

Restructuring vocational education and training provision in Australia: Exploring the impact on teachers' work



Changes in teachers' work and the challenges facing teacher unions

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Pat Forward

ABSTRACT: The vocational education and training (VET) sector in Australia has undergone a prolonged period of substantial and significant restructuring. Reforms have been driven by a pressure to increase market forces within the system, and to gear 'outputs' ever more closely to economic considerations and the needs of industry. This paper outlines the key elements of VET reform and links these developments to the ideological dominance of market based policy in the public sector, and the influence of human capital theory on education policy. The paper explores the impact of these reforms on teachers' labor process, and some implications for the Australian Education Union.

The modern Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system in Australia had its genesis in the mid-1970s in the wave of reform generated by the Whitlam Labor government. The Education Minister of the time, in tabling the report of the Kangan Committee in Parliament in April, 1974 described the major shift of emphasis for the sector:

It abandons the narrow and rigid concept that technical colleges exist simply to meet the manpower needs of industry, and adopts a broader concept that they exist to meet the needs of people as individuals ... The report also takes a long step in the direction of lifelong education and of opportunities for re-entry to education. It recommends unrestricted access for adults to vocationally oriented education. (Beazley, as cited in Goozee, 2001, p.26)

However, ever since this promising beginning there has been a struggle to retain these values and aspirations in the face of persistent efforts to both reduce costs and re-focus the vocational education and training (VET) curriculum as a narrower and more skills-driven model. These developments can initially be traced to the Hawke and Keating administrations when, during the period of the Accord between government and organized labor, initial attempts were made to marketize the system and re-organize the curriculum. This restructuring of the service continued apace under the Howard administration, with a relentless drive to promote system privatization and further vocationalization of the curriculum. However, a particular feature of the Hawke government was its use of industrial relations restructuring to undermine the power of organized labor in the sector and to challenge the ability of the sector union, the Australian Education Union (AEU), to defend and represent its members, particularly in the professional area.

This paper seeks to set out the key features of VET restructuring in the period since the 1980s and up to the defeat of

the Howard government in November 2007. It seeks to identify the central discourses that have shaped policy direction, and as such the paper adopts a policy analysis approach, drawing on Dye's (1992) presentation of policy analysis as explaining "what governments do, and why." In seeking to explain the key factors shaping policy a particular focus is placed on the role of market ideologies and the increasing influence of human capital theory (HCT) in shaping TAFE education policy. These reforms have had significant consequences for teachers who work in the sector. Marketization has placed a premium on efficiency measures and resulted in an increasing pressure to drive down labor costs, in particular through casualization. At the same time the narrowing of the curriculum has impacted significantly on teachers' control over curriculum decisions and teachers' ability to make professional judgments about appropriate pedagogies.

During this period of reform the AEU has sought to protect its members from the negative consequences of reform on teachers' labor process, but it has also had to come to terms with a much more hostile bargaining environment. The paper concludes by exploring some of the implications of these developments for union organization, and identifying prospects for future union strategy.

Labor's Social Contract-The Restructuring of Vocational Education

Almost twenty years ago, under a Labor government, Australia's vocational education and training system was set on a path which radically transformed it. Those who would defend the revolution then, when looking at the somewhat bleak landscape which confronts us now, argue that the revolution was hijacked by an in-coming conservative government, which took advantage of the changes which had already occurred, and turned the nascent system into something much more aligned with the neo-liberal agenda which they sought to impose across the whole political landscape. Others believe that the seeds of the neo-liberal agenda were planted with the original reforms.

Since the 1980s in Australia ... education reform (and particularly VET reform) has been driven by a neo-liberal agenda which reconstructed education systems according to the principles of 'human capital theory.' The role of education and training was recast as an instrument of micro-economic reform within a broader program of reform that redefined (and reduced) the role of the state, marketised many areas of public provision and commodified social relations through consumer sovereign models of citizenship. (Wheelahan, 2004, p. 2)

The restructuring of vocational education cannot be separated from the Accord phase of Australia's history when the Australian Labor Party (ALP) responded to balance of payments and currency crises with a program of neo-liberal inspired economic restructuring including financial deregulation, tight finance, and 'competition' policies. However, a distinctive social-democratic nuance to this reform was the negotiation of a new settlement between the state and organized labor in the form of a social contract between government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). As part of the Accord, organized labor traded wage restraint in return for an enhanced social wage and associated benefits. It is not the purpose of this paper to assess the merits or otherwise of the Accord in terms of its benefits for organized labor, or indeed argue whether the strategy can even be described as "social democratic" (Phillips, 1995). What is important for the purpose of this paper is to note the way in which Australian unions retreated from the more ambitious attempts to influence the ALP government's economic strategy through industry planning, and instead re-focused to "intervene and shape restructuring to push Australian industry along the 'high road' to international competitiveness-a 'high wage, high skill' economy-by addressing skill gaps and enhancing labor flexibility whilst opening up access to skills and career paths for disadvantaged labor groups" (Buchanan & Briggs, 2004, p. 7). At this point organized labor tacitly accepted the ALP's neo-liberal analysis of Australia's economic problems and increasingly focused attention on securing international competitiveness by raising productivity through enhanced skill development.

Reform of the TAFE system-of vocational education and training-was critical. As part of the Accord Australian unions were given a more significant say in the shaping of policy and the ACTU played a key role in the restructuring of vocational education during this period. A specific feature of this shift in policy direction was the abandonment of the earlier vision of TAFE as articulated by Kangan, and instead a clear narrowing of the TAFE mission. As Wheelahan (2004) argues:

The reforms to VET meant that the outcomes sought from vocational education and training subsequently narrowed, and in Australia this was expressed through limiting VET as training for work, focussed on detailed outcomes as specified by industry (p. 2).

This restructuring of vocational education assumed two distinct, but interdependent, forms. First was a curricula shift towards outcomes focused competency based training (CBT). The emphasis on CBT represented a clear narrowing of the TAFE model and a lowering of the aspirations that the labor movement had traditionally invested in further education. CBT introduced an essentially individualistic and atomized approach to the curriculum, paving the way for the de-skilling of teachers' labor process along Taylorist lines (Wheelahan, 2005). Indeed the Taylorisation of the curriculum, with its concomitant impact on TAFE teachers' work, has continued apace as CBT has metamorphosed into the development of 'Training Packages.' Training Packages represent narrow, formulaic 'skill kits' (Carlson, 1987) and are described by Wheelahan (2004) in the following terms:

Training packages consist of prescriptive, reductive and atomistic lists of competencies. They strip knowledge from learning in VET, and result in impoverished learning in which learners do not acquire the 'learning to learn' skills necessary for today's complex, changing world. Competencies embody codified skills (but not necessarily knowledge) that reflect current and past workplace practices and not those required for continuous change. Furthermore, training packages are too narrowly focused on work to the neglect of broader skills, knowledge and attributes that people need to manage their careers in a changing world and be active citizens who contribute to their local communities and broader society (p. 8-9).

The consequence for TAFE teachers of these reforms has been a serious assault on their professional autonomy and their freedom to determine appropriate pedagogies. Curricula outcomes became both narrower and more prescriptive, facilitating increased control over teachers' labor process. However, TAFE teachers' objections to this process of de-skilling received little support from the wider union movement where teacher resistance was often characterized as an attempt by the profession to defend privilege and existing control of the curriculum.

The second feature of restructuring during this period was a determination to create an 'open market' which would both encourage, and in some cases create, a range of private providers (community and volunteer groups, employers' in-house schemes, and professional organizations) to compete alongside the public provider-TAFE. As Buchanan and Briggs (2004) argue:

The focus of the policy was the construction of institutional infrastructure to support the training market (e.g. national recognition framework for private providers) the introduction of a training levy to create a pool of capital to kick start the market and the commercialisation of the TAFE sector to integrate the public provider into the training market (p.10).

Wheelahan (2005) argues that these neo-liberal reforms to VET were enacted to create markets within VET that blur the public-private divide and impose the discipline of markets, managerialism and audit culture. It is important to recognize therefore that much of the marketization of the sector that is the current source of so many of its problems was set in motion during the period of the Accord and was firmly established by the time the Howard government was elected in 1996.

The Accord period delivered TAFE teachers an intolerable intrusion into their working lives. Where the partnership between the ACTU and the government in other industries sought to increase the status of much of the work that workers undertook, in education many of the architects of the Accord displayed an extraordinary suspicion and contempt for teaching in TAFE, and sought to actively and vigorously exclude teachers from the reform process (illustrated for example by the exclusion of teachers from any of the major decision making bodies formed during the national training reform period-including from the Australian National Training Authority itself, and from Industry Training Advisory Boards). Few other unions would have tolerated the tinkering with their work which occurred in vocational education and training, and arguably much of the current malaise in the system is due in no small part to the separation of education from the so-called training work that goes on within TAFE and which was endorsed by the wider union movement. What is more, such developments arguably created the conditions in which a much more explicitly anti-union and anti-public sector government could press ahead with more far-reaching and draconian reforms of the sector.

Gloves Off: The Howard Government and TAFE Restructuring

When the Howard government was elected in 1996, in many ways there was no significant change to the underpinning approach to VET. As has been argued, marketization and the development of a narrow, skills-driven curriculum, were processes that were well established by the previous administration. What was different was that the Howard government made clear from the outset its overwhelming hostility to the trade union movement, and its determination to enact changes to industrial relations in Australia to diminish the role of trade unions in the workplace.

A desire to break the power of organized labor was arguably one of the defining features of the Howard administration and characterized policy throughout its time in office. It is certainly not restricted to an assault on the AEU. For example, the industrial "reforms" of the Howard government, in a sense the first wave of their changes, saw the introduction of individual industrial contracts-Australian Workplace Agreements, and a range of other mechanisms designed to undermine the collective industrial awards and agreements which were the defining characteristic of employment arrangements for public sector teachers in Australia. It was this first wave of industrial reform which saw the waterfront shut down in Australia during 1998, when employers used the provisions of the Workplace Relations Act to sack an entire workforce, and replace it with contractors. Because teachers in the public sector in Australia are employed by their respective state or territory government, some were protected from the first raft of reforms because they were covered by the state industrial, rather than the federal industrial system. Indeed, the Howard industrial agenda saw a number of state branches of the AEU move their awards and agreements back into the state sphere in order to protect their members. Some states were not as lucky. Both Victoria and Western Australia at the time had Liberal state governments, whose approach to labor relations and the marketization of the economy mirrored that of the Howard government.

The Howard government seized the momentum of market reform of the TAFE system, accelerating the privatization of VET through unashamedly pro-privatization policies. State and territory governments were required to implement 'User Choice' and competitive tendering of all funding. Throughout the late 90s, during the period of what was termed "growth through efficiencies," the public TAFE system in Australia was forced to fund what was extraordinary growth in the sector by cutting the unit costs of provision. In successive negotiations between the states and territories and the Commonwealth government post 1996, the Howard government refused to honor the agreement negotiated between the Keating government and the states and territories in 1993 to fund growth in the VET system. TAFE teachers bore the brunt of diminished funding for the sector, in an industrial climate that severely curtailed their capacity to take industrial action in defense of their wages and working conditions. By the end of the 1990s, the TAFE sector was one of the most casualized education sectors, with more than 50% of teachers nationally employed on a casual basis. In one large state, the number of casually employed TAFE teachers is greater than 70%.

On October 9, 2004, the Howard coalition government won a fourth term in office and by this time a discourse had emerged that presented Australia's economic problems in terms of a crisis in the supply of skills, an analysis largely supported by representatives of big business. The Australian Industry Group (AiG) presented the skills shortages as "catastrophic" and James Baron, CEO of Group Training Australia has argued in personal correspondence with the author that:

Australia has skill shortages in every traditional trade. All essential, residential, commercial and industrial services are suffering-all the engineering trades, all the vehicle trades, all the construction trades, all the food trades, as well as electrical/electronics, printing, wood, hairdressing and furniture upholstery.

The irony of these skill shortages, coming after more than ten years of the vocational education system being "industry led" (Brown, 2006), was not lost on teacher union members. Neither was the irony that the Howard government's solution to these skill shortages was to give even more control of VET to big business, to the apparent exclusion of every other stakeholder in the system. In the years following the 2004 election the policy of the Howard administration in relation to VET was characterized by two distinctive features. First was a program of privatization, most clearly illustrated by the creation of 24 Australian Technical Colleges (ATCs)-essentially private VET colleges, funded entirely by the Commonwealth, with an estimated cost per student of four or five times the cost of sending an equivalent student to school or TAFE.

The second feature of the Howard government policy was essentially a power-grab where control of the VET system became increasingly centralized with power shifting upwards from states and territories to the central administration. For example, within days of the 2004 election victory, Howard announced the abolition of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA); the Keating initiated joint Commonwealth/state and territory body which had overseen the development of the National Training System in Australia since 1992. All functions of ANTA were taken over by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). However, it was through increased control over funding that the central state managed to increase its grip on the VET system. In the lead up to the 2004 election the state and territory and Commonwealth governments had been unable to reach any agreement on future funding for the VET system. Despite assurances given to the states and territories that funding would be assured during the protracted negotiations around the reorganization of the system during 2005, this was not to be the case.

Immediately upon the passing of the Skilling Australia's Workforce Bill through the Senate on August 17, 2005, each state and territory minister was notified that funding would be withheld from them unless they signed up to new bilateral VET agreements. The Howard government signaled that it intended to force the states into accepting new arrangements and that funding was the "big stick." While a number of state governments held out for a few weeks, the final sign up by all states and territories signaled the conclusion of the first phase of the Howard takeover of the vocational education and training system.

The new arrangements proposed in the Skilling Australia's Workforce Act, and the proposals contained in contingent bilateral agreements with the states and territories were remarkable because they incorporated key elements of the Howard government's industrial relations reforms into arrangements for the delivery of vocational education and training. These arrangements included a requirement to offer all employees in TAFE the new version of Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs), individual contracts revamped under the then impending Workchoices legislation to bypass and undermine collectively bargained awards and agreements. Other arrangements went to the heart of TAFE teachers' work. They included a requirement to offer performance pay and implement performance management systems. The decision by the Howard government to link its 30% share of funding for VET to industrial and organizational arrangements with the TAFE institutes was remarkable both for its audacity, and its arrogance.

More recently, in February 2006, the Council of Australian Governments¹ (COAG) agreed to a National Reform Agenda to "enhance the capability and contribution of the Australian people-the nation's human capital. It will continue competition reforms to make our markets work more efficiently and will reduce the regulatory burden on Australian business" (COAG, 2006, p. 2).

The centre of the reform process in vocational education and training has now been shifted to COAG rather than the education and/or training departments of the state and territory governments, or even DEST. This has sent a very strong signal to the Australian community about the significance to the national economy of reforms to the VET sector in the context of arguments that the establishment of a national, industry-led system had faltered, and in the context of a "show of strength" by the Federal government. The Howard government's abolition of ANTA and its use of its minority funding share in the VET system to enforce industrial and other reforms to the sector were all evidence of this "show of strength." However, the most significant effect of locating the authority of the reform process within COAG was arguably to shift the debate away from public scrutiny, disturbing the traditional mechanisms used by groups like unions for influencing or lobbying the governments. State and territory Labor governments responded to the agenda of the Howard government in apparently contradictory ways. In VET, policy and strategic direction was removed from those within government who had the most knowledge of the system, and the influence of state and territory bureaucrats on policy became, at best, contradictory. For the AEU, this meant that many of the traditional mechanisms for influencing decisions has been undermined.

The Federal government's success in centralizing its power over the VET system, and to an extent the acquiescence of state and territory governments in this process, made it much easier for the central state to shape the nature of policy in relation to Australian TAFE. Centralization therefore facilitated a process whereby pressures for privatization and marketization have been accelerated, where the curriculum continues to be impoverished (through, for example, perpetuating the false dichotomy between 'vocational' and 'general' education) and where TAFE teachers' working conditions and professional identity suffer further erosion (in many contexts teachers are no longer called teachers, but rather trainers, assessors, or facilitators).

VET Restructuring-Identifying the Driving Forces

Policy in relation to VET is clearly multi-faceted and complex. In this paper I have sketched out key elements of policy and tried to illustrate the broad strategic direction policy has taken over a period of more than twenty years. In so doing I wish to acknowledge complexity and nuance, and to recognize for example significant differences over time, or between states. Nevertheless I want to argue that it is possible to present some defining features of VET policy, which are now deeply embedded and which have significant implications for the future direction of the sector, and the type of system that students will learn in, and teachers will work in. In so doing I want to focus on two key themes which I believe have driven VET policy for over twenty years, and which continue to shape its current and future format, despite the recent change of government. These themes are a commitment to marketization, and the development of human capital as a key plank in economic policy.

Marketization.

In the earlier part of this paper I have mapped out some of the key ways in which VET policy has been shaped by both Labor and Liberal Party commitments to market-driven reform of the sector. Privatization, competition, and User Choice have become the lexicon of the TAFE sector, but it is important to understand the impact of marketization on the system and the pressures that have driven its introduction.

Damon Anderson, in his study of the impact of market reform of TAFE argues that while overall his findings are equivocal about the impact of market reform on quality in vocational education and training, from a TAFE perspective quality has not improved, and indeed has declined under competitive tendering and user choice. He suggests that there may have been a modest improvement in quality in small non-TAFE providers, but that other circumstantial evidence found that a large proportion of TAFE institutes were:

- * Less inclined to share information and resources
- * Diverting resources from training delivery to both administration and marketing
- * Giving a higher priority to cost-reduction than quality improvement as a result of competitive tendering and user choice (Anderson, 2006).

Consequently Anderson goes on to argue:

Market reform appears to be changing the values, priorities and motivations of VET providers in significant ways, with potentially adverse consequences for the public interest. As a result of market reform, TAFE institutes are driven more by efficiency and financial and commercial objectives, than by equity and educational and skills formation objectives...Overall the imperatives of market competition appear to be overshadowing government policy and planning priorities as drivers of VET provision. In effect, doing business and remaining financially viable, if not profitable, seem to be incrementally supplanting the public interest role and responsibilities of TAFE providers (p. 35).

A key feature of VET marketization must therefore be seen as the pressure to drive down costs. The relentless rise in market forces has been used to impose a 'discipline' on the sector, to reduce costs and thereby increase 'value for money.' In a global economic environment in which traditional developed countries, with their welfare states and corresponding tax regimes, are seen as less attractive to capital than the small state/low tax economies of south-east Asia, there is a growing pressure to contain public expenditure. In labor-intensive industries, such as education, the drive to contain costs falls largely on the labor force. It is for these reasons that TAFE teachers have seen unprecedented degrees of casualization. By the end of the 1990s the TAFE sector was one of the most casualized education sectors. Casual employment is eating away at the heart of the TAFE teaching workforce, undermining an already demoralized profession, and accelerating the impact of policies of marketization (Cully, 2005; Kronemann, 2001; Kell, 2006). While state and territory governments maintain the primary responsibility for employment of TAFE teachers, even where they have employed slights of hand and devolved this responsibility to "autonomous" institutes, then they must also accept responsibility for the deplorable state of employment arrangements. There is no question that the system is under-funded. There is no question that the impact of this lack of funds has been felt at critical points in the system-at the points of interaction between TAFE teachers and their students. But there is also no question that those who have borne the impact of these policies are TAFE teachers.

The VET system has normalized poor employment practice, using the idea of "industry experts" as a cover. While the particular nature of vocational education and training lends itself to the employment of industry experts to bring current industry experience to institutional provision, nevertheless, to argue that the main focus of contract and casually-employed teachers is not teaching, but their own industry is inaccurate, and contradicts much of the work done on casual teaching in TAFE. The AEU's own research (Kronemann, 2001) has shown that the majority of casually-employed TAFE teachers see their main focus of work as teaching. Nevertheless the dominant discourse in the system is one of constructing casually-employed TAFE teachers as "industry experts" primarily, and often not as teachers at all. This in some way is presented to justify the employment practice. A recent inquiry into the future of TAFE in Australia conducted by the AEU established clearly that casually-employed teachers had been employed for extensive periods of time as casuals, were overwhelmingly disillusioned and wanted permanent employment.

This impact on teachers' working conditions of course reveals another reason behind the drive to marketization-and that is to undermine the power and influence of the AEU. Teachers are a well organized part of the workforce and their union organization has provided an effective defense against attempts to worsen working conditions, or reduce professional autonomy. Marketization must therefore be seen in the context of a deliberate and strategic attempt to undermine the union and to create the conditions which militate against its effectiveness. In this sense the market reforms cannot be separated from the Howard government's industrial relations reforms, and in particular the imposition of Australian Workplace Agreements which in states such as Victoria and West Australia were used to significantly undermine teaching conditions in relation to teaching hours, preparation and correction time, and hours of non-attendance at the workplace.

The Development of Human Capital.

In order to understand the nature of educational reform in Australia in the last twenty years, and in particular, the forensic attention paid to vocational education, it is important to be cognizant of the influence of human capital theory, especially as a de facto component of economic policy. Human capital theory frames the skills agenda of all the major political parties in Australia and is clearly evident in the education and economic policies of the new Labor government. Human capital theory:

considers education relevant in so far as education creates skills and helps to acquire knowledge that serves as an investment in the productivity of the human being as an economic production factor, that is, as a worker. Thus education is important because it allows workers to be more productive, thereby being able to earn a higher wage. By regarding skills and knowledge as an investment in one's labour productivity, economists can estimate the economic returns to education for different educational levels, types of education, etc. (Robeyns, 2005, p. 4).

The apparent attraction of human capital theory in an age of so-called 'knowledge economies' suggests that competitiveness can be secured through increased productivity, which in turn results from a high-skill labor force. For relatively high-wage economies (compared with the emerging industrializing nations) it is this analysis that makes HCT attractive to both neo-liberal governments and organized labor, and which often accounts for union emphases on 'bargaining for skills.' In this context Marginson (1997) argues that education and training became subordinated to national economic policy through the policy reforms of the late 1980s and early 1990s:

Everywhere, education was seen as crucial to economic competitiveness, mobilised for economic reconstruction, and embedded in micro-economic reform, corporatisation and marketisation. The formation of citizens in education was subordinated to its new economic mission....this time the objective was not so much the broad development of the skills and talents of the nation, as in the late Keynesian period, but the development of those specific aspects of education and research that assisted national economic competitiveness (p. 151).

However, there are a number of problems with this approach, and to a great extent we are seeing these problems emerge as we speak. It is an economic model, where the only benefits from education which are considered or counted are increased productivity or higher wages. It is a model which blocks out the cultural, social, and non-material dimensions of life: "In human capital theory, as in other parts of mainstream economics, human beings act for economic reasons only" (Robeyns, 2005, p. 4). Human capital theory is entirely instrumental-it values education, skills, and knowledge only in so far as they contribute to expected economic productivity. For this reason, knowledge

which is not seen to be immediately economically instrumental has no investment value from a human capital perspective.

It is this emphasis on the utilitarian and functional that has resulted in the shift to a more narrowly focused TAFE curriculum, one in which the Kangan Report's (ACOTAFE, 1974) aspiration for an education system that focuses "primarily on the needs of the individual" (p. 9) seems very distant. Rather, in the prevailing political climate, VET bureaucrats and administrators struggle with any aspects of vocational education and training that are not captured by functional Training Packages. The education element of vocational education and training has been narrowed into key competencies, and these have increasingly morphed into employability skills. Employability skills are now being uncritically inserted into secondary curriculum around the country, and in some states are even being discussed in the context of primary curriculum. Similarly, the push by governments and employers to shorten apprenticeships is not about improving the opportunities or skills of young working class people. Shortening apprenticeships is about imposing narrow, employer-determined technical skills, and removing the contextual and situated knowledge young people need to apply those skills in powerful or conscious ways. It is also about denying the working class access to powerful knowledge, and the capacity to continue to access education throughout their lives (Wheelahan, 2007).

The consequence of these reforms for teachers is that their professional autonomy and judgment has been challenged significantly. The adoption of prescribed outputs through Training Packages has been deliberately used to undermine teachers' ability to provide a broader, more holistic and, dare one say it, more critical approach to education of the type traditionally championed by professionals in the TAFE sector. At the same time, new performance management arrangements have been introduced to further tie teachers into the system.

Conclusion

The VET system in Australia has been systematically stripped of its educational aspirations, with a narrow focus placed on skills training, delivered in forms that provide value for money. The system now suffers from being driven by a combination of market imperatives and human capital outputs that has fundamentally altered the character of the service over a period extending more than 20 years, and which has accelerated markedly in the past decade. The defeat of the Howard government, and the election of a Labor administration is likely to bring about some improvement, but it is difficult to identify a fundamental shift in the general trajectory of policy. The dominance of global economic forces continues to provide the compass that directs the policies of nation states. What is apparent is not just the way in which marketization and human capital theory have driven policy, but the complex way in which these pressures become mutually reinforcing of each other. The neo-liberal extension of market relations to all spheres of social life, and not just the economy, has changed the nature and outcomes of education and training. Education and training has been marketized and commodified. Public policy has transformed education into a 'quasi-market' where 'customers' exercise 'choice' based on self-interested and self-maximizing decisions. Market behaviors are to be instilled in individuals through the education and training system. Curriculum has been reshaped to be aligned with employer requirements, not just in terms of specific skills, but in shaping world view of its 'products' (students). Look no further than employability skills to understand how complete the revolution in the VET system has been.

The dominance of the human capital agenda, and the extent to which VET policy is now business driven, is becoming increasingly clear. The consequence of this is a skewed TAFE curriculum which sacrifices broader educational objectives for employer-defined economic utilitarianism. Doughney and Wheelahan (2005) present the difference in the following terms:

The skills of employers and the learning needs of individuals are not the same. An assumption that the two are synonymous leads to abstracting the skill from the bodies of the people who must exercise the skills. Providers are not teaching skills, they are teaching people. The capacity to exercise skill at work is an emergent property of more fundamental, complex and wide-ranging knowledge, skills and abilities. This capacity relies on the full development of the individual—an individual who has the capacity to live within and make connections between their personal, working and civic lives. So while employers may need specific skills, the conditions for securing these skills rests upon an individual's capacities to exercise them, and this capacity cannot be developed by limiting teaching to just those skills (p.10).

The consequences of these reforms have had a profound impact on TAFE teachers—the people who work at the core of the VET system. Working conditions have suffered badly, especially in states and territories where these policies have been pursued more vigorously. As has been indicated, rates of casualization are scandalously high and this contributes directly to a growing sense of insecurity and demoralization within the profession. However, it would be only a partial picture that presented the impact of TAFE teachers purely in terms of working conditions. At least, if not more, significant is the extent to which TAFE teachers' professionalism and professional identity has been challenged by the drive towards a narrow training agenda. Teachers' professional opinions have been marginalized at all levels of the system, both at national policy and institutional levels. Teachers have been compelled to forego a more rounded approach to teaching and curriculum design as they have been strait-jacketed by, for example, the introduction of Training Packages or the shortening of apprenticeships.

All of these developments have had profound consequences for the organization teachers look to for protection: the AEU. However, not only has the union had to come to terms with a policy environment less hospitable to union organization, but the union itself has been the direct target of government policy. The AEU, therefore, is having to come to terms with policies which both indirectly and directly undermine its ability to defend its members.

Teachers and their work are at the centre of TAFE. For TAFE teachers, the goal of their work is the development of the human beings they teach. In shorthand terms, it is about what Freire (1970) refers to as the citizen learner-worker. Teachers do not make skill formation, or human capital formation or economic growth their goal. Teachers do not see students as bundles of skills or inputs into the supply stream of the economic system. Education is a social process. Teachers are not 'deliverers,' and students are not 'bundles of skills.'

It is critical to the future of TAFE that teachers and their union reassert their right to work collectively, both professionally and industrially. In this context, it is particularly important that we advocate and articulate the need for networks of teachers to be established, and where they already exist, to be supported, both economically and industrially. TAFE teachers have responsibilities to their students and to the system. They have the right to work collaboratively, to have control over their working environment, and to shape the learning environment. The TAFE system depends upon a well educated, well trained, autonomous teaching workforce which has access to supported, collaborative, professional networks.

TAFEs are public institutions. They play a number of complex and sophisticated roles in the community. They already have, often directly through the networks of teachers who work with them, fine relationships with their local industry and community groups. TAFEs need to be properly supported in this role. Their role needs to be expanded, and they themselves can help break down the silos of different layers of government and different departments within government. If their role in industry planning was expanded, they could play a much more useful role in assisting local communities to investigate the development of new industries. If they were supported adequately, the strength of the relationships which they currently have could be built upon and developed. Their interest would be with communities, not just with businesses. They are social institutions, and they belong to the communities they serve. We should assert this, and argue for real support for the role that TAFE plays.

There is no turning back for TAFE, and there is very little to be found in the past. Despite what we may want to believe in a world where markets dominate, and economic rationalism is the only rationalism apparent in debates, the past was not all good. We need to initiate and encourage debate around the teaching and learning that goes on in TAFE. TAFE is not just about narrow technical skills determined by industry, signified by Training Packages and verified by audits. It is also not about a deficit model of second chance education. It is about the type of education all people have a right to enable them to participate as citizens in contemporary society.

The future of the public TAFE system in Australia, and of the TAFE sector of the AEU are intertwined, and there is a logic in this. The AEU is now one of the largest trade unions in Australia, and its success in recruiting, and organizing its teacher members, and promoting the public education system is acknowledged. The TAFE sector of the AEU has more than held its own in terms of recruitment numbers, and also in terms of political and industrial influence, both at state and territory and at a federal level. But the future is challenging. The AEU must focus on and build its capacity to develop strategic responses in the professional, industrial, and public policy areas. The apparent tension between

industrial and professional issues is a false dichotomy, promoted by TAFE employers to encourage a narrow view of the TAFE teaching profession. TAFE employers perpetuate a deficit model of an aging workforce pre-occupied with defense of working conditions rather than the interests of their students. In reality, the TAFE teaching profession and indeed the AEU are the key defenders of a public vocational education system, and the working class youngsters who have an entitlement to it.

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Endnote

1 The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is the peak intergovernmental forum in Australia. COAG comprises the Prime Minister, State Premiers, Territory Chief Ministers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA). It was established in May 1992. Its role is to initiate, develop and monitor the implementation of policy reforms that are of national significance and which require cooperative action by Australian governments.

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