

Time to get on with it, says TDA

The vocational education and training sector needs to stop apportioning blame and navel-gazing, and get on with the job of implementing the new national training framework, **Martin Riordan** tells Alethea Mouhtouris.

As a former political journalist, media staffer for John Howard during the PM's opposition days, executive in an offshore company, and holder of a range of corporate communications roles for the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) – including principal speechwriter – newly appointed executive director of TAFE Directors Australia, Martin Riordan, is clearly positioned to advance the TDA's public profile.

In addition, enjoys close links with the Federal Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson. "We know each other and that's good. I'm sure that we can forge a good relationship. There are going to be differences, obviously, but I think we'll be agreeing more than we'll be disagreeing."

Riordan says one of the first issues for the vocational education and training sector is "putting the argy-bargy and the issues of blame behind us" as all players move to implement the national training framework.

"Now that these ... issues are forging ahead, we're looking for a voice of an important provider - which is TAFE. And we're certainly going to be providing that voice," he says.

"Secondly, and equally importantly, there is a good deal of intellectual leadership that's needed for the sector. In terms of research and fact-building it's very important from our side ... to make sure that when the sector is being represented, it's done so with fact-based material." Accordingly, TDA is working closely with the National Council for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) review into the relevance and efficacy of the research and statistics it provides to stakeholders of the national training system.

So what are the sector's big hurdles for 2006?

"Introspection is a big hurdle. We need to jump that quickly. We need to be confident that the sector has the ability to make a difference as we review skills shortages," he says.

"The second big hurdle is we need to find, in collaboration with government, a better mechanism to look at funding. The hurdles in the past have been too scattered and too many to even broach. The third hurdle is we need to review the research and data on the industry so we can be better fact based and a little clearer that we're comparing apples with apples."

Riordan says it's not uncommon to find multiple organisations discussing the same issue, using different sets of data to make comparisons.

"It's not good enough. This may well go back to the reason why we've had so much confusion on funding. There really should be a review of research to help better scope what key are factors needed; how can we best come to grips with issues of funding which have been a key point of difference in the past."

Riordan says he is specifically referring to the way in which the Federal Government allocates funding to the states, and how the states, in turn, allocate that funding.

"It's also trying to understand [it] from an equity point of view. When you look at issues such as what funding goes on university education – is it fair and equitable compared to how we fund VTE? Is a student going to be treated fairly and equally across higher education and VTE sectors?"

For TDA, one of its biggest priorities will be to raise its profile as a leader in the vocational education and training sector.

"[Marketing and promoting] the TDA is an important issue and we want to improve the way we are perceived in the market," he says. One way of doing this is the evaluate the way the organisation communicates with all its stakeholders, not just its member directors

"We'll be reaching out very widely through the institutes. All the institutes are very keen for TDA to be their national voice and we won't be taking that responsibility lightly. We are we going to be reaching deep down into those



Caption: L to R - TDA executive director Martin Riordan with DEST deputy secretary Jim Davidson, TDA chair Barry Peddle and TDA deputy chair Bruce Mackenzie.

organisations to find out the key issues that they'd like us to talk about.

"We want to be very clear that TAFE is a major stakeholder in the VTE system," Riordan says.

"We want to work openly with the other providers, public or private. The big issues that are facing Australia in terms of skills shortages can't be underestimated and there's absolutely no time for looking into the past and going into skirmishes or blame.

"We need to be a lot more confident as a sector. I'm committed to working with the other major training sector groups and I'll be working a lot closer with industry. Through the TAFE system, we have the closest ties, especially with small to medium enterprises and we want to bring all that out."

TDA is also looking to extend its Australia-China relationship in the wake of the signing last year of a memorandum of understanding with the China education association for international exchange.

"From an overseas perspective, it's going to be extremely important for Australia's intellectual property and our branding that TAFE is properly represented abroad.

"As Australian Education International has found in the field of universities, the promotion and engagement of education abroad is something which really needs to be done with a significant amount of skill. It's also a matter of putting the focus onto what's good for Australia and what's good for overseas, and we need to build more mutual benefit into our vocational education promotion overseas."

The challenges for TDA

In the next year, TAFE Directors Australia needs to:

- **Actively work to increase its profile.** ACPET and industry groups such as Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) and Business Council of Australia (BCA) have strengthened their profile in the past 12 to 24 months, to TDA's detriment. Despite the best efforts of its chair Barry Peddle, TDA risks being dismissed as a minor player
- **Seize the day.** TAFE is the biggest player in the VET sector so take advantage of the opportunities that this position innately provides
- **Be more proactive.** Show more initiative and become a sector leader, focus on the issues, identify solutions and lead public discussions.
- **Forge alliances.** And close links with government, industry groups and other key players which carry political weight, rather than staying aloof
- **Realise its potential.** The weak political impact of other TAFE organisations gives TDA a special responsibility and opportunity to represent the views of wider TAFE, and not just a small and elite group of institute directors. **AM**

IN BRIEF

TASMANIA ANNOUNCES TRAINING PROVIDERS

The Tasmanian Government has awarded tenders to 23 training providers to deliver education and training under its competitive bids training program worth \$36 million. The organisations will deliver 53 training programs across a range of areas including, agriculture, aquaculture and fishing, building and construction and business services and programs for seasonal workers, said Education Minister Paula Wriedt. Meanwhile, the Tasmanian Government is running a \$150,000 TV and newspaper advertising campaign to provide information about apprenticeships, traineeships and TAFE Tasmania. Wriedt said the Training...Tasmania's Future "features local Tasmanian businesses and their employees sharing their stories about how training has benefited them. The Departments of Education and Economic Development are working on a range of programs that will provide more skilled employees for industry and more opportunities for workers. I hope that this campaign will inspire Tasmanian businesses and individuals about the possibilities that the right training can open up. For Tasmania to continue to prosper it is crucial that we provide the most up-to-date training for all Tasmanian industries, especially those that are growing rapidly."

LECTURER JOINS NMIT FOR NEW WINE COURSE

A former University of Melbourne lecturer has been appointed as a foundation senior lecturer for a new specialist degree in viticulture and wine-making at Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE. Helen Waite has worked as an assistant to the state viticulturist in the Victorian department of agriculture, has also won a \$10,000 Churchill Fellowship and delivered research papers at a range of international wine industry conferences. "My aim is to provide the grape and wine industry with graduates who have a sound theoretical and practical knowledge of viticulture and winemaking as well as of the national and international wine industry," Waite said. "NMIT's specialist degree has a stronger emphasis than universities on the connection between theoretical knowledge and understanding and the practical application of that knowledge. There is a strong, theoretical basis to the degree and it is related very directly to viticultural and winemaking practices."

RIVERINA INSTITUTE DEVELOPS MODEL FOR TRAINING IN BUSH

A new model for education and training in rural communities has been launched with the opening of a TAFE NSW Riverina Institute presence at Hay, in western NSW. RI@Hay is operating in the main street after community liaison identified a demand for a stronger TAFE presence in the town. Institute director Rosemary Campbell said RI@Hay provides course information, co-ordinates local training needs, meets local skills demands and delivers training locally. Campbell said the institute runs specialist courses in Hay "but their activities have not always been organised or promoted in a co-ordinated way". The closest TAFE campus is in Deniliquin, 125 kilometres away.