

Shaping the future of

by Pat Forward, Federal TAFE Secretary

More than ten years ago, after the election of the first Howard Government and the funding cuts to TAFE which resulted, many TAFE teachers in trade workshops across the country spoke passionately about what they perceived as the potential demise of their trades, and the frustration of trying to warn TAFE managers of an impending crisis.

In some TAFE Institutes, teachers were forced to go cap in hand to local industry and businesses asking for resources to supplement their departmental budgets. TAFE nationally was in the throes of attempts by a number of state governments to commercialise and marketise the Institutes. In Victoria, Queensland and West Australia, corporatised TAFE Institutes struggled for their economic survival, and many struggled in vain. They were told that economic efficiency and a balanced budget were the new touchstones of performance; that competition for public funding with the nascent crop of private providers, and in many cases other TAFE Institutes, was how they should shape their future.

The voices of trades teachers were alone in sounding the warning of an impending skills shortage. TAFE and technical education struck no chord in the public imagination. TAFE was told to redouble its efforts and grow its enrolments, but grow them with no additional funds; merely the endless pressure to become more efficient.

State governments had long since sold the public utilities which were the vehicle for them to induct a new generation of apprentices into the traditional trades. Employers, like inefficient farmers, were indeed 'eating their seeds' — failing to employ young apprentices, preferring instead to use labour hire agencies, or sweat their existing trained workforce. Every one knew that tradesmen were getting older, but in the back of the collective mind was the belief that many of the traditional trades were going to be overtaken by new technol-

ogies. In a context where planning was abandoned in favor of leaving it up to the market, it was all too hard. Ultimately, investing in education and training took away from the budget 'bottom line'.

Trades workshops across the country fell into disrepair, their plight compounded by the budget pressures within TAFE Institutes. There was no secure employment of new TAFE teachers. Where there was new employment it was overwhelmingly casual or contract. Much of the damage which was done to the public TAFE system was done in those last years of the last century. Like the trades training for which they were responsible, TAFE Institutes

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suffered from a complete abandonment of any principles around the notion of the public good, any attention to the future in terms of medium and long term planning, and a complete shift away from the notion of education as a social good.

Failure to adequately plan, fund and resource the TAFE and VET systems led to the almost farcical situation of successive ANTA Agreements being the subject of bitter and vindictive blame shifting between the Commonwealth and the states and territories in the lead up to the 2004 Federal Election.

During the 2004 Federal Election the Howard government suddenly discovered skills shortages, and turned vindictively on the public TAFE institutions around the country in response. Following a decade of handing organisation of the national VET system over to peak industry groups who had largely controlled policy in the system, Howard now claimed that the states, and the public TAFE system, had failed; that the system now had to become “genuinely industry-led” and run by the

Commonwealth. Howard announced the establishment of 24 Australian Technical Colleges, and an initial \$289 million to fund them. From 2005 to 2009, the Auditor General estimates that in excess of \$585 million will have been expended for a potential 8,400 secondary students. As no ATCs have met their enrolment targets, the actual number of students is much less than this.

The ATC-solution to the skills shortage is a very good example of the Howard government's out-of-touch response to what was clearly a problem which had been a long time coming. It had elements of his 'back to the future', folksy and essentially conservative approach to vocational education. The nominated trades were almost entirely male dominated. The initiative showed a lack of insight, with many arguing that the ATCs simply seek to perpetuate class and social disadvantage and division; narrowing, rather than extending, the options of young working-class boys by streaming them into narrow, employer-determined skills at an age where the real issue for many is their engagement in education.

Ironically, at a time when most respected commentators argue for a vocational education which affords young people access to nationally recognised qualifications, pathways throughout their lives, and an education which genuinely prepares people for a future during which they will have not one but many jobs, the ATC-response was essentially about reacting to youth disengagement by channelling young people into vocational pathways early.

The Howard years have been a litany of knee jerk, populist responses, and ideological solutions to problems which in many cases are the creation of the government itself.

All levels of government have become preoccupied with increasing workforce productivity in the context of a growing reliance on human capital theory. The alarm around skills shortages

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during the 2004 Federal Election captured a mood in the electorate, and further narrowed the debate around vocational education and training. Increasingly, the benefits of VET are explained in limited economic terms. 'Second chance' education is recast as the need to get people off welfare and into employment, and all hopes of maintaining education as an intrinsically valuable shared resource to which citizens are entitled have been abandoned. Vocational education is particularly vulnerable to a much narrower, instrumental approach which sees training as a commodity, a consumer product for which individuals must take responsibility, and must ultimately pay, for they are the ones, it is argued, who benefit economically.

Since the Commonwealth walked away from the ANTA agreement, and a commitment to fund growth in the TAFE and VET system, it has been difficult to establish a mechanism for making a claim on governments for funding of the TAFE system. There is no question that the system has been starved of funds. Funding from the states and territories has declined by 16% since 1997, and from the Commonwealth by a massive 26%. While the VET system grew rapidly in the period from 1995-1999, this growth has not been sustained into this century, and this has made it hard to establish a funding claim. Historically growth in the system

has followed proactive government policy, and government policy appears to be the single most significant contributor to growth in the system. While this may be harder to quantify than factors such as, for example, demographic changes, what it does emphasise is the importance of proactive government policy in encouraging higher levels of participation in vocational education and training, and nobody doubts the importance of increased levels of vocational education for both individuals and for society.

As a union however, our claim for additional funds for TAFE is underpinned by much more than a need to encourage growth in the vocational education system, however important this is. Education at any stage of an individual's life, and in any sector, is never about a commercial exchange between a producer and a consumer; nor is about the transmission of narrowly defined competencies from one individual to another. In each of the vocational areas covered by TAFE, huge bodies of knowledge are brought to bear on the exercising of specialist skills in contemporary work contexts which are increasingly sophisticated and complex. The essentially reductionist approach forced by narrow instrumentalist training in a resource-poor environment will condemn a generation of working people to a very barren working life. In a

punitive industrial relations climate, the bargaining power of workers is further reduced when their access to the broad vocational knowledge which underpins and is an essential part of their trade or vocation is denied by the training system.

Governments are right to ensure that their funding is well spent, and that the public institutions for which they have responsibility acquire this responsibility prudently. But this does not replace a well-considered, broadly-debated and proactive vocational education policy. For ten years, narrow reliance on audit and accounting, on scrutiny and management has been the single driver of the VET system. There has been no genuine attempt to understand the effectiveness of TAFE, or the broad role that TAFE plays in the working and social life of the country, or the lives of the many millions of people it touches.

Additional long term funding commitments from governments are required to ensure collaborative policy development, and to build the capacity of the system. TAFE needs a new discussion with Australian society to enable it to move forward with certainty and confidence. Unions, teachers, students, businesses – all need to break into the very narrow circle of those who currently have a stranglehold on VET policy. The future of TAFE is too important to Australian society. ❖