

## Another Brick in the Wall

Thank you for the opportunity to be part of this panel tonight. My name is Linda Simon and I am a member of the TAFE Community Alliance. We set the Alliance up last year to highlight the impact of the changes on TAFE, and to engage community groups in campaigning against them. We thank the Addison Rd Community Centre for working with us and for their support. I have provided leaflets about the Alliance for you to take and pass on to others and urge you to go to our website where there is lots of information and petitions as well.

So why is vocational education and training the most marketised education sector, and what impact has this had on education?

There are probably a number of responses to this question, but part of the answer lies in the complex nature of VET. It is very often referred to as an industry led system, with its main responsibility to meet the needs of employers and industry. At the same time it has a significant role in second chance and further education, in providing educational opportunities for some of the most disadvantaged in our society and who need support to access qualifications that will lead to jobs or a more fruitful role in society. There are obviously conflicts and tensions in these different expectations of VET. As well we have the tension between considering education for the benefit of the individual versus education to build economic productivity.

Over at least the last decade the pendulum in education overall, but especially in VET, has swung towards

the valuing of education for its delivery of job ready graduates to work in industry areas required by the Australian economy. This impact has been felt most strongly in VET as a large part of its mandate has been about educating young people in a variety of trades and qualifications critical in maintaining strong economic growth. We are the sector that educates the people who literally put the bricks in the wall.

The dominance of a neo-liberal economic view or a free-market economy has had a significant impact on VET. Professor Fred Hilmer may have claimed years later that he did not intend a competitive market philosophy to be applied to education, but it has been. The drivers have both been about cutting the costs of vocational education and training and reducing the educational component of its qualifications. Whilst apprenticeships and traineeships may make up just less than a quarter of the qualifications offered in VET, they dominate much of the dialogue with governments and the philosophy behind them of competency based training and workplace delivery and assessment, has been applied to most of the qualifications offered within the VET sector.

So vocational education and training has become a market in itself, the products of which are the qualifications that students can gain. Governments of all persuasions have adopted and implemented this philosophy, most recently by signing up to the National Skills Partnership Agreement with the Federal Government which obliges them to implement a competitive training

market in VET, to make government funding contestable and to implement an entitlement system for students, in other words a voucher system where students can purchase their training from their selected provider, like in any other market.

Why doesn't a market philosophy work in education? For a start, an effective market requires informed consumers to be able to differentiate between quality and shoddy providers. Students by and large are not informed consumers, but many are those that can be seduced by promises, not of a quality education, but of a quick cheap qualification, or of one for which they can get a loan rather than having to pay upfront fees, or one where they are made promises of a free IPAD. To get a real example of how a market is inappropriate in education, just look at Victoria where in the early days of their competitive market approach hundreds of students used their entitlements to study to become fitness trainers, far more than could get jobs in the industry. There may have been many reasons for their wanting to take on such a career, but informed consumers they were not, and many students were seduced to undertake qualifications with providers who delivered substandard qualifications that did not provide the skills and knowledge needed.

Even without the full implementation of a training market here in NSW we have examples of unscrupulous RTOs offering students with intellectual disabilities, struggling at CII level at TAFE, the chance to enrol in a Diploma of Business, guaranteed successful completion, no up-front fees but rather an expensive loan,

and an IPAD. There is nothing in the current regulatory system that appears to be stopping this sort of exploitation of students.

Unfortunately the use of Training Packages and a competency based system of delivery and assessment in VET, has also added to the marketisation of the sector. Just the terminology gives it away. The sector has been forced to move to a model of training rather than education and at every opportunity possible, governments appear to want to remove the word **education**, whether it is through dropping the name TAFE from their organisations, or cutting qualification requirements for their teaching staff, so that only a Certificate IV in Training is required, or introducing categories of staff whose job is not education but only assessment. As any educator knows, delivery and assessment are integral parts of quality education and inform each other, not to be taken in isolation.

So the immediate future is not good for vocational education and training. Part of the impact of a market philosophy is that the market should dominate and that providers of VET will rise or fall dependent on the market. Because the discriminator in the market is unfortunately not educational quality, but rather short cheap courses that supposedly deliver the skills that industry needs now rather than the knowledge and skills that students might need over a career, then TAFE as the public provider is being sorely undermined. In Victoria where TAFE used to deliver some 80% of vocational education and training, it now delivers less than 50% and there are hundreds of RTOs now operating in

the market, many of which do not have facilities, do not use highly qualified and well paid teachers, and look for the best way to make a profit. For after all that is what private providers are about, making a profit.

You probably heard the announcement from the Prime Minister last Sunday at the ALP launch, where far too late in the day he recognised the problem of the effects of the market philosophy on TAFE, and said that he would expect states to support and fund their TAFE systems, or that the Commonwealth would intervene and directly fund the colleges. This is of course far too late for an ailing TAFE system, and after Saturday the marketisation of VET will probably be increased, rather than wound back.

One of the further consequences of these changes is that under a market philosophy, supposedly all providers are created equal. In other words what we have been seeing for some time now, is that TAFE is being reconfigured to operate like a business so that it has the supposed autonomy to operate like a private provider. Changes made by the NSW Government last week highlighted this. TAFE Institutes will be encouraged to make increased amounts of revenue from commercial enterprises, and will be able to keep their own profits. TAFE NSW has been saying for some time now that if it is to compete with private providers, it needs to cut costs. The costly part of TAFE is in paying its staff, and cuts to costs have already resulted in many teachers losing jobs, both permanent and part time casual teachers, and TAFE looking at ways to have low-

cost trainers and assessors in the system. The impact on student services has yet to be realised, as NSW moves to introduce a fully competitive market through Smart and Skilled NSW, in July next year. We do know from proposals in the IPART draft report on fees and charges, that the amount of money to be provided by the government to deliver qualifications will not be enough in many cases to ensure quality delivery, and that student fees will be considerably increased, all aspects of a marketised, and rapidly becoming, privatised sector.

Fortunately for the students of the future, trends in education are cyclical, and some time down the track there will be a realisation that education is important in its own right, and that we need to recognise far more the benefits to not just the individual, but society overall, of a strong and critical education system in all its parts. And there will be a swing back to education for many reasons not just for jobs in a market. But what will be the damage? Will there still be a public system of vocational education and training? Will TAFE, the provider of technical and further education, survive the onslaught of these conservative philosophies?

In the TAFE Community Alliance, we use the slogan **TAFE is too important to lose**. We'll continue to campaign and hope you will join us in doing so.

***Linda Simon***