Abstract

When in 1991 federal Employment, Education and Training Minister John Dawkins proposed a radical plan for the Commonwealth to take effective control of State technical and further education (TAFE) institutions, he was taking the final step in a campaign which had long been in preparation.

Policy theorists argue that policy entrepreneurs like Minister Dawkins deploy carefully developed rhetoric to promote their preferred initiatives, aimed less at persuading than at widening the debate's audience, altering decision-making criteria and mobilising bias by linking issues to a wider policy agenda.

Through the use of a series of government policy documents and controlled inquiries, Dawkins succeeded in establishing a widespread climate of belief that TAFE institutions had become unresponsive to industry and in need of reform. Where the claims of these policy documents can be checked against evidence they are largely unsubstantiated, but this did not diminish the success of the rhetorical mobilisation.

Introduction

At the joint meeting of the Australian Education Council and the Ministers of Vocational Education, Employment and Training in October 1992, the then federal Minister for Employment, Education and Training, Hon John Dawkins, advanced a proposal for the Commonwealth to take prime responsibility for funding and policy control of the State-owned colleges of technical and further education (TAFE). The proposal, although unwelcome to many State and Territory ministers, came as no surprise. The issue had been raised informally at the previous meeting of the Australian Education Council in August, leading to a 'monumental blue' (Lingard 1994, citing South Australian Minister Rann). In any case, variations on the theme had slowly been working themselves through the labyrinthine network of working parties established to progress reform in federal/State relations as a result of the Special Premiers' Conference process.
However, the origins of what was to turn into one of the most tense struggles between Commonwealth and States during the period of the Hawke–Keating governments are to be found somewhat earlier. Minister Dawkins had embarked on a range of reform measures since becoming Minister for Employment, Education and Training in 1987, including the abolition of Commonwealth's arms-length funding through the TAFE Council of the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission and the introduction of Commonwealth/State resource agreements with greatly increased accountability requirements.

Direct ministerial activism of this kind was only one element of Dawkins' role as a vocational education and training (VET) policy entrepreneur (Kingdon 1984). In many ways, his agenda-setting through carefully chosen rhetoric was a more significant factor. The rhetorical case had two principal planks. One was the claim that the training demands arising from the government's commitment to micro-economic reform, and especially its chosen policy instrument of industrial award restructuring, would simply be beyond the financial capacity of State administrations. The second was that, in any case, the States' vocational education systems—concentrated in the public TAFE institutions—had become unresponsive to the real needs of industry and required a major overhaul.

Dawkins' views had been fairly consistent from his time as Opposition spokesman on education and training (Dawkins & Costello 1983). His first steps in the reform of vocational education had been taken while still Trade Minister, through establishment of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) Overseas Study Mission which resulted in the key agenda-setting document Australia reconstructed (ACTU/TDC 1987). This was a report of major political consequence which attempted to translate European, especially Swedish, models of co-operative industrial reform to the Australian environment.

From the time he became Minister for Employment, Education and Training in July 1987, until he launched his bid to take effective control of State TAFE systems in October 1991, Minister Dawkins worked to craft a window of policy opportunity through a sustained effort to create belief in his propositions about TAFE in relevant policy communities. The capacity issue was dealt with largely through the
management of public commissions of inquiry, especially the Deveson and Finn committees (Deveson 1990; Finn 1991).

This paper studies the manner in which the second plank, the establishment of a climate of belief in an ‘unresponsive’ TAFE system, was pursued. It is argued that Dawkins’ activities may be viewed as an exercise in the ‘mobilisation of bias’ (Bachrach & Baratz 1963) to achieve a policy outcome. The validity or otherwise of the belief system created is not of prime concern, although some comment will be offered on this point.

**Rhetoric as a policy-making tool**

The importance of rhetoric in policy-making is not primarily its persuasive power. Rather, policy rhetoric is about the framing of a policy agenda, the determination of the roster of participants in policy debate, and the specification of decision-making criteria. Policy proponents will frequently express their goals as a set of technical questions, concerned with improving efficiency, while trying to avoid terminology which might invite a wider political debate. Their opponents within a policy community, if in danger of losing the debate, will frequently try to shift the issue to a wider and possibly more sympathetic audience, through the use of rhetoric which redefines an issue as broadly political or even moral in scope.

March and Olsen have argued that ‘the history of administrative reorganisation in the twentieth century is the history of rhetoric’ (March & Olsen 1983, p.282). Rhetoric is an important tool that policy entrepreneurs use to establish the existence of an issue for which their proposed reform is presented as the appropriate solution.

In their pioneering work on ‘non-decision-making’, Bachrach and Baratz demonstrated that the manipulation of dominant community values, myths, political institutions and procedures was a technique used to limit the scope of decision-making to issues considered ‘safe’ by political elites (Bachrach & Baratz 1963, p.632). The border between decision-making and non-decision-making is maintained by the ‘mobilisation of bias’ (Bachrach & Baratz 1963, p.642). Rhetoric is the instrument political
actors use for the mobilisation of bias, either to keep an issue off the political agenda, or to force it on.

This conceptualisation of the role of policy rhetoric has been developed and systematised in the work of Baumgartner in his studies of educational policy-making in France (Baumgartner 1989). Baumgartner began by asking the question:

... why do some issues become important societal debates, dominate the national media, and monopolise the attention of the nation's political leaders, whereas other issues are decided by small groups of experts?

(Baumgartner 1989, p.3)

Baumgartner's answer was based on an analysis of the rhetoric used by policy actors to gain control over an issue and to determine the degree of conflict and the extent of participation in decision-making. Conflict underlies the process, because with consensual issues there is no incentive for members of a policy community to invite broader participation. However, where there is disagreement, there are winners and losers within the policy community. The losers have an interest in changing the roster of participants by appealing to outside allies.

Policy-makers attempt to manipulate the policy process by defining the issues. Those with an interest in contracting the debate use arcane and technical language in an attempt to define the issue restrictively as a technical question to be handled by specialist participants. Those with an interest in expanding the debate use symbols to portray the issue as broad and political, so many can participate.

Policies must be explained in symbols of some sort, and policy-makers fight over the attachment of some symbols to their policies because they know that different symbols will attract different participants.

(Baumgartner 1989, p.11)

Kingdon argued that policy entrepreneurs link problems and solutions by defining one of them so that other people are convinced they are related (Kingdon 1984, p.191). Baumgartner pointed out that the redefinition of an issue can be used to generate either opposition or support. In short,
... depending on the balance of power in different policy communities, [policy proponents] attempt to force the issue onto the general agenda, to restrict it to a small community of experts, or to shift it from one group of experts to another.

(Baumgartner 1989, p.18)

The conflict which eventuated over Dawkins' plans for TAFE illustrated these techniques. Minister Dawkins linked his proposals to micro-economic reform and the perils of international competition (Dawkins 1991, p.5) while opponents, such as South Australian Minister Rann, spoke about 'the cold, clammy hand of Canberra' (The Australian 16/10/91) and an 'East German centralist model' (Ryan & Hardcastle 1996, p.244). The effect of these rhetorical upgrades was to take the debate to increasingly wider audiences, to link it to broader Commonwealth/State disputes and eventually to secure a partial victory for the resisting States.

In the earlier case of the supposed unresponsiveness of State TAFE systems, however, Dawkins' rhetorical deployment was seen as no more than niggling and no vigorous response was offered. Only in retrospect was it realised how effectively Dawkins had taken his claim outside the narrow policy community of State and federal VET officials to one incorporating employer and union bodies and central government agencies. By the time of the 1991 conflict, a climate of belief in the unresponsiveness of TAFE institutions had become, to a greater or lesser extent, an accepted element of the debate.

Preparing the ground

The idea that the Australian economy needed a fundamental restructuring, involving reskilling of the existing workforce and a greater emphasis on vocational education among those preparing to enter the workforce, had emerged some time prior to the 1986 balance of payments crisis, which attracted the government's attention to the need for micro-economic reform. The issue had become a major focus of reports by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a body whose reports Dawkins regularly utilised to add legitimacy to policy proposals.
Vickers has studied the way policy entrepreneurs in the Federal Government, especially John Dawkins, made use of OECD pronouncements as legitimating rhetoric for their initiatives:

"Legitimation is a logical use of the authority of the OECD. It is especially useful for Commonwealth politicians and bureaucrats who already know what they want to do but need to consolidate their support and discredit their opponents... the role that knowledge from the OECD plays in the Australian policy-making process is clearly a political one.

(Vickers 1995, p.54)

Dawkins maintained an active role in the OECD himself and his department was responsible for liaison with the OECD on educational issues. Dawkins chaired the 1987 OECD meeting on education and the economy in Paris (Vickers 1995, p.53) and cited this conference in his early policy statements on his reform agenda (e.g. Dawkins 1989c, p.65).

The OECD had for some years been looking at the issues of workplace restructuring and training reform. In 1984 an OECD conference, Competence and Cooperation, had taken a new look at the relation between vocational education and enterprise skill formation (Sweet 1989) and in the period 1985 to 1987 a cross-cultural study of productivity in the service industries continued the theme (Ford 1988).

A participant in this latter study, Professor Bill Ford of the University of New South Wales, became an enthusiastic evangelist for these ideas to Australian business and union audiences, but their adoption as public policy did not take shape until after the Dawkins-initiated ACTU report Australia reconstructed appeared in 1987. Goozee described the report as seminal for the development of vocational education and training because its:

... emphasis on the needs of the labour market rather than the needs of the individual and the coining of the term 'skills formation' to replace TAFE and training, gave a strong indication of the new directions which were to be taken in applying economic rationalism to vocational education and training.

(Goozee 1995, p.107)
Dawkins, as Australian Minister for Employment, Education and Training, chaired a major OECD conference in March 1988 in which the ‘new orthodoxy’ in the economics of vocational education was cemented (Sweet 1989, p.136). Within Australia, the Minister deployed a range of rhetorical instruments to dethrone the Kangan era philosophy which placed individuals’ interests at the centre of vocational education and training. The urgency of establishing a new policy orientation was greatly increased by the adoption of industrial award restructuring as the centrepiece of the government’s corporatist approach to economic management.

The Hawke Labor Government had, from its earliest days, developed a corporatist policy style, in which major social groupings were invited to participate in the formation of public policy. Although not usually perceived as a consensus-seeking political actor (Edwards 1996, p.460), Dawkins was prepared to adopt this approach at least as an interim strategy: ‘In the short term, our most useful technique for thrashing out agreement is that embodied in the process of consensus—something which Australia has elevated to an art form’ (Dawkins 1990, p.460).

The government was especially keen to co-opt what it referred to as the ‘industry partners’ into its decision-making on industrial relations and skill formation, the second seen very much as derivative of industrial relations policy. Government rhetoric invited both industry sides to assume ‘ownership’ of vocational education and training from the educators and State bureaucrats who had previously dominated the field. In many respects, Dawkins saw his role and that of his department as coaching the two sides of industry on how to claim their inheritance.

**Setting the agenda**

While *Australia reconstructed* was the first salvo in an extended campaign, it suffered from the defect of making few references, let alone unfavourable ones, to education and training. In fact, the report directed most of its criticisms in this area towards industry’s poor training record. However, it did argue that:

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...it is clear that the tertiary education system has to lift its game if Australia's skill base is to be improved. The most effective way of doing this is through forging closer links between education authorities and industry.

(ACTU/TDC 1987, p.119)

From late 1987 and throughout 1988 and 1989 Dawkins and his Ministry issued a series of policy statements which undertook the process of defining policy issues so that the industrial relations agenda seemed inextricably linked to Dawkins' emerging training agenda. In doing so, they also promoted the view that TAFE needed to be brought more sharply into the process of economic reform and required to respond more directly to employers' requirements. These documents were:

- **Skills for Australia**, issued by Ministers Dawkins and Holding in 1987 (Dawkins & Holding 1987)
- **A changing workforce**, issued by Minister Dawkins in 1988 (Dawkins 1989)
- **Labour market reform: The industrial relations agenda**, issued by Minister of Industrial Relations Ralph Willis in 1988 (Willis 1988)
- **Skills formation and structural adjustment**, issued by the Department of Employment, Education and Training in 1988 (DEET 1988)
- **Industry training in Australia: The need for change**, issued by Minister Dawkins in 1989 (Dawkins 1989c)
- **Improving Australia's training system**, issued by Minister Dawkins in 1989 (Dawkins 1989a)
- **Industry training in Australia: The need for change, final report**, issued by the Employment and Skills Formation Council in 1989 (ESFC 1989b)

*Skills For Australia* was aimed primarily at introducing radical changes to the method of TAFE funding by the Commonwealth and sought to justify these by asserting that:

>The government is determined that our education and training system should play an active role in responding to the major economic challenges now facing Australia... Our skills formation and training arrangements are not yet adequate to meet these demands.

(Dawkins & Holding 1987, p.111)
The document insisted that the focus of funding needed to be sharpened to ensure that funds are spent in accordance with national objectives and to ensure ‘improvements in the relevance of TAFE provision’ (Dawkins & Holding 1987, p.34).

A changing workforce was essentially an exhortation to industry to become more involved in training issues. It included the proposition that ‘the government has made clear its wish to see greater industry involvement in TAFE and more diversified arrangements for vocational education and training generally’ (Dawkins 1988, p.8) and the hope that ‘increased industry-based training will provide healthy competition for TAFE’ (p.21).

Willis’ paper Labour market reform clearly linked the industrial relations and training agendas by quoting Skills for Australia on the role education and training should play in lifting industrial productivity (Willis 1988, p.10). Willis made no explicit comment on the adequacy of the TAFE response to date. However, when in August the DEET Economic Division discussed industry training, it felt no need to produce evidence for an apparently self-evident claim that ‘industry has frequently complained about the inflexibility of the TAFE system and the lack of relevance of many TAFE courses’ (DEET 1988, p.34).

The DEET Economic Division instead expressed strong support for skill centres, run by the departmentally funded industry training committee (ITC) network, because of the ‘close involvement of industry’ (DEET 1988, p.35). Although skill centres were envisaged as competitors for TAFE, the only examples of successful skill centres cited by the division were joint activities of ITCs and TAFE in South Australia (DEET 1988, p.35).

Improving Australia’s training system devoted little space to TAFE but provided a rationale for the Commonwealth’s increasing assertiveness in vocational education and training by emphasising the need for ‘national consistency and co-ordination of training’ (Dawkins 1989a, p.22). The document again stressed the importance of award restructuring for training policy, and continued the industrial relations linkage through cross-referencing to a concurrent statement on award restructuring by the Industrial Relations Minister.
Improving Australia's training system held that individual State accreditation bodies caused confusion both to nationally operating Australian enterprises and to overseas qualified migrants. Minister Dawkins foreshadowed the establishment of two new bodies to deal with both problems, a National Training Board (NTB) and a National Overseas Skills Recognition Body (NOOSR).

Dawkins' discussion paper Industry training: The need for change was addressed primarily to the need for mandatory training expenditure requirements for industry. TAFE received a passing reference.

Industry has been at times critical of TAFE for failing to provide adequate places in courses in high demand, teaching courses which have not kept pace with developments in industry and for lack of clear goals, targets and accreditation procedures.

(Dawkins 1989c, p.29)

These papers set out Dawkins' rhetoric on TAFE in broad terms. It is clear that while little concrete evidence was adduced in any single document to support the argument of TAFE's poor performance and unresponsiveness, the simple repetition of the theme over two years had an effect in mobilising bias and thus resetting the parameters of policy debate.

Building independent support

Evidence for the effect achieved by continuous reinforcement of the 'unresponsiveness' rhetoric is available from a succession of reports issued by the Economic Planning Advisory Council (EPAC), a highly influential policy forum of the government, whose membership included State premiers as well as business and union representation. According to Boreham's study of corporatism in the Hawke government, EPAC could be described as the major institutional embodiment of corporatism in Australia (Boreham 1990, p.50).

EPAC did not undertake or commission any direct research into the VET sector until 1992. Until then it relied wholly on advice from Dawkins' Ministry for its comments on VET. For example, in its 1986 report on
human capital and productivity growth, EPAC supported the view that 'industry representatives' were concerned that technology and business courses in TAFE were insufficiently up to date (EPAC 1986, p.19). In 1988, EPAC's *An overview of microeconomic constraints on economic growth* argued that 'a major barrier to improvement in the quality of apprenticeship training has been the absence of defined competency standards and competency testing' (EPAC 1988, p.32).

The EPAC document concluded that reforms to widen and deepen the national skills base were essential to the promotion of economic growth, a recurring theme of the Minister's statements, although it would appear not to have been fully supported by contemporary research (Marginson 1993, pp.128-129).

In 1989 Minister Dawkins used EPAC as a forum for an extended articulation of his reform agenda. A document presented to EPAC in his name, 'Employment, education and training: Key trends and government initiatives', encapsulated the government's theory and practice in the training reform agenda. Quoting the 1988 EPAC paper's conclusion that improving the skills base required reforms within schooling, training, higher education and in industry (Dawkins 1989b, p.2), the paper claimed that 'previous policies had accommodated, even promoted, a series of outmoded and inefficient practices in education and training' (Dawkins 1989b, pp.2, 4).

The Dawkins (1989b) paper served no easily ascertainable purpose beyond a further reinforcement of the Minister's rhetorical position: EPAC was not at the time conducting an inquiry and had not solicited submissions from any other source. However, the paper served a useful purpose for Dawkins as a policy entrepreneur by widening the audience for his proposals from the industry parties to a broader group of policy specialists normally concerned with whole-of-government policy-making.

When EPAC conducted its first seminar specifically devoted to education and training in 1992, or its first research on VET in 1993, the organisation to a considerable degree recanted the views it had previously endorsed. Rather than complaining of an unresponsive TAFE system, it expressed concern at poor government consultation with the
educational coalface and an excessively narrow view of education (EPAC 1992, p.3). Similarly, its first commissioned research on vocational education and training expressed doubts about Dawkins’ linkage of economic growth to training reform (Maglen 1993, p.53). This, to a large extent, turned the tables on the critics but it was no longer relevant—the policy debate had moved on.

The use of EPAC in the manner described served a useful purpose from Dawkins’ perspective by seeming to provide independent support for the policy propositions he was attempting to promote. Within his own Ministry a similar, although less convincingly independent, voice was available in the Employment and Skills Formation Council (ESFC). This was a statutory advisory body made up largely of members from outside government, although its then Chair, Charles Halton, and secretariat, were public servants. The ESFC was to have a principal role in the desired mobilisation of bias.

The ESFC had contributed to the documentation of the government’s training reform agenda by preparing the report *Industry training: The need for change* in 1989 (ESFC 1989b). Although TAFE was scarcely mentioned in the original document, some of the most severe criticism of TAFE’s lack of responsiveness to industry came in the two reports by the ESFC on their consultations with industry on *Industry training: The need for change*. According to the ESFC’s May 1989 interim report:

*There is also strong support for improving the responsiveness and efficiency of education and training provision. Comments generally focussed upon TAFE ... In general, industry comments were critical of TAFE but there were some important exceptions.*

(ESFC 1989a, p.12)

In the second report in November, the ESFC was even more critical of TAFE. It advised that ‘a large number of submissions, around 50, argued for more responsive TAFE systems’ (ESFC 1989b, p.103).

The ESFC devoted considerable discussion to measures it saw as essential for reforming TAFE’s responsiveness, a list which from this time became entrenched as DEET’s agenda in its future dealings with State TAFE authorities. The list included:
a stronger relationship between industry and TAFE, even in TAFE administration

• collaboration between industry and TAFE over equipment and facilities sharing

• more entrepreneurial activity in TAFE

• greater accountability for TAFE

• introducing greater competition for TAFE

• longer hours of opening for TAFE

• improved course articulation and recognition of prior learning

(ESFC 1989b, p.104)

The report also asserted the existence of strong industry support for competency-based training, more qualified support for modularised courses, and support for common accreditation machinery for skills acquired formally and those learned on the job (ESFC 1989b, p.96).

TAFE and industry: Rhetoric and reality

In the model of policy development advanced by Kingdon and Baumgartner, the truth of rhetorical propositions is of lesser consequence than the skill with which policy advocates deploy them to define issues and gain audience support. However, from an observer’s point of view, it is worth examining such empirical evidence as is available on the validity of the case advanced.

It is clear that some real industry dissatisfaction with the TAFE system existed in the 1980s, although industry was well represented at all levels of TAFE governance, from the Commonwealth TAFE Council, through State advisory councils, to individual TAFE college councils (Hall 1988). There has always been a strand of business opinion that all educational institutions are inefficient, a view illustrated around this time by a report in *Time Magazine* in one of its earliest Australian editions in 1986. *Time* reported a series of meetings between higher education officials and industry leaders and between TAFE and industry. The *Time* report
described these as occurring in a climate characterised by the Advanced Education Council Chair, Dr Gregor Ramsey, as 'staggering in the sheer hostility towards education' (*Time* 22 September 1986).

On the other hand, the policy statements of the leading industry representative bodies, such as the Metal Trades Industry Association (MTIA) and the Confederation of Australian Industry (CAI), seem to have been considerably more measured than the comments of the leaders of industry training committees, whose views had largely shaped the ESFC conclusions on TAFE's unresponsiveness.

The ACTU had traditionally been a strong supporter of the TAFE system. In its submission to the Kirby Inquiry in 1984, for example, it had strongly resisted any move towards greater industry involvement in training (ACTU 1984, p.26). While there was some diminution of this support in the later 1980s, criticism of TAFE was not a pronounced feature of union statements. *Australia reconstructed* had asked tertiary education as a whole to 'lift its game' by improving links with industry, but had noted in mitigation that 'there are some encouraging examples, particularly in regard to TAFE and industry, but they are still inadequate' (ACTU/TDC 1987, p.119).

On the employers' side, the industry body with the most sustained linkages to the TAFE sector had been the Metal Trades Industry Association. In its submission for the TAFE Council's 1985–87 triennial recommendations, the MTIA had stated clearly enough: 'The relationship which has developed between industry and the TAFE system at both the local and State level in most States is strong and works extremely well' (MTIA 1984, p.6).

The organisation had not changed its mind by the time of the 1989 ESFC consultations.

*It should be noted at the outset that TAFE has been extremely co-operative in providing assistance to the [industry] parties. TAFE has been frustrated in realising the full potential of its assistance mainly because the industrial parties have yet to reach an agreement on a new award and training infrastructure.*

(MTIA 1989, p.55)
The story remained the same in 1990:

MTIA has been instrumental, in conjunction with unions, TAFE, the Commonwealth and State Governments, in dragging training practices out of that era [1940s and 1950s]... [We] are working closely with TAFE in designing curricula.

(MTIA 1990, p.5)

The Confederation of Australian Industry, later the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), was only marginally more critical. In its commentary on the proposals in Australia reconstructed, the CAI had confined itself to the moderate comment that 'employer input into education delivery should be increased while the resources of employers should be tapped to improve the level of facilities available to educators' (CAI 1987, p.19).

In 1988 the CAI (in noteworthy contrast to the federal agencies) attempted to put some rigour into the debate on what industry thought of the education system by conducting a large-scale survey of its membership. The result did not lend support to claims made by the federal Minister in respect either of higher education or entry-level training offered by the TAFE system. According to the survey, while only a bare majority of employers expressed satisfaction with the school leavers they employed, graduates of both tertiary sectors were more highly regarded.

The survey... indicated a much greater level of satisfaction with students from the trades area, 76.3 per cent of those hiring tradespersons, and a high level of satisfaction, 87.7 per cent, with the graduates of higher education institutions.

(CAI 1988, p.42)

In its submission to the ESFC consultation in 1989, the CAI was largely concerned with the then proposal for an industry training levy. Its only comment on TAFE was that 'CAI is also developing, through its members, improved relationships with technical and further education institutions in each State' (CAI 1989, p.15).

This submission is interesting, though, for the light it shed on industry's response to Minister Dawkins' emphasis on reforming accreditation...
machinery, which had been justified in the Minister’s discussion paper as necessary to inject industry competencies into training curricula (Dawkins 1989b, pp.29-31). According to the CAI:

> Quality training is not necessarily the product of the accreditation process. Accreditation does provide a means of ensuring standards are being met but it can also have a detrimental effect on total skills formation.

(CAI 1989, p.13)

Not only was the CAI not a strident critic of TAFE, but there is evidence that the confederation was growing concerned at the appearance of a rift between TAFE and industry. Twice in 1989 CAI representatives attended general meetings of the TAFE Teachers Association to deny what they clearly saw as an unjustified picture of industry hostility.

> I also want to emphasise that employers are not suggesting that the education system should mass produce individuals who are capable of little more than simply slotting into the production process—an accusation frequently levelled at employers.

(Callendar 1989, p.23)

> There has been, at times, a misconception that employers wish to see the role of TAFE phased down and replaced with an alternative means of delivering vocational training. This is not correct. The Confederation is very supportive of the TAFE system and its charter and believes it is vital to upgrading the level of training and skills development in Australia. This is not to say, however, that employers do not believe there is room for improvement in the content and delivery of course or the way that some of the TAFE systems are operated.

(Webster 1989, p.25)

The attitude of the Business Council of Australia (BCA) was almost identical to that of CAI/ACCI. In its 1987 policy statement, the Council stressed that education has many functions beyond the economic and argued for a ‘pluralistic education system’ (BCA 1987, p.3). Any criticism of TAFE was indirect, implied in its recommendation to government to ‘encourage the trade training institutions, such as TAFE, to develop their curricula to better meet current and future needs of business’ (BCA 1987, p.8).
In its submission to the 1989 ESFC consultations, the Council took a similar line of mild criticism.

> Role and responsiveness of TAFE needs to be improved to increase its usefulness and the relevance of the training it provides. There are marked differences from State to State in the readiness of TAFE to respond to the requirements of the users of its training.

(BCA 1989, p.16)

Almost identical sentiments were contained in the Council’s policy on workforce training, undated but apparently 1990 (BCA 1990a, p.10). Much stronger support for TAFE came from a series of enterprise case studies which the Council commissioned as a follow up to the ESFC consultation (BCA 1990b, p.11).

Case studies

Empirical evidence on the state of industry–TAFE relations is available also from two formal studies conducted at this time. In one, the TAFE National Centre for Research and Development studied 28 major enterprises throughout Australia. The major finding of the study was the fact that these enterprises had, at best, a rudimentary awareness of their own training needs (Hall 1988, p.12). It did find, however, substantial evidence of TAFE/industry interaction.

> The concerns expressed [by a number of government reports] about the need for greater industry involvement suggest little such interaction takes place at present. To the extent that such a view exists, it is mistaken. There is clearly considerable interaction in the area of technical and further education.

(Hall 1988, p.5)

The TAFE National Centre’s study also cast doubt on industry’s desire to be involved in new accreditation arrangements pointing out that a major current criticism is that ‘TAFE is now swamped with curriculum committees’ (Hall 1988, p.9).

The second study was an evaluation of Commonwealth–TAFE related programs funded by DEET. Again, the finding was one of considerable

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and successful TAFE–industry links at a number of levels, but with the caveat that there was room for the relationship to grow further to become one of partnership. This would, however, require adjustments by the industry as well as the TAFE side (Thorn, Gonczi & Chapman 1990, pp.7–8).

The evidence, therefore, suggests that the TAFE–industry relationship in the years 1987 to 1990 was in considerably better shape than a reading of federal Ministerial and official statements would indicate. This is not to say that industry had no complaints about TAFE, nor TAFE about industry. However, it is difficult to see how the ESFC’s industry consultations arrived at so adverse a finding on TAFE’s responsiveness.

Evaluating the view from the ESFC

According to the ESFC, ‘about 50’ industry submissions complained about TAFE. The only record available is the ESFC’s own summary of views—submissions to such reviews are not published or archived on the grounds of confidentiality. However, the three major national employer bodies—MTIA, CAI and BCA—published their submissions independently and they have been reviewed here. They cannot reasonably have been the foundation for the ESFC’s critical view. On the other hand, the ESFC indicated that 36 ‘industry’ submissions were from industry training committees (ESFC 1989b, appendix).

The growing cultural antipathy between the ITCs and the TAFE sector had been evident in a series of reports from the ITCs’ national body, the National Training Council, throughout the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. NTC 1979, p.1; NTC 1980, p.4; NTC 1984, p.57). Not only was there a longstanding tension between the ITCs and the TAFE sector, but the ITCs were funded and managed from the same Ministerial portfolio as the ESFC. It would seem that much of what was reported as industry dissatisfaction was, in fact, one area of the employment, education and training portfolio talking to another.

What seems a fair summary of the state of play on industry–TAFE relations in the 1980s has been provided by Richard Sweet of the Dusseldorp Skills Forum:
Industry criticism of the responsiveness of the TAFE and training systems was a common theme of the 1980s. Whilst much of this criticism was fundamentally a reflection of the rigidities of the labour market in which TAFE and training authorities operated, much of it also arose from difficulties in the structure, operation and management of the training system itself.

(Sweet 1993, p.5)

If Sweet’s assessment is accurate, it would seem that a moderate degree of industry dissatisfaction had been systematically inflated by Minister Dawkins and agencies within his portfolio as part of an exercise in mobilising support through rhetoric for a package of intended reforms—the training reform agenda. Not only was there far less dissatisfaction with the training system than implied by government, some crucial areas of the agenda, such as industry involvement in accreditation machinery, and thus the competency-based training push, had rather less industry support than claimed.

Conclusion

Between 1987 and 1990 Commonwealth Minister John Dawkins engaged in a systematic process of setting a policy agenda derived from the new value system of corporatist and managerialist approaches to government. A clear policy trail of documents and policy initiatives illuminates his attempts to mobilise support through rhetoric which stressed the urgency of adopting an economic and instrumentalist view of education and training and cast the existing public TAFE system as maladaptive and non-responsive.

The training reform agenda was deeply rooted in a new industrial relations agenda built on the concept of award restructuring. This approach allowed the recruitment of representatives of the industry parties into a corporatist ‘common front’ against institution-based vocational education. The fact that a common front was not always easily developed, especially with some employer organisations, reflects the degree to which the rhetoric was contrived and, in its characterisation of an unresponsive TAFE system, went well beyond the actual experience of the parties involved.
As well as his own (and his agencies') rhetoric, Dawkins skilfully deployed legitimation derived from the key economic corporatist bodies, EPAC and OECD, which had the added benefit of widening the roster of debate participants. Like the reportage of industry attitudes, the use of EPAC and OECD material was, at the least, selective. But it was effective and stands as an exemplar of the lasting impact of uncontested rhetoric in setting a policy agenda.

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