

## Issues and their implications: Tasmania Tomorrow By Sharon Maguire, May 2008

*This paper will analyse the “coalface” issues I believe to be relevant to my own teaching and learning context, critically examining the present situation and detailing my expectations of future trends in the Tasmanian Vocational Education and Training [VET] sector.*

In analysing issues and implications relevant to my own teaching and learning context in Adult and Vocational Education [AVE], I believe the overwhelming issue of concern at present to be the *Tasmania Tomorrow* education reforms due to be implemented in 2009. Other issues I believe relevant and worthy of discussion are that of employability skills and Australian Quality Training Framework [AQTF] compliance. A motivating factor in my undertaking the Bachelor of Adult and Vocational Education was the uncertainty surrounding the changes to Technical and Further Education [TAFE] Tasmania as part of the State Governments impending reforms.

In June of 2007 Tasmanian Minister for Education, David Bartlett, unveiled plans for a major reform of Tasmania’s post-compulsory education system, *Qualifications and Skills for Tasmania Tomorrow*. “This is vital for Tasmania to realise its potential in a globalised, creative and innovation based economy” (David Bartlett, Minister for Education, para. 6, 2008a). Increasing evidence suggests the key to economic growth and performance is knowledge-intensive industries, and many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] countries appear to be asking themselves how higher education in particular can be restructured to become an economic driver (Hazelkorn, 2004). Some of the research cited in Mr Bartlett’s *Tasmania Tomorrow* public document comes from OECD publications on Finland, New Zealand and Singapore, so it would appear that the Tasmanian Government is seeking to follow global trends (Department of Education, 2008a).

The *Tasmania Tomorrow* initiative will see the creation of three new public training organisations, overseen by Skills Tasmania whom are responsible for management and funding, which are expected to begin operation from January 2009, each operating as a statutory authority;

- The Tasmanian Academy focussing on academic learning for university entrance
- The Tasmanian Polytechnic focussing on practical and applied learning for vocational and employment outcomes
- Training Tasmania (interim name) focussing on skills development for businesses and their employees

Singapore Polytechnics offer courses to Advanced Diploma levels that are workplace skills oriented, with articulation to university entrance, teachers must hold a degree relevant to the field in which they teach and undergo a Certificate of Teaching before or during their initial appointment (Singapore Government, 2008). Finland Polytechnics offer up to Bachelors and Masters Degrees that are working life oriented, teachers must have teaching degrees and relevant vocational experience, of particular interest is that Degrees in Finland's Polytechnics are free and fully funded by the Government (FNBE, 2008). New Zealand Polytechnics offer mainly technical and vocational education and some degrees, teachers are required to have or obtain a Certificate or Diploma of teaching (New Zealand Government, 2008). The Tasmanian model would appear most closely aligned with New Zealand in the overall scheme of teacher requirements, courses offered and the qualifications framework in place, though I do not expect that the Tasmanian Polytechnics will offer Degrees in the future.

The Tasmanian reform was developed in an endeavour to address three key educational issues; post year 10 retention rates and employability skills, skills shortages and qualifications in the workplace, productivity and economic viability. The reform initiative is of significant relevance to my own teaching and learning context, as under the new arrangements, TAFE Tasmania will cease to exist. TAFE and the states' senior secondary colleges will be replaced by the three new organisations, with TAFE splitting to form Training Tasmania and the Tasmanian Polytechnic (Department of Education, 2008b). I received a response from the *Tasmania Tomorrow* Project Team indicating that the Smithton TAFE campus is well placed to become a satellite of the Tasmanian Polytechnic and as such this is the focus of my interest, though this is yet to be confirmed officially.

Of concern to me is that the timeframe for the transition is so short, course offerings are still unknown, staff are yet to be informed of where they will be assigned and for those of us expecting to be part of the Polytechnic it is not clear what our responsibilities will be in relation to pathway planning, pastoral care and the like. I believe that in relation to my own teaching context, Certificate III will represent the successful exit point, seen as equivalent to the Tasmanian Certificate of Education [TCE]. I have heard concerns expressed by colleagues that TCE subjects that align to VET qualifications will drop off the radar. It is still unclear what subjects and units will be offered and how they will be offered.

On a positive note we may see the return of Certificate I and II as part of the pathway process to achieving Certificate III. Traditionally we have offered some Certificate I units, full Certificate II and III and some Certificate IV units in Information Technology in the Circular Head Region. Last year our team was directed not to offer qualifications below Certificate III, as it was seen as not being a valued outcome by industry and funding preferences were aimed at higher level qualifications. This had a detrimental effect on our

student numbers, as the pathway for engagement and entry no longer existed. The *North West Tasmania Regional Training Demand Profile* (Skills Tasmania, 2008a) highlights some interesting points that support the need for lower level qualifications being available in the district; Circular Head was one of the regions cited as having disproportionately high numbers of people in low income brackets, it has the lowest proportion of people with post-secondary qualifications and it was one of two regions identified by ABS modelling as being disadvantaged in regard to socio-economic and educational characteristics. I am looking forward to the opportunity for change, but the lack of information available on the transition and implementation arrangements is creating an element of angst.

Chappell (2001, as cited in Favero, 2003) notes that TAFE institutions in Australia were originally constituted to provide industrial skills away from the workplace, but the high privileging of industry relevance and emphasis on work place and work-based learning has changed the face of TAFE over the last decade. “Less than half of TAFE Tasmania’s training is now delivered in the classroom. Most of it happens on the job, and that’s having an impact on the skills shortage” (David Bartlett, Minister for Education, para. 6, 2008b). Ian Cornford (2005) suggests “The policies implemented at the insistence of large business, such as CBT [competency based training], training packages, the opening of the training market, and movement to a supply driven system, have contributed to the present crisis”. Findings in the *Report on Stage 1 - Skilling Tasmania Policy Consultation* by Skills Tasmania, would seem to support this view, in that the report concluded that “industry representatives, business owners, managers and employees generally do not understand the training system well, including the role of Skills Tasmania” (Skills Tasmania, p.15, 2008b), yet business and industry are the main drivers of policy reform and change in Vocational Education and Training [VET]. Business and industry are experts in the areas of business and industry,

teachers are experts in education, maybe policy would be better served if teachers had more input in its formation (Cornford, 2006).

The policy process for the Tasmanian reforms is expected to consist of four stages, the first stage consisted of a discussion paper and targeted consultations, the second stage saw the release of a consultation response. At the time of writing the third stage, involving the final consultation and formation of a draft policy, and the fourth stage, consisting of the final policy statement, are yet to evolve, therefore much is still unknown (Skills Tasmania, 2007). Submissions received during the consultation process highlight concerns, some of which I share, that appear to have been largely ignored. The overwhelming main concern expressed by parent associations and colleges is the mixing of young school age students with adult students. Other common concerns are that retention issues need to be dealt with earlier than post year 10, there is a fear that a system of 'elitism' will be created in academies and course options for students will be lost, and concerns were raised in relation to training packages not offering the employability skills required for employment (Skills Tasmania, Submissions, 2008c).

Cornford (2006) suggests that training packages are a behaviourist approach linked to employer demand for quicker, cheaper training outcomes, that impede the development of lifelong learning, as they are devoid of adequate teaching theory that fosters genuine problem solving, creativity, continuous improvement cycles and other desirable employability skills. I see parallels in the attempt to bring employability skills into curriculum policy and the arguments posed by Luke (2000) in relation to bringing 'critical literacy' into state curriculum policy, in that the desire by Government and industry for learners to develop employability skills in an education system may also be a paradoxical injunction.

Maybe employers and industry need to shoulder some of the responsibility for the development of employability skills, in that maybe there should be a rethink about how employees and employers share their knowledge and skills in the workplace to provide opportunities for expansive learning (Young, 2001). Facets of employability skills can take years to develop. Sanguinetti, Waterhouse and Maunders (2004) see an overlap between employability skills and social skills, suggesting the two cannot be separated. Lonsdale and McCurry (2004) believe employability skills appear closely aligned to social literacy skills, and as such can be context specific. When employability skills are seen in the realm of literacy, it becomes apparent that when education is reduced purely to vocational outcomes, it ignores that literacy is a social practice of meaning making. It promotes a view of individually competitive behaviour and consumerism. “Literacy is a much richer experience than that associated with discreet employability skills” (Lonsdale & McCurry, p.38, 2004). Literacy requires a capacity to critically engage with the world, policies need to support community capacity building as opposed to the narrow focus of individual skilling.

I personally share Butterwick’s (p. 4, n.d.) sentiments “When the dominant model being used reflects a critical literacy (feminist/Freirian) and capacity-building orientation there is movement toward the productive/emancipatory potential of life skills”. However, in analysing how future policy may change in regard to employability skills in Australia, I expect it may reflect some of the changes observed in other OECD countries, such as that of Singapore’s Employability Skills System (Government of Singapore, 2005), that offer a dedicated employability skills qualification as opposed to the method of embedding that we currently have. I think it will be some time before we get it right.

The development of formal quality assurance systems is one of the most significant trends observed across OECD countries in education systems. A resulting effect is that

funding for education across OECD countries is increasingly characterised by competitive procedures, performance-based measures and greater targeting of resources. Some of the methods used to guide the system from a distance to encourage adherence to national policies and objectives observed across OECD countries are; “performance-based funding for teaching and learning activities, targeted funding to achieve explicit objectives (e.g. development of partnerships with the surrounding region), competitive research funding; performance evaluation, objectives-based contractual arrangements with institutions and publication of information on institution’s performance” (OECD, p.62, 2008). It appears that Australia echoes the global trends as many of these methods are reflected in Australian VET funding policy and key elements of the Australian Quality Training Framework [AQTF] system.

Kaye Scholfield conducted the review of a report commissioned by the Victorian Government in 2000 to examine the States’ training quality; her recommendations influenced the national training system, resulting in the formation of the AQTF. Training organisations, such as TAFE, delivering training packages are audited on the quality of their training against the national AQTF standards. Not only must training and delivery be in compliance with these standards, but evidence of quality must also be demonstrated, placing greater accountability directly on teachers. There has been a significant increase for teachers in paperwork and administrative tasks due to the burden of audit compliance (Favero, 2003).

Favero’s findings (2003) highlight many of my own experiences in regard to compliance issues. A log of teacher activities at Kangan Batman TAFE, for the case study exploring teaching issues by Jill Favero (2003), revealed that “compliance and administration activities consumed more than half the teachers’ time” (p.8), supporting claims made by

teachers. It appears ironic that systems introduced to ensure quality teaching have in actual effect reduced the time available for actual teaching activities.

A report by Lauri Grace (2005) on a PhD research project undertaken through the Faculty of Education, Deakin University, revealed some interesting thoughts.

*“It may be that where learning and assessment receives public funding... there is an increased likelihood of Training Packages and the AQTF being implemented in a way which subordinates and displaces the authority of education professionals at the level of their everyday practice” (p. 10).*

I feel these thoughts sit well with my own experiences, in that I see the policies and rulings pursued by TAFE as part of the problem. I am supportive of AQTF and see the need for a quality framework and accountability in education, but feel somewhat constricted by the narrow rule-bound reading that seems to drive TAFE compliance systems. I feel there is freedom to read and enact the ruling texts differently, with more scope to respond to local needs (Grace, 2005). Working within the current bureaucratic system, the sheer weight of administrative duties and paperwork is counterproductive.

In concluding I am hopeful that the new Tasmania Tomorrow reforms will be positive, I feel that some of the pressure to focus on delivering more commercially viable training may be alleviated, and a return to focussing on the individual learner and the local community may be more plausible under the new system. Analysing future trends in regard to these reforms is incredibly difficult as there is not enough available information on the new learning structures from which to provide an informed opinion. The lack of available



information and absence of communication with teaching staff has been a huge oversight on the part of all involved in the reforms.

In regard to AQTF, many of the problems faced by teachers could be alleviated by better management of policies within TAFE, many of the administrative tasks could be centralised, and dedicated teams could be formed purely to create AQTF resources for teaching staff. The changing nature of work and work patterns by those entering the work force may see a rethink on competency based training and the governing AQTF standards in the future, as teaching for particular skills or outcomes may be losing its relevance. Employability skills, social literacy, technology literacy and the need for critical literacy in the working life, and the demand for these skills by employers, may change the shape of training delivery in the future. There appears to be a trend emerging suggesting that training may need to be more generic in nature, more transferable across contexts and not so prescriptive in its outcomes (Kelly, Brannick, Hulpke, Levine, & To, 2003; Kostos, 2006; Loogma, 2004).

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