the lead up to the election, with the threat of the SAW Act receding, and the era of cooperative federalism approaching, the Queensland Government enacted legislation which complemented the then Federal Government’s agenda in VET, providing their TAFE institutes with the ability to become statutory authorities. The Tasmanian Government’s reforms effectively abolish its public TAFE system.

Each of the events outlined above – Queensland’s move to make TAFE institutes statutory authorities, Tasmania’s move to dismember its public TAFE system, and the growing support for TDA’s “autonomy” push are based on arguments that in a competitive vocational education and training market, TAFE institutes (and I quote) “need to establish more flexible, cost effective and autonomous

¹ (TDA 2007 Convention Communiqué)

governance arrangements to enhance TAFE institutes' capacity to develop industry partnerships and grow the commercial component of their business."

There is no evidence that turning TAFE institutes into statutory authorities will achieve this – none whatsoever. More significantly, however, what underpins this push for greater autonomy from TAFE directors is an assumption that the central driving mission of contemporary TAFE institutes is a commercial orientation, driven exclusively by the needs of business and employers.

However, even if we were to accept the proposition that commercial success is evidence of effective vocational education and training, which we clearly do not, then we would also need to accept the proposition that greater autonomy would enable Queensland TAFE to become more commercially successful. Throughout the 1990's, TAFE institutes around the country struggled with financial debt after doctrinaire state government's "granted" them greater control over their finances. TAFE directors seem to ignore the reality that support for greater control being devolved to them from state and federal governments is derived from the desire to relinquish responsibility for reduced government funding, and force the TAFE directors increase their reliance on non-government funding sources.

It is clear that TAFE institutes should be efficiently run, accountable organisations, but it does not follow that the measure of their success should be their commercial viability, nor that greater autonomy would ensure efficiency.

The Tasmanian Government's proposal is based on assertions that Tasmanian businesses need a training provider (and I quote) "that is aligned to their needs and can respond as a business, with strategies that focus on their client, rather than self interest, policy imperatives, or funding initiatives." The Tasmanian Government is saying that TAFE Tasmania is self-interested, burdened by government policy imperatives and by funding constraints. They neglect to say is that two out of three of these "problems" are a direct result of the Tasmanian Government's own policies.

These have been the depressingly familiar criticisms of TAFE over the last twenty years, so the irony of now wishing to replace an organisation which is allegedly too constrained by government policy, financial pressures and self interest, with one that can "respond like a business, on business-like terms" is not lost on us. There is no evidence presented, for example that the Tasmanian training enterprise will (and I quote) "increase skills development and improve productivity by leveraging industry investment with government funds." Nor is there any evidence that it will result in a "greater investment in training by businesses."

In the bald assertions, though, that the training will be "just in time, just enough, and just for my enterprise" there is ample room for suspicion that what we are witnessing, in the rhetorical scramble for the business dollar, is a continuation of

the agenda which ensures that narrow enterprise specific skills will replace a broad-based vocational knowledge in the Tasmania of tomorrow. These proposals are about reproducing social disadvantage and class difference, locking young workers out of any capacity to participate in society or in their workplaces in confident ways. Instead, the employer who pays for the skills will get the skills he/she pays for, and nothing more. The individual worker will be left with a very narrow range of enterprise-specific skills, and little to bargain with industrially within the workplace, or in another workplace, when he/she loses or changes jobs.

The virtue of TAFE autonomy is asserted, but never argued or debated. It is in many respects entirely contradictory. TAFE directors want autonomy without the responsibility and accountability which managers of public funds should have. TAFE institutes in Australia, even in the current climate, are majority government funded. They may have had to compete for these funds, and they may have had to rely increasingly on commercial activity for their income in a climate where governments have effectively starved TAFE of secure funding. But they are nevertheless, publicly-funded providers. Many who have been successful in commercial activity have done so by leveraging their public funding. Leveraging (the use of public funds to cross-subsidize private provision) is in fact both sanctioned and encouraged by governments. Leveraging is used to drive the cost of fee for service provision down, hiding the real cost of education and training.

In Victoria, where TAFE institutes have been autonomous since the early '90s, the institutes hold onto their "profits", guarding them jealously. Incidentally, while most Victorian TAFE institutes now do deliver surpluses, this was not always the case. Many struggled to survive as recently as only a few years ago. And have the "profits" they now have tucked away come from greater efficiency? Indeed not. Low teacher salaries, high levels of casualisation and rampant discounting of student contact hours are the real story behind Victorian TAFE success.

Anecdotally, Victorian TAFE institutes now have millions of dollars of profit stored away. They guard these funds against the incursions of the state government. There is little evidence of re-investment, and most TAFE institutes in Victoria continue to cry poor when it comes to high levels of casualisation, appalling TAFE teacher salaries and the provision of professional development.

To reiterate – autonomy is sought by directors largely for reasons of self interest, commercial success has replaced education as the driving force in TAFE, but there is in any event no evidence that greater autonomy will deliver the outcomes that directors and governments' argue that it will. The real danger in all this for us is that the key assumption – that TAFEs should be commercially-oriented enterprises which operate to serve the interests of business – has moved into the centre of vocational education and training thinking, and that it has become an almost unchallenged "truth".

What does all this mean for the work of teachers in TAFE? As I have already argued, teaching and learning in TAFE are increasingly subsumed under the framework of commercial delivery. Most TAFE institutes in Australia are currently operating under the educationally damaging consequences of construing TAFE institutions as half businesses and half public services pitted against each other, and against private providers for increasingly scarce government funding. Essentially the development of a training market has meant that the conditions for decent educational provision, the existence of groups of qualified teachers who can plan courses, properly evaluate whether their educational practices are facilitating student learning, refine their courses and continually update their knowledge and skills is considered an expensive cost of production which tender processes discipline.

The theme which emerges, both overtly and covertly in all this is that union awards and teachers' working conditions remain a significant impediment to the achievement of flexibility, and constrain the capacity of TAFE to compete in the training market. Rhetorically, it is argued that it is the "inflexible" workload provisions in awards and agreements which allegedly restrict the capacity of TAFE to "deliver" (as required in the Tasmania Tomorrow proposal) 24/7/52 (24 hrs a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year). In truth, it is not the rigidity of working conditions, but the cost of wages under award conditions which provides the impediment. And it is therefore, very clearly, the cost of a unionised, qualified TAFE teaching workforce which is the obstacle which prevents TAFEs operating as profitable commercial entities in the competitive training market. Private providers have no such restriction because they are largely un-unionised.

Three states are currently enterprise bargaining with the union. The approaches of the respective state governments are poignant examples of how the neo-liberal agenda in VET plays out for teachers' work.

The WA government is proposing a Flexible Performance Hours Arrangements (FPHA) and Victorian TAFE directors an Overall Total Remuneration Package (OTRP). These proposals require teachers to individually negotiate their award or agreement conditions sometimes for more money. It is clear that TAFE employers have been discussing their approaches to enterprise bargaining with each other. In each of the two arrangements, the quantum of increased pay would not compensate for increased. The proposals involve individual negotiations between managers and teachers, and therefore the further development of individual employment arrangements.

Politically the West Australian Flexible Performance Hours Arrangements (FPHA) and Victorian Overall Total Remuneration Package (OTRP) are examples of the inroads that marketisation has had on all areas of teachers' work. They are evidence of an approach which sees industrial conditions as individual entitlements to be bartered and traded, rather than professional and industrial

conditions of work which enable teachers to actually effectively and professionally teach. In one sense, this is the reality of the effect that enterprise bargaining has had on the professional work of teachers. Once industrial conditions are seen as “tradable” conditions with a value, they easily become individual entitlements rather than collective conditions of work. Employers argue that individual teachers should have the freedom and the choice to opt out of collective arrangements, and they say that they are acknowledging the increased value of the work by offering often paltry increases in wages.

Employers continue to put pressure on the union during industrial negotiations to differentiate between types of teaching – that is, that on-line, workplace or forms of one-on-one learning are in a sense worth less than teaching in classroom settings. They sometimes acknowledge that this is not necessarily because the different forms of teaching are more or less hard, or that they require more or less knowledge or effort or expertise, but rather because the different hours are worth more or less in funding terms. However, if different teaching, assessment, training or other forms of contact hours are arbitrarily allocated a different time amount or value during bargaining, it fundamentally erodes the complexity of teachers’ work, and establishes precedents which are difficult or impossible to change or claw back, and which become bench marks for other states and territories.

We have scheduled today two sets of workshops which deal with the issues I have outlined. They deal with the public TAFE system broadly, and TAFE teachers’ work and qualifications. We await with some interest announcements from the new government which deal with the architecture and symbols of the training system that are the legacy of the Howard government. Australian Technical Colleges, the Institute for Trade Skills Excellence and the National Industry Skills Committee are all vestiges of a system which was in disarray and whose reason for being was not the education and training of people, nor the solution to a skills “crisis”, but the playing out of a political power struggle between a federal government bereft of vision for the future, and states determined to implement ill conceived reforms to a resource starved VET sector.

While the symbols and the architecture are important, and their fate crucial to any capacity to move forward, the real problems which beset TAFE are derived from the neo-liberal agenda which underpins the approach of both major political parties. It is that which we must challenge in putting forward an alternative vision for the future of TAFE.

Increased investment in the sector by all levels of government in Australia must come from a view of the sector which is driven not just by the skills needs of the economy or of employers, but by a coherent and sophisticated vision for the future of students in the vocational education and training sector. TAFE is about a vocational education experience which provides its students with access to a broad vocational knowledge and with the capacity to develop a range of

educational and vocational pathways. In a sense, the separation which has emerged between the dual missions of TAFE – to service the needs of the economy and to provide ‘second chance’ education has served to caste one as more critical than the other. In many ways they are not separate. The narrowing of the skills agenda, especially through training packages, has hollowed-out the educational experience of many trainees and apprentices. Those involved in the so-called ‘second chance’ area have been relegated to the end of the queue, with the real threat that much of the work that is currently undertaken in TAFE around a broader education will be consigned to community providers because they are cheaper.

Far better is a vision for the sector which does not promote such artificial and narrow divides, but rather sees the work of a TAFE as a rich, sophisticated, knowledge-driven sector which contributes to the social and economic life of society by providing easy access to all citizens throughout their lives. The mission of TAFE is complex and multi-faceted – young people should be initiated into vocational education as the first step in their working lives, with the right and the ability to return at any stage in their lives to change their careers or improve their opportunities. Existing workers must have similar rights and support. Those marginalized in society – those currently described as the second chance students - are much better described as themselves developing the capacity to gain knowledge and education, than being defined in a deficit model as ‘second chance’. While we continue to allow a narrowly defined economic skills agenda as the central focus of TAFE, governments will continue to prioritise spending and resourcing according to criteria which has little to do with a society, and everything to do with a market economy.

In a similar vein, the redefinition of TAFE teachers work into ‘delivery’ and ‘training’, the colonization of the VET training qualification – the TAA, the casualisation of the workforce, the deliberate confusion created by industry and employers about the identity of the TAFE teacher – industry trainer or teacher – all these things have worked to undermine the TAFE teaching profession.

Early on the National Training Reform Agenda, the idea of “provider capture” was promulgated to reduce the power and influence of TAFE over vocational education. This was also aimed at undermining the TAFE teaching profession. While the particular identity of vocational teachers deserves scrutiny, TAFE teachers are first and foremost teachers. They may once have worked in a range of different areas, but once they start to teach, their identity is formed around the profession of teaching. The work of TAFE teachers is as complex and sophisticated as that of primary or secondary teachers. They must draw on a breadth of knowledge around pedagogy, they must learn to teach. They must have the same access to and interaction with the theory and knowledge around education which their teaching colleagues in other sectors have. They must be able to interact critically and discursively with the various theories and understandings in order to make the judgments and choices which are the

lifeblood of teaching. They will forever live a dualism between their own initial vocation, and their identity as teachers, but this is a good thing, and arguably one of the great strengths of the sector.

Asserting the professional nature of TAFE teachers work is not a defense of arbitrary privilege. It is an argument about the rights of TAFE teachers to have influence over the development of curriculum for their students, to determine the ways of teaching suitable for different individuals, and to develop close relationships with their industry so that they can revisit and update their own vocational knowledge. It is also about having the time and resources to work collaboratively with their colleagues in an environment which fosters innovative teaching and learning. These things are not about privilege. They are about creating an excellent and productive teaching and learning environment for students.

The professional nature of TAFE teachers work is intertwined with the industrial and workload conditions which are the object of increasingly close government and employer scrutiny. The view that Training Packages are merely lifted from the shelf, “delivered” to students in the workplace and then returned to the shelves at the end of the day is so far removed from the reality of teachers work as to be laughable. But as a new generation of TAFE teachers come to work, often on a casually-paid basis and without the teaching qualifications which previous generations have had, and as the existing generation of skilled and qualified TAFE teachers moves into retirement, it will be increasingly difficult to sustain the profession.

Each of these issues – the identity of the public TAFE system, the integrity of the profession and the future of union negotiated workload conditions - are so closely intertwined that they are arguably, inseparable. It is for this reason that the work of the AEU in the TAFE sector is so crucial to the future of TAFE in Australia.

I want to thank several people on your behalf for their work throughout 2007. I want to thank Linda Simon for her dedication and commitment to role as TAFE President. It is worth remembering that this is a role that she has on top of her paid job, and it consumes large amounts of time and energy, both of which she gives generously. I want to thank the Executive for their work throughout the year. Most are continuing in their roles for the next two years, and I want to particularly mention Pat Burke and Roberta Blackwood-Beattie, both of whom are moving on this year. I want to acknowledge their contribution to the work of the TAFE division throughout their terms on the Executive, and wish them well. I want to thank Jenni Devereaux whose first year as Editor of *The Australian TAFE Teacher* passed smoothly, and with many accolades from around the VET sector about the high quality and relevance of this publication. I want to thank Paula Messer, without whom, as most of you know the essential work of executive and the AGM would not proceed as it does.