THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TAFE AND ITS LECTURERS' COMMUNITY: AN ATTEMPT TO SEE THE FUTURE

LUBOMIR TCHERVENKOV

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- TAFE, contextual analysis, scenario thinking, school community, lecturers community

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

SYNOPSIS

No one really knows what future holds, but there are some tools available, which can make us aware of the possible future tendencies. This paper is based on an instrument, called *'scenario thinking'*, developed by Scearce and Fulton in their book "What If? The Art of Scenario Thinking for Nonprofits". It explores four possible future development for TAFE revolving around two major axes. The first one is 'managerialism' vs. 'professional autonomy'. The second one is 'market driven' vs. 'government funded' technical training. The paper examines the most likely outcome for Western Australia.

INTRODUCTION

The very fabric of life comprises three main elements; past, present and future. These concepts apply not only to individuals and families, but also to larger organizations, such as schools, companies and even nations. The past is petrous and cannot be changed. The present, as it unfolds in every given moment appears to be a summary of all our past actions combined. The future depends on all our past actions, plus the decisions we make in the present.

The destinies of individuals are more easily predictable as they depend largely on the individual's free will, their personal decisions and actions. However, the destinies of large organizations, such as schools depend on myriad of unknown factors; many of which are decisions taken from somewhere "above". Often the driving factors in the educational organizations are some faceless political or corporative organizations.

No one really knows what the future holds, but there are some tools available, which can make us aware of the possible future tendencies. For example, Scearce and Fulton (2004b) develop a very useful instrument, called *scenario thinking,* which is well described in their book "What If? The Art of Scenario Thinking for Nonprofits". Scenario planning or scenario analysis was first used by military intelligence. Its aim was to explore various possible future set-ups. Then a plan of action was prepared for each one of them. Thus, the military personnel were ready for rapid action in all eventualities. Later on this model was applied to the business strategies of large corporations (Wright & Cairns, 2011).

More recently, there is an attempt to replicate the success of such strategic planning process to educational institutions. The goal is to "... introduce the non-profit leaders to a powerful way of embracing, influencing and planning for the future – scenario thinking ..." (Scearce & Fulton, 2004b). This paper is an attempt to perform a contextual analysis of some possible future trends at my workplace. I am a professional engineer/lecturer in the Electrotechnology division of one of Perth's TAFEs.

'SCHOOL COMMUNITY' AND 'LECTURER COMMUNITY' CONSTRUCTS

Most authors agree that the school community construct should encompass certain key characteristics, such as a strong relationship between the school staff and its corresponding communities. Also, there should be some kind of advisory board, which represents the community. The advisory board should be involved in some of the decision making. Finally, there should be a full-time community school director, who manages and coordinates all school based and out-of-school activities (Burke, 2000; Dennison & Shenton, 1990; Eacott, 2011a, 2011b; Gewirtz & Ball, 2000; Hedley, 2000; Lashway & Eric Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1996; Scearce & Fulton, 2004a).

According to most sources, the school community should ideally function as a hub, utilizing community resources, educating and supporting students and their families, in a range of in-class and out-of-class activities. Every school community is unique, but often they represent collaborative efforts of teachers, administrators, students, parents, local businesses, community agencies or local residents.

However, my educational organisation does not fit into this particular model. The problem is that we provide highly specialized technical training. For this reason, there is very little collaboration with parents, local businesses or local residents. Ideally, the lecturers should be working in a very close collaboration with the industry and should hold regular meetings with industry representatives.

As far as I am aware, most of the lecturers, who are close to retirement, do not keep regular contact with the industry community. At the same time, the younger colleagues are engaged exclusively in professional development on a an individual basis. This may include self-study for their mandatory TAE Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, or they may be attending selected professional seminars. It is difficult to organise professional development courses, which are suitable to *all* the lecturers. This is so, because each one of them delivers highly specialised engineering subjects. The overlap of content between units of delivery is small, which makes the professional development of large groups of engineers, each one of them specialized in a particular field, quite impractical.

For the reasons, given above I have decided not to explore the school community in its traditional context, but to concentrate rather on what I call a 'lecturers community'. For the purposes of this paper I will define it as *'a community of professional lecturers, who may or may not collaborate with each other, while engaged in the delivery of highly specialised engineering subjects to adult learners'*. This is my definition and I do not assert that it is academically comprehensive. However, I am confident that it is adequate for the purposes of this paper. Therefore, my task is to explore what would be the hypothetical impact on the *lecturers' community*, according to the four possible scenario thinking models, described further on in this thesis.

SPECIFICS OF TAFEs AS TEACHING INSTITUTIONS

Before proceeding any further, a few words must be said about the specifics of the teaching institution in which I work. For the purposes of this paper I will simply call it TAFE. At the same time, however, we have to bear in mind that TAFE strictly speaking does not exist anymore. It has been fragmented into several Institutions of Technology, which are now all part of the VET (Vocational Education and Training) sector.

Australian technical education began its history in the 1820's with the establishment of the first Mechanics Institute in Hobart. Originally the first Australian technical and further education systems 'not surprisingly tended to replicate their British counterparts' (Hermann, Richardson, & Woodburne, 1976, p. 27). And according to the British tradition they used to fulfil a different role from the other tertiary institutions. Although the opinions of academics about the distinct roles of universities and technical education colleges vary, it seems that the definition given by Ashby in 1946 is still withstanding the test of time.

Here is the criterion for determining what subject or parts of a subject should be taught at a university. If the subject lends itself to disinterested thinking; if generalisation can be extracted from it; if it can be advanced by research; if in brief, it breeds ideas in the mind, then the subject is appropriate for a university. If, on the other hand, the subject borrows all its principles from an older study (as journalism does from literature, or

salesmanship from psychology, or massage from anatomy and physiology) and does not lead to generalisation, then the subject is not a proper one for a university. Let it be taught somewhere by all means. It is important that there should be opportunities for training in it. But it is a technique, not an exercise for maintaining intellectual health; and the place for technique is a technical college. (Ashby, cited in Hermann et al. 1976, p.27)

Other distinctive features of technical colleges are their enormous diversity of course durations, variety of attendance patterns and a wide range of offered credentials. The Australian Qualification Framework, which was adopted on the 1st of January 1995, allows some overlapping of issued qualifications: both the VET sector and the higher education sector can offer Diplomas, Advanced Diplomas and Bachelors' Degrees. This overlap was originally intended to allow for the smooth transition from TAFEs to universities. Interestingly, in recent years there is an increased flow of students from universities to TAFEs. The main reason for this is rooted in TAFEs' reputation as places, where one can obtain practical, hands-on, technical skills.

MANAGERIALISM VS. PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY

Historically technical education colleges originated and developed within State governments and colonial governments. Their strong centralisation was imperative in order for them to survive, especially in rural and country areas. This makes them very different from universities, which traditionally have always been very autonomous institutions. In other words, in order to keep their wide spread and to solve the problems with the scale, TAFEs from their inception did not have much autonomy. Quite the opposite: they were expected to implement both the Commonwealth Government's and the State Government's economic, social justice and education policies. These were often quite contradictory, which frequently placed TAFEs in a very difficult position.

In 1901, the new Australian federal arrangement provided a formal division of powers between the Commonwealth and the States. The Commonwealth powers were listed in

considerable detail in the Constitution, while the States retained their 'residual powers'. Since education was not specified as a Commonwealth obligation, it remained a State responsibility.

It was not until 1973, when the Kangan committee officially laid the foundations of the modern TAFE, which envisaged a strong intervention by the Commonwealth. It was then when the acronym 'TAFE' was mentioned for the first time in the report, meaning 'technical and further education'. It also provided a formal definition of the new institution:

> …technical and further education should be regarded as describing all organised and sustained programs designed to communicate vocationally oriented knowledge and to develop the individual's understanding and skills. It should include all programs of education with a vocational purpose, other than those financially supported by other Commissions, whether the individual is using the program with employment as a primary aim or with the aim of gaining specialised knowledge or skills for personal enrichment or job improvement. It includes what is usually known as 'adult education'. It does not include activities which have no direct educational purpose and which are not planned as a systematic sequence (Australian Committee on Technical Further Education, 1974, p. v).

The Kangan report outlined all important areas of future TAFE developments – access to its services, curriculum research and development, training of staff specialists, counselling services, grants to develop facilities and so on. This was a historical moment for TAFE, because for the first time it was put on the national agenda and began to form its national identity. Since then it survived many other reports, committees and reforms over the years, but it retained its core values, almost unchanged until the late 1980s.

Around that time, there was a strong push towards competency-based training and different TAFE funding arrangements. In fact, this was the exact point in time when the management of programs was separated from a statutory authority and was placed directly into the hands of the DEET (Department of Employment, Education and Training (Commonwealth)). This was the beginning of the '*new managerialism'*.

The abolishing of CTEC (Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission) was seen by Prof. Peter Karmel as a clear 'assertion of ministerial power'. He saw the separation of professional policy advice from its implementation as a 'recipe for its irrelevance' (Karmel, 1989, p. 12).

In the following years, the executive power to run the TAFE system concentrated more exclusively in the hands of the Commonwealth. In February 1992, the then Prime Minister Paul Keating included in his Economic Statement (called "One Nation"), the proposal for the Commonwealth to fully fund TAFE. He also established the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). "One of ANTA's major tasks is to make recommendations to the government about more effective and efficient means of delivering vocational education and training"(Australian National Training Authority, 1994).

Of course, anyone who has been in the TAFE system, knows that *more effective* and *more efficient,* are simply other terms for cutting back on important functions essential to delivery, such as professional development, student support systems or updated technical equipment (Goozee & National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2001, p. 104). ANTA survived until 2005, when the Howard government incorporated it into the Department of Education and Training, thus continuing the further centralisation of TAFE management.

Finally the National Training Framework (NTF) was implemented in 1996, which consisted of three main components: industry-driven system, the development of Training Packages and the Australian Recognition Framework. In July 1998, the report *"Today's Training, Tomorrow's Skills"* was released, which marked the first major TAFE overhaul since the Kangan review. The report recognized that the TAFE clearly leads the VET sector by providing services to over 1 million students, or 82% of the total enrolments (Goozee & National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2001, p. 99). The report gave recommendations to the Commonwealth to further fund TAFE as a sole provider to many exclusive services, such as training in regional and rural areas, opportunities for school leavers, training for people with special needs and various community service obligations.

Thus, it seems that the governing system in TAFE colleges has evolved historically from '*professional autonomy'* in its early days, towards *'managerialism'* in the latest two decades. The later term is used to describe a new cast of public servants and administrators (usually MBA

graduates), who are not wedded to any specific industry or professional sector. Starting from the 1990s, it was believed that they can apply generic management skills to run, say, a factory, department store or a teaching institution. However, reality proves otherwise. As Hienz-Dieter points out:

> A strong formal education is becoming a prerequisite for an increasingly large number of careers and occupations, including some that until recently were considered vocational ... Management of higher education, and educational organisations in general, will have to become as sophisticated and knowledgeable as the best management in the corporate world. Still, managers of schools and universities will not succeed if they simply imitate the practices of their peers in business. (Heinz-Dieter, 2002).

MARKET-DRIVEN VS. GOVERNMENT-FUNDED TECHNICAL TRAINING

This leads to the second axis of our scenario thinking: market-driven vs. government funded technical training. In the last couple of decades, there has been a very strong push towards market-driven education model. More specifically, tertiary education has been regarded exclusively as a lucrative business only. There have been numerous government attempts to privatise it and run it entirely on that basis.

On one hand, the government departments with their cumbersome administrative instruments, very rarely seem to be suitable to deliver profitable business solutions. On the other hand, education definitely should not be regarded simply as a business, as its nature encompasses an enormously complex cluster of very important supporting functions – self-esteem issues, self-realisation, social politics, national productivity and many others. In this respect the policy makers should be extremely careful, when advocating simple pay-per-service type of VET education.

The term "vouchers" for post-secondary education first appeared in the West review of higher education in April 1998. The basic idea behind this concept is to promote greater competition among registered training organisations (RTO) and giving the students a greater choice of educational 'products'. However, it has been noted that this system is not very suitable for online delivery, impracticable for mature students and that it is more difficult to

administer and manage. In addition to this, if the voucher system is not differentiated by income, it can significantly disadvantage entire groups of learners. Back in 1998, both the Minister Kemp and the Prime Minister John Howard pledged that they had no intention of introducing such changes to tertiary education funding and did not act on those recommendations of the West review committee.

However, the voucher idea has been circulating for a long time and it is far from dead. There are several different voucher systems, and they have been mainly used in countries, such as USA, France and Denmark. It has been used in Chile for over 20 years. Contreras (2002) points out in his research that "apparent impact is relatively small" (p.2) and that "TSLS estimates show that females gain less than males from going to voucher schools"(p.2). In other words, his research shows that the size of the disadvantaged groups can reach 50%, i.e. it can be gender based.

Peter de Graaff, the Assistant General Secretary (Post School Education) of the NSW Teachers Federation argues that:

In Victoria, the introduction of a market-driven, demand-focused system has meant:

- Rises in course fees;

- Disguised public funding going to private providers;

- Declines in TAFE enrolments;

- Private providers cherry picking profitable courses, with TAFE left with high-cost technical training;

- Course options delivered by providers are driven by financial considerations;

- The financial viability of TAFE has been threatened;

- Declines in educational quality.

A financial report on the VET sector produced by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research shows that Victoria's fully marketised VET system has been the biggest loser (*The Australian*, October 5) (Graaff, 2011).

TAFE Directors Australia also expresses great caution towards giving market instruments full rein in the VET sector.

TDA acknowledges that a degree of competition is an important means of ensuring system efficiency. However, any move to a fully contestable training system, as is proposed in Victoria, entails a significant risk of actually reducing workforce participation as the continued reduction in funding for TAFE institutes renders them unable to provide either the necessary diversity of programs, or the additional support and guidance that disadvantaged students need. The uncertainty surrounding the future of TAFE institutes in Victoria threatens to undermine public confidence in the stability of the VET system as a whole and to encourage students to pursue university studies which do not suit them (TAFE Directors Australia, 2011).

DISCUSSION

In the light of the above findings, four possible TAFE future developments can be examined, employing scenario thinking as outlined by Scearce and Fulton (2004b). These are given in Figure 1:

Market-driven TAFE

Second best possible outcome

Funds allocated for professional development, upgrading facilities, new modern equipment etc. will be decided on professional meetings. If lecturers are united towards a common goal (excellent education for students) it is likely that they can survive in a market-driven environment.

3.

Education run purely as a business. Little or no consideration given to the long term social implications. Private RTOs are the biggest winners. The students and the public are the biggest losers. Lecturers losing significant benefits and professional development opportunities.

Most likely development

4.

Managerialism

Professional Autonomy

Best possible outcome

Professional Learning Communities. Divisions managed by capable individuals, with degrees in several fields, for example concurrent degrees in engineering, education and possibly management. Professional development is inextricably linked to sharing practices. Validation and moderation are the key tools.

2.

Professional development organized as bureaucratic activities. Professional communities managed by TAFE appointed administrators, for example MBA put in charge of professional engineers and technicians. Technical curriculums developed by bureaucrats. Generic management with no understanding of the delivery content.

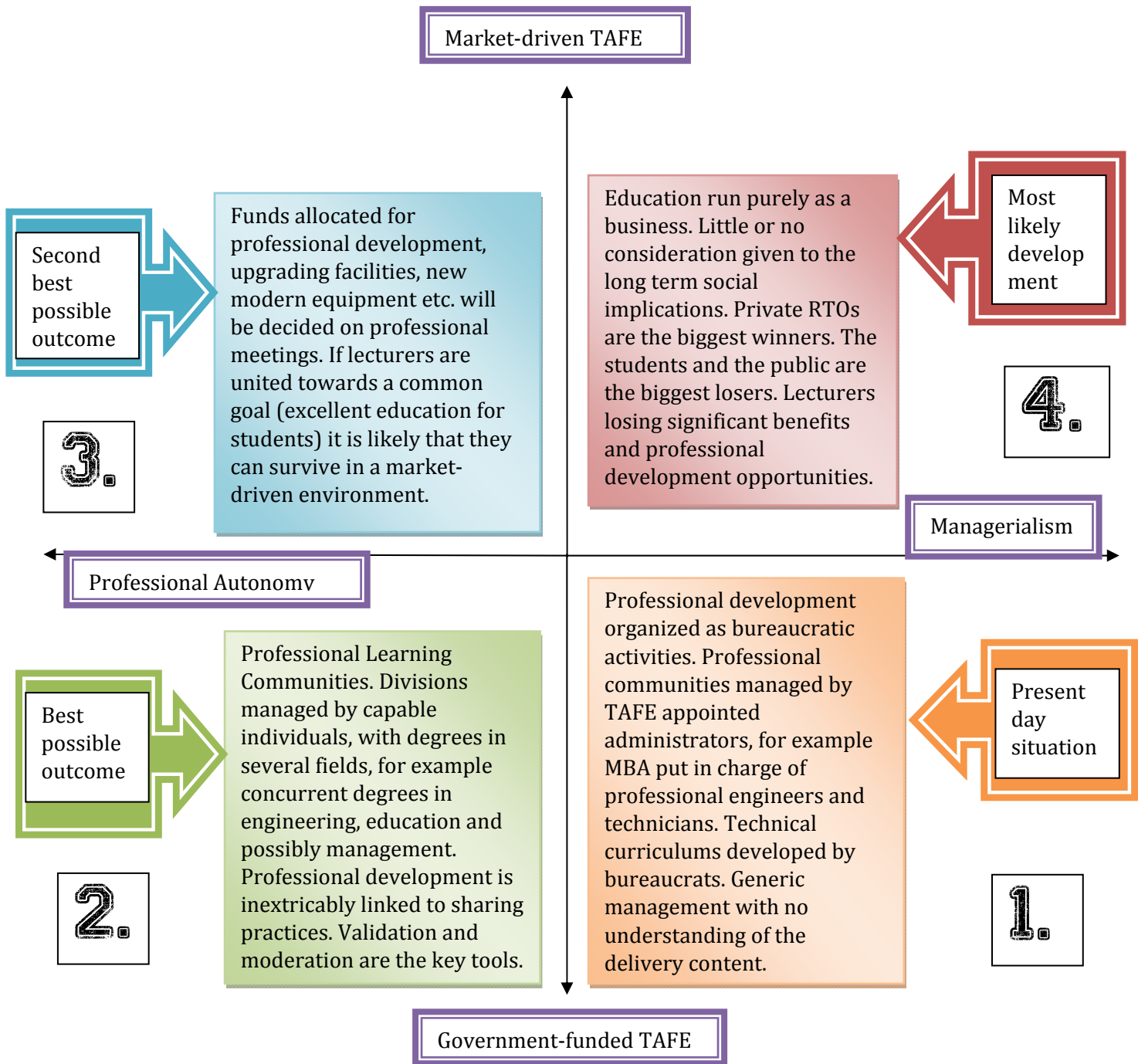Present day situation

1.

Government-funded TAFE

Fig. 1 *Market-driven vs. Government funded TAFE on one side and professional autonomy vs. managerialism on the other, produces four possible scenarios for future TAFE development*

1. **Scenario 1. Government-funded TAFE combined with managerialism.**

This is the present status quo. This model allows for professional development and some clauses are postulated in the Western Australian TAFE Lecturers' General Agreement (SSTUWA, 2011). However, a lot of the professional development is organised as bureaucratic activities in the true spirit of managerialism, rather than real learning. It is quite sad that professionals (such as professional engineers, for example) are often managed by people with MBAs, who have no understanding of the content of delivery and the aspects of the teaching process. Pat O'Brien (City Beach HS, Perth, WA) and Barry Down (ECU) list 14 serious problems arising from this current system (O'Brien & Down, 2002). Among them are increased levels of uncertainty and stress among teachers, collegiality being replaced with competitiveness, less time spent teaching, more time spent documenting, a lot of accountability for teachers and very little accountability for bureaucrats and so on.

The bottom line is that this corporate, managerialist model did not produce any better outcomes in Australian schools since it was introduced about two decades ago. In fact, its core principles are completely foreign to a culture of real learning and proper education.

2. **Scenario 2. Government-funded TAFE, combined with professional autonomy.**

This is the best possible scenario outcome for the future of TAFE. Copious academic research shows that if the strong hierarchical management structure is replaced with distributed, shared responsibility among *professionals*, we can expect improved results in the students (and teachers) learning. The world renowned educator Pasi Sahlberg explains that professional autonomy is at the heart of the consistent success of the Finish educational system. According to Sahlberg, accountability of teachers should be replaced with confidence in them. They are professionals and should be treated as such. Sadly, in Australia they are often treated by bureaucrats as small children and held accountable for every action. In Finland, for example, almost all teachers have Master's

degrees in Education and it is far easier to become a lawyer or a medical doctor, than a professional teacher.

> I am particularly concerned, with many others, of the growing number of those who believe that people from the corporate world have the answer to educational change and that they know best where to go next. Among them are those who insist for more data and performance targets. These same people believe that more competition between schools is the key to more effective education and that pay-per-performance for teachers will attract better people to teaching (Sahlberg, 2011).

It is evident that the direction in which our education system has been moving in the last couple of decades is wrong. There is a vast amount of research which clearly demonstrates that we should in fact be redeploying it in the opposite direction. Instead of corporate managerialism we should be instilling professional autonomy, such as professional learning communities, for example. Instead of a market-driven-for-profit type of education, we should have a government funded model, which allows the entire nation to benefit from free education. Sadly, Australia together with USA, Canada, New Zealand and England has been infected by, as Sahlberg calls it, the 'GERM' (Global Education Reform Movement). But there is an alternative way and Finland is a testimony to it. The second scenario, which we just considered, is clearly the best outcome for the future of the Australian education system. Its core principles are very close to the Finnish model.

3. **Scenario 3. Market-driven TAFE, combined with professional autonomy.**

In this scenario, it is envisaged that present government funding for TAFE will largely cease and it will be replaced by a voucher system. At the same time, the lecturers will be given more professional autonomy to manage their section budgets themselves. This scenario is not the worst of all, but it is very unlikely to happen for many reasons. It is highly improbable that the Commonwealth government will willingly loosen its grip on

TAFE management via its available financial mechanisms. The entire history of TAFE evolution reveals that, in fact, exactly the opposite process is slowly taking place.

However, it is possible that singular TAFEs can be made more autonomous. In fact, this already happened a few years ago, when TAFE was abolished and fragmented into several autonomous Institutes of Technology, Polytechnics and Institutes of Training. This change, however, did not have any positive effect on a micro-level at all. Lecturers are still being governed within a very strong vertical, managerial structure before and after this change. In order for this third scenario to become a reality, the lecturers should be organised in professional learning communities.

There is overwhelming evidence in the academic literature that this type of self-governance on a micro-level produces much better teaching and learning results (Hord, 2009; Stoll, Bollam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006; Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004). The benefits of Professional Learning Communities are examined in detail in my paper "Professional Learning Communities" (Tchervenkov, 2012).

However, this can only happen, if a restructure *within each of the Institutes of Technology* is carried out. Only then the existing managerialism can be replaced with professional autonomy. This will require new type of VET leaders. As pointed out by Scott Eacott in "Preparing Educational Leaders in Managerialist Times: An Australian Story":

> The doxa of school leadership needs to be more than challenged, it needs to be resisted. This requires a leadership habitus that is not just about having learnt the rules of the game, rules which have established the principal as the deliverer of the agenda of the state. Education is arguably losing its voice in the policy arena … This means that knowledge production, and particularly the engagement of current and aspiring school leaders, needs to be based on reading across boundaries (geographic and field) (Eacott, 2011b).

If this happens, there is a good chance that the sections will autonomously manage their budgets more effectively, professionally and conscientiously. In fact, such a type of self-

governance on a micro-level was in place in the years 1975 – 1982, which was the 'golden age' of TAFE (Goozee & National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2001, p. 38).

4. **Scenario 4. Market-driven TAFE, combined with managerialism.**

Unfortunately, for Australian society this is the worst, and at the same time the most likely future development scenario. The timeline of TAFE governance in Western Australia is very well described by the late Prof. Michael White, who was a prominent scholar in Curtin University.

He points out that starting from the 1960s there has been a strong support for the separation of TAFE from the State Education Department (White, 1987). Separation from the State Education Department, although it may sound very good in theory, is in fact the first step towards privatisation. We know that this did not eventuate (yet), but the idea is far from dead. Privately run TAFEs mean more expensive, lower value education, lack of time for professional development, insufficient practical equipment, less choice of courses, and unequitable access to education.

The biggest losers from such an approach, as already proven in Victoria, will be the students and to a certain degree the lecturers, especially the ones who have been in the TAFE system for a while. The biggest profiteers will be the private RTOs, which will cherry pick selected, easy to deliver courses, encompassing minimum practical training, combined with maximum revenue. Little or no consideration will be given to the long term social implications of running TAFEs as businesses, which could be quite devastating.

We should always bear in mind that TAFEs fulfil a very important role, especially for the disadvantaged, low-income earners, school leavers, people with disabilities, women, people with poor reading and writing skills, students from non-English speaking backgrounds and students in the remote and rural communities. All those people will have to pay the highest price of all – deprivation of adequate education! This sounds

pessimistic, but if something is not done now, the historical examination of events shows that the VET sector is moving fast towards a model envisaging a market-driven education, combined with managerialism: the worst possible scenario!

CONCLUSION

The art of scenario thinking is useful, because it allows us the consideration of several possible future scenario developments. In such a way stakeholders are better equipped to face the challenges, which metaphorically await us just around the corner. Unfortunately, the examination of past events proves that the VET sector is moving in the wrong direction. Instead of professional autonomy, the inefficient and demoralizing model of managerialism was instilled. Instead of fighting to preserve the government-funded model, there is an increasing push to manage TAFEs as market-driven business enterprises. The social consequences of such political short sightseeing can be devastating, especially for younger Australians. In the words of Pasi Sahlberg 'our time to speak out is now' (2011, p. 184). We can all hope for the best, but prepare for the worst!

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