

TAFE and Post-Secondary Education

By Don Aitkin

The Bradley Review should certainly say something about the future place of TAFE within post-secondary education. In what follows I set out some of the perspectives that I would bring to such a discussion.

First, hand and mind. I have come to the view, over a working lifetime in education, that as a society we put more stress than we should on the work of the mind, and less than we should on the work of our hands. There are good historic reasons for our having done so in the past, but I think we would benefit from a more even balance in the future. All artists, for example, use their hands, as do surgeons, dentists— and indeed all of us, when we cook, dress, play sport and so on. Getting our hand and mind in concert gives us the best outcomes, it seems to me. I have taken on some of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences here (*Frames of Mind*, 1983), because it is plain to me that as children we present our capacities to our parents and other significant adults in different ways, and it is not sensible to categorise children too early. All of us need to develop as many of our capacities as possible, and it is not wise for us, as parents or educators, to down-play the importance of what is done with the hands.

Second, status differences. It follows, at least for me, that we should aim to diminish the status differences between all forms of post-secondary education, since they emphasise different aspects of the same set of intelligences. In the Australian context, that suggests to me that we should do our best to diminish the differences between TAFE and higher education (the use of the latter term plainly carries with it some status baggage).

Third, resource differences. Over time I would move to having the funding of all forms of post-secondary education managed by the same people, and increasingly through a similar template. TAFE facilities can be expensive, so this is not to urge that more money go to TAFE rather than to universities; rather, it is to propose that students be seen as needing the same kinds of resources, that the buildings in which they learn should be of the same quality, and that grounds and appurtenances be of the same quality. To follow this path will, of course, diminish status differences.

Fourth, funding students. When a student has completed secondary studies successfully, I would argue that he or she would then be able to accept entitlement to a five-year fee-less enrolment in any post-secondary institution where the student has passed the necessary cut-off score. For my part, this entitlement could be taken in any order that seemed sensible to the student: two years of TAFE and then three of university, or the other way round, or all in one sector or the other. More, I would have the entitlement remain current for a long time — thirty years or more — so that any unused portion would be available should a career shift require some further study.

Fifth, avoid undue mergers. While I have seen some successful elements of merged university and TAFE endeavours, I am generally of the opinion that no great public good

will come from trying to merge TAFE institutes with universities, at least for a generation or so. This prescription may sound paradoxical, given those above. But there is a good deal to be said for keeping core businesses focussed rather than broad. Until we have dealt well with status, resource and student-funding issues it will be premature to try and bring all these institutions into a single 'one size fits all' shape.

In any case, some of our universities are already very large, and large institutions have important problems in management, identity and communication. Making them larger does not seem sound to me unless there are very great gains to be made. I cannot see those gains at the moment.

In the meantime I would encourage TAFE institutions and universities to develop the best articulation arrangements they can to make transition easy for students who wish to make the transition.

Sixth, assist autonomy. TAFE institutions would benefit, I think, from having both the autonomy and the accountability that universities have. I accept that there is a great deal of history in the way that TAFE institutions are presently run, and that they are entangled in a web of past practice that itself must be unpicked before autonomy will be possible. But it seems a good goal to me, because strong government control prevents people using their own acumen to solve their problems and advance their interests, while government cannot effectively manage institutions. The present system is not optimal.

It will be clear from the above that I regard all human beings as highly educable, and that I see no great reason to prefer one form of education over the other. Both are necessary, and a combination of the two is probably best for most of us.