



PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT AND CASUALISATION
ORGANISING, ACTIVISM AND RECRUITMENT IN TAFE

DISCUSSION PAPER

2005 National TAFE Council AGM

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The National TAFE Council Executive resolved to make casualisation and precarious employment, and recruitment and organising around these issues, a major part of the AEU TAFE Division's activity throughout 2005 and beyond. Given the recent election result and other events at the national level in relation to ANTA and the national system, this issue has never been more important.

Recruitment and organising around casual and precarious employment is the theme of the 2005 AGM, and it will be a major focus of our activities throughout 2005.

As a context for our work, what follows is a paper which gives an overview of the current state of affairs in relation to casually and precariously employed teachers in TAFE.

Few of the States and Territories Authorities are willing or able to supply us with accurate information about the number of their employees in TAFE who are casually or precariously employed. Sometimes this is because they do not collect it and therefore do not have it, sometimes it is because they do not want to publicise the information. Interestingly, and not surprisingly, there are no reliable national statistics around levels of casual employment in TAFE and VET nationally, although there is a growing acknowledgement that the level is very high.

If we are to develop an effective campaign to address the increasing casualisation of our sector, we desperately need an accurate snapshot of the current situation in TAFE. The future of the public TAFE system depends on our capacity to address the growing casualisation of the system.

20% of the Australian workforce are hourly paid casuals, with a further 20% termed "contractors"¹. Across the Australian workforce the percentage of hourly paid casuals has doubled in almost twenty years. In TAFE and VET, the level of casual employment has increased at a much greater rate. In TAFE ten years ago, casual employment was less than 10%. The issue for the AEU TAFE Division is that there are now many more casual TAFE teachers across the country than permanently employed teachers – and that very few of these teachers are AEU members. What we do know is that NSW has a casual employment rate of about 78%.² In several other states, the figure is about 50%, with Victoria at 30%, and Tasmania allegedly 20%. The figures in TAFE are significantly higher than any other sector of education within our union³, and significantly greater than the Australian workforce as a whole.

The issues around the number of hourly paid casuals combine with the so-called aging of the TAFE teaching workforce to produce a very worrying mix.

In 1996, 48% of so-called "VET practitioners" (the terminology used in the paper **Enhancing the Capability of the VET Professional**) were aged 45 or over. By 2001, this had increased

¹ Buchanan, J. **Paradoxes of Significance: Australian casualisation and labour productivity**, acirrt working paper 93, p 2

² Referenced in **Enhancing the Capability of the VET Professional**, but also acknowledged in our own research

³ Rates of casual employment in universities are high, and may be comparable with rates in TAFE

to 61%, with 16% aged 55 or more.⁴ The permanent workforce in TAFE is generally older than the non-permanent workforce. The concern for the AEU is that when issues of mode of employment combine with the aging of the workforce, and when this again intersects with the difficulty of recruiting casual teachers, then the prospects for the future of the TAFE sector of the AEU are bleak.

Casual employment damages the quality of teaching and learning within TAFE and robs individual teachers of a decent standard of living, including access to the employment conditions which permanent and even contract teachers experience. Casual employment artificially divides the workforce into two classes, encouraging division between them and resentment on both sides. Casual employment in TAFE is often demeaning and humiliating, forcing teachers to work under conditions which are often intolerable with no bargaining power or capacity to negotiate. Casual employment robs teachers of a professional identity and a secure future. The stark reality is that the AEU must as a matter of urgency work with casual TAFE teachers to reduce the amount of casual employment in the system by securing permanent and more secure employment positions, improve the working conditions of casuals overall, and recruit casuals to the union.

Why does the AEU have difficulty recruiting casuals in TAFE? The issues which confront the union when dealing with the issue of casual or precarious employment are varied and complex:

- The AEU (and its predecessor unions) culturally and politically saw itself as a union for permanent and full time teachers who were in early days the overwhelming majority of TAFE teachers.
- In the past, the union has had an ambivalent attitude towards casuals and contract teachers, derived in part from somewhat old fashioned attitudes towards women in what was originally a male dominated profession.
- TAFE always had a legitimate place for what some states call “sessionals” – “industry experts” - who come in to do a couple of hours with specialist and current industry knowledge. In addition, for a proportion of casual or sessional TAFE teachers, TAFE was their second or night job. What has happened is that the numbers of these people coming in through this “back door” has escalated, but it is also the reason why many casual and contract teachers have been so employed for more than 15 years.
- “Sessional” or hourly paid work was seen by some systems as a legitimate way of recruiting people into the system – “trying them out”. In terms of union recruitment, this has meant that those lucky few who have moved from casual to permanency have spent some considerable time in TAFE without union membership, and arguably this has led to very bad habits.

The casual employment of specialist industry experts over the last ten or so years was a Trojan Horse – a way of essentially altering the make up of the TAFE workforce at a time when the TAFE system was undergoing fundamental and revolutionary change.

⁴ Enhancing, op cit, p60

The growth in the use of casuals has also had a fundamental and dramatic impact on the issue of qualifications and professional development. TAFE and then VET were always different to schools because the requirement for industry experience and expertise meant that the issues of TAFE teachers' qualifications and identity - that is whether TAFE teachers were teachers, or industry experts - have always been "up for grabs". The impact that this has had on the union is significant, because a number of casuals identify as industry experts rather than teachers, and the union's recruitment strategy has focussed on recruiting teachers. Much of the rhetoric in the system has encouraged a degree of animosity towards the union by employers – the employers arguing that the union doesn't understand or fully represent casuals. It is also manifest in attempts by the union to lift the qualifications bar, and to argue for teaching qualifications for teachers, and the antagonistic response from some casual teachers. Witness the significant rhetorical shift in recent times towards "trainers", "assessors", "practitioners" – anything but teachers! The issue of TAFE teacher identity is critical in developing appropriate recruitment strategies for casuals.

Increasing activism and recruitment amongst TAFE casuals

Most Branches and Associated Bodies have grappled with the issue of casual employment over the past few years, with varying levels of success. The AEU and its B/AB's have developed strategies for attempting to improve working conditions for casual teachers in industrial agreements, combined with mechanisms to limit the use of casuals either through industrial arrangements or directly through negotiations with employers.

We intend to showcase some of this work at the AGM, and to encourage Branches and Associated Bodies to share the work they have done and the successful strategies they have developed.

In states where casual employment has spiralled out of control, the employers argue that lack of funding is the prime reason for casual employment, and that until the funding issues are resolved, then the capacity to wind back the number of casuals is limited.

In some states and territories, devolution of employment responsibility to the institute, college or department level has exacerbated the problem, both because it has devolved budget responsibility to these levels, pressuring managers to make choices on budget alone, and also because the monitoring of the level of casual employment is made much more difficult. In many states and territories, employing authorities argue that they are unable to provide statistics because they are not available. While this may be questionable, there is no doubt that devolution at all levels has worked in the interests of employers.

Organising and activism – the challenge of union recruitment

It is critically important that the systemic issues which have contributed to the high level of casual employment in the sector, and the difficulties in persuading casual teachers to join the union, are understood.

If we do not approach these issues analytically, we are in danger of exacerbating the problem by either blaming the casuals, or blaming ourselves and our activists. In most cases neither is right. It is worth remembering that levels of union membership in other highly casualised industries continue to be very low and for the same or similar reasons as they are low in TAFE.

Casual teachers are not easily accessible; they do not have access to the same communication and other structures as permanent teachers; they are only present for the time they teach; and they often do not have access to office and computer space. Frequently they do not have access to professional development, and often they are not networked into the institution's social activities.

Despite all this, casual TAFE teachers are fundamentally the same as permanent TAFE teachers and in most respects, and many of the strategies we use for recruiting and activating generally can be readily adapted to casual teachers.

The AEU recruits teachers because we are identified as a socially progressive union which attends to both the professional and industrial needs of our members. We focus on lobbying around funding for public education and our activism around these issues establishes our credentials as a union worth joining. We have a very public social justice agenda in which our members take pride.

Given this, why have the strategies which appear to have been so effective amongst permanent and ongoing teachers in schools been less successful in TAFE, and particularly amongst casual teachers?

It is the intention of this workshop to attempt to investigate the reasons why casual teachers are not joining the union, to highlight and showcase the strategies and campaigns that have been successful, and to work together to look at innovative and different ways of approaching the issues that confront us in TAFE.

It is worth making the point that enhancing the activist culture of our union is essential not just for recruitment and organising amongst casuals, but amongst all TAFE teachers. Many of our Branches and Associated Bodies are developing campaigns which need to apply across the whole TAFE teaching workforce, especially amongst those who teach in TAFE but are now employed as trainers or in various other categories, without the advantage of the hard won conditions that our union has gained for its members. It is no accident that John Howard wants to have union-free workplaces in vocational education and training, and it must be a key part of any strategy to protect and enhance the working conditions of all our members.

In considering these issues, there are a range of strategies and areas that it is important we traverse. Most of these are issues and strategies which we cover on a daily basis in our organising work, but we often do not have the opportunity to share them with other States and Territories. Many B/ABs have worked hard in their negotiations to include conditions which improve or regulate casual employment, and a great deal of activity goes on at the local level in attempting to convert casual teachers to more permanent forms of employment. These workshops are an opportunity to share ideas and identify some industrial priorities.

Issues around professional identity and professional development are covered in this workshop for several reasons. Critical to our capacity to activate and recruit teachers is the issue of recognition of their professional identity. Many of the contradictions inherent in the more recent changes in the TAFE system have at their core an almost Taylorist approach to teaching and learning, and an active attempt to diminish the work of TAFE teachers. No better example of this exists than casual employment itself. The AEU and its Branches and Associated Bodies remains as often the only voice for the TAFE teaching profession, and for the recognition of the true value of the work of TAFE teachers. This is a strength we must build on. Many aspects of the work we routinely do around issues like flexible delivery need to be more publicly promoted to our membership.

We must develop, in consultation with our casual members, inclusive union structures for the recruitment and organising of casual and precariously employed teachers. It is imperative that we examine our structures to see how appropriate they are for the contemporary working environment of **all** our members. If there are impediments to organising, activating and recruiting which we have either built into our existing structures, or failed to critically examine, then we must have the courage and honesty to address them now. We do not have the luxury of maintaining union barriers to effective strategies in these areas.

We need to expand the very positive work we have done in political campaigning and lobbying over funding and other issues to include casual employment. We know that the levels of casual employment in our sector far exceed those in other sectors of the economy, and we know that there is a close relationship between this and quality in the system. We know that casual employment has an impact on the teaching and learning environment, and affects the capacity of students to succeed. Very significantly, we know that the effects of under-funding of the system have been borne by teachers and other TAFE workers and that this burden has been demoralising and pernicious.

Finally, we have attempted to build this theme into all our work for 2005, scheduling and organising our meetings around seminars and conferences in Queensland, South Australia and Victoria in partnership with state governments. We will take our activities to other states and territories in following years. We are keen to build alliances with other stakeholders in our sector to raise the profile of the union, and to have it identified as a significant contributor to the professional development of TAFE teachers. Most importantly, we are determined that we will not let the issues which we raise in relation to casual employment, however uncomfortable they are for TAFE employers, go away.