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Inquiry into the role of Technical and Further Education system and its operation

From Neil Hauxwell

I ask that the inquiry consider the following comments-

Personal Perspective

I have worked in a wide range of roles in Victorian TAFE and AMES since 1980, Initially in unemployed youth programs then later in Adult literacy, Workplace Basic Education and in a range of general education programs such as VCAL, CGEA, VCE , and CWE. More recently I have written maths programs for apprentices, been responsible the organisation-wide assessment of the literacy/numeracy skills of GippsTAFE apprentices and trainees, and developed Sustainability components in various trade and community programs.

Organisational Culture of Victorian TAFE in Recent Years

Over the past decade or so, some larger TAFEs have obtained a considerable portion of their incomes from overseas students and entrepreneurial activity. This has often been to the detriment of “core” education and training delivery. I believe that the success of the few (in generating additional funds) has led to the emulation by many. This has changed the senior management culture in most TAFEs. The language and strategies of leadership have moved from notions of “serving industry and community” to resemble that those of gung-ho corporate sales people. The result is that government funding has been utilized in pursuit of sometimes ill-considered corporate ambitions. TAFEs, in recent times, are more likely to have an extensive and well-resourced Marketing and/or Business Development Department than to have significant numbers of staff researching and responding to local community and industry needs.

The enthusiasm of many TAFE CEOs to play at “Corporate Cowboy” has made the system vulnerable to attack from sections of the state bureaucracy intent on imposing market fundamentalism on the state’s further education and training.

Problems with the “Market Model” of Technical and Further Education Delivery

My opinions in this regard have been formed by my work in TAFE in the Latrobe Valley/Gippsland. I believe however that they are relevant to most of regional Victoria.

Flip though any regional local government “Plan for the future” document and it’s an odds-on bet that there will be a prominent section on retaining and expanding local industry employment. Apart from financial security and community wellbeing, the drift of the “best

and brightest” of young people to Melbourne is a major concern for rural and regional Victorians.

Research into the literacy/numeracy skills of adult Australians over the years clearly indicates that many Australian adults will need to train, retain or extend their general education in order to respond to changing employment skill needs.

TAFE needs to improve its program content and delivery to address regional employment development and to foster life-long education. Unfortunately, imposing “market solutions” has already closed campuses in smaller centres and “dumbed down” training content. If this “Privatising” of TAFE is allowed to continue, it is regional Victorians who will lose the most.

In marketing parlance, the markets for further education and technical training in the regions are both diverse and diffuse. While a Melbourne organisation such as CAE can readily assemble a viable class, say of migrants from Africa, with a similar level of language skills, the same will not be possible in Bruthen or Bright or even Barnawartha. Similarly, training/retaining people for jobs in capital cities has much better economies of scale than for jobs in the bush.

Regional TAFEs have until recent years been the most effective regional providers of adult general education. This was the result of cooperative approaches to staff training and program development. Reducing TAFE to yet more competitive entities squabbling over copyright, commercial-in-confidence and maximised dollar returns will destroy rather than enhance regional further education. It is a formula to extend pockets of regional poverty and disadvantage.

On-line learning is being held as a desirable outcome of greater competition. All too often, the attraction is actually toward an automated method of harvesting government training dollars. Information Technology offers many advantages in overcoming barriers of distance, but I think that is basically just a tool, not as Minister Hall seems to suggest, a solution in itself. From personal experience, I know that developing decent quality new learning programs that meet the needs of a particular group of people takes a great deal of time, consultation, testing and modification. It is simply uneconomic to produce, for example, a quality small engine maintenance program for NESB women farm operators when the target group has four members at Stratford and will run for 2 days next month. Economies of scale suggest that training providers need to act in unmarket-like cooperation in development and resource sharing.

Accountability Issues

The introduction in Victoria of “Contestability” led to a surge in the numbers of private training providers.

While some injected new ideas, others began blatantly milking the training system. The response of the funding authorities was to create a succession of “accountability patches”. This has resulted in time wasting, confusing and ineffective “accountability” requirements. In my workplace at GippsTAFE we have had the campus manager conducting accountability audits while unable to describe in writing what is expected of teachers in regard to the funding body’s requirements. The situation is Kafkaesque.

The “quality” of a physical object can be quite readily determined by a series of measurements and tests. This is not the case for human learning and skills development. The changes to learners are complex and as variable as the individuals within a

class. Longitudinal studies may be the most effective measure of learning quality (and quantity) but in the world of “market defined learning” these are never considered - too difficult/ don't fit the cash-register-transaction model.

What has emerged from the changes to Victorian TAFE is a race downward in program quality. The race is won (and profits maximised) by the expedient of applying a minimalist definition to every course learning outcome. If the course document says “Operate common wood working machines” - ask *What are the two simplest machines to operate?* If the document says “Produce a surface to an acceptable finish” ask - *Which industry sector accepts the roughest finish?*

Competition is forcing the “shaving” of course of hours and practices such as “concurrent delivery”, a euphemism for finding similar learning outcomes in two courses, then charging for both training items.

These practices are being increasingly adopted within TAFE.

The organisational changes currently being forced by the Victorian government will eliminate any vestige of Community Interest oversight by the boards of TAFE institutes. The changes seem to be premised on the view that by privatising Technical and Further Education, market forces will lead inevitably to improvements. It is an erroneous, and for the future of the state, particularly its regional areas, a dangerous assumption.

Finally

TAFE in Victoria needs reform, but destroying the entire system is an act of ideologically driven vandalism.