

The winds of radical change



Gillian Shadwick, chair of TAFE Directors Australia, offers her thoughts on what Howard Government's fourth term will bring.

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The policies announced by the Coalition during the election campaign signal the Government's intention to make some major changes in its approach to vocational education and training. They are likely to have profound implications for TAFE and the VET sector generally.

These policies are the Government's response to the severe skills shortages that have emerged in many industries especially the skilled trades.

Some of the proposals have real merit. The initiatives to improve careers advice, extend the youth allowance to New Apprentices, provide more opportunities in defence industries for apprentices, expand the number of school-based apprentices, and expand the New Apprenticeship Access Program are all worthwhile. TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) supports these directions.

However the overall approach falls well short of being a comprehensive strategy to tackle Australia's skills shortages. Nor will it position the nation's workforce strategically for the future.

Little has been said about training needs outside the traditional trades. To meet the needs of a modern economy and to fill skill shortages, there is a critical need for a comprehensive national strategy across all industry sectors. There is a need to invest more in the skilling of both youth and older workers in rural and metropolitan areas. The AIG's sound suggestion for technology cadetships deserves support.

The proposed plan to set up 24 new Australian technical schools has some merit, because it seeks a fresh approach to introducing year 11 and 12 students into trades-related education and training. The proposed technology schools are, however, an expensive proposal. They will cost nearly \$300 million for only to 7200 "talented years 11 and 12 students" a year. They will duplicate existing TAFE and schools facilities and infrastructure. The outcomes are uncertain. They will not deliver qualified trades people to meet the skills shortages in the critical short term. The approach is likely to irritate state and territory governments

But if the Australian technical schools prove to be workable then some TAFE institutes will want to partner with industry, schools and others to set up them up. TAFE institutes are well placed to do so through their trades expertise, industry, regional and school relationships, experience with 15-19 year olds and trades workshop facilities.

The details of the Government's proposed Institute for Trade Skill Excellence are not clear but this slim proposal is radical and problematic. It has the capacity to undermine our current ANTA/industry lead national vocational education system. It would appear to cut across existing nationally agreed systems for registering training organisations, assuring quality and recognising qualifications and the new Industry Skills Councils. Are we to move through this new bureaucracy from a national system in which all RTOs who meet common quality standards are equal to an alternative national system where some RTOs are "more equal than others" (to borrow from George Orwell)?

TDA is pleased to see increased funding for prevocational training, but we are bewildered that none of this funding is going to TAFE given TAFE's significant capacity and national reach. In fact the Government's policy announcements do not offer a single dollar for the TAFE system. The

TAFE network of colleges and campuses and its distance education capacity stretch into every part of Australia. Investing in TAFE should have been at the core of any serious national strategy to address skills shortages because this would have been smart as well as sensible.

TAFE institutes will deliver on any new policy direction that is genuinely responsive to their local industry and community needs and to the needs of their students. To do less would be irresponsible. But TAFE's has been short-changed in the Government's thinking to date. TAFE's quite formidable capacity to address the skills shortages in conjunction with industry has so far been virtually ignored in the current mix of new Commonwealth VET policies.