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Australian Technical Colleges

The Commonwealth Government has committed \$343m for Australian Technical Colleges (ATCs). The take-up of places in Australian Technical Colleges has so far been less than spectacular. At the time of Senate Estimates in June there were around 280 students enrolled in ATCs. There are currently only five colleges in operation. The Government has set a target of 7,500 places in ATCs by 2008. At this stage, realization of this target seems doubtful.

Why ATCs are not the answer

The ATC proposal is based on the fallacy that skills shortages are due to lack of training opportunities when, in fact, they are due to a complexity of issues, including poor pay and conditions in some entry level traditional trades, lack of investment by industry in apprenticeships, and the failure of Australian industry to develop a training culture. The enrolment target of 7,500 places represents less than half of one per cent of current VET student enrolments. ATCs will not play a major role in addressing Australia's skills shortages.

The ATCs will duplicate existing facilities, waste taxpayers' money, and provide no solutions to the existing shortages for five years. The Howard Government is also using ATCs to pursue its industrial relations agenda requiring them to offer AWAs to staff. This has nothing to do with providing high quality VET.

If ATCs meet their enrolment targets

TAFEs are experiencing shortages of trained trades teachers in many areas and have also suffered a run-down in trade facilities sparked by lack of funding. Duplication of courses and facilities is likely to exacerbate these problems.

ATCs not only receive all the funding that other public or private schools do, they will get extra from the Australian Government and probably from business. Meanwhile, ordinary schools will continue to struggle to find adequate funding for their VET courses. ATCs will encourage competition for already scarce resources while unnecessarily duplicating existing school and TAFE facilities.

If ATCs fail to meet their enrolment targets

Then \$343m which could have been productively spent on improving schools and TAFE will have been wasted.

The alternative

What is needed is a positive and collaborative partnership between all levels of government, and relevant community and industry stakeholders. Supporting strategies and resource models should be developed to enable schools, TAFEs, industry and all levels of government to work cooperatively to meet community needs.