

*To Hell in a Handcart*  
**Educational realities, teachers' work and neo-liberal restructuring in  
NSW TAFE**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the impact of neo-liberal economic restructuring on teachers, specifically teachers in technical and further education. Historically, there has been limited research undertaken on teachers as workers, and even less on TAFE teachers. During the period covered by the study, TAFE was buffeted by the massive changes, social, political, cultural and economic, that were occurring on a global scale. As a result, TAFE has been a system in crisis. The consequences are addressed by an empirical study that examines NSW TAFE teachers' experience of the great changes that have occurred to their work since the late 1980s.

Forty-one teachers were interviewed in tape recorded sessions lasting around one hour each. The respondents were drawn from twenty-seven teaching sections across all the major industry areas represented in TAFE. Twenty of the teachers were from metropolitan locations, twenty-one were regional. Nine managers were also interviewed, from Head of Studies to senior management levels, covering those with local as well as state-wide responsibilities.

The changes to TAFE have been driven by a pervasive neo-liberal ideology adopted by both major parties in Australia. This study documents the experience of TAFE teachers as that ideology led to a corporatised vocational education and training system strongly oriented to the market. It also records their responses to the narrowing of curriculum that resulted from the "industry-driven" vocational education and training policies of governments. The study gives voice to their grief, frustration and anger as their working conditions deteriorated and their commitment to quality education was undermined.

The study documents the teachers' resistance to the processes of organisational fragmentation, the increasing incidence of cost-driven, rather than educational, decision-making, and the commodification of curriculum driven by a series of policy decisions taken at both national and state level.

The study compares these experiences with those of the TAFE managers, whose response to the crisis, while differing from that of the teachers, supports the teachers' commitment to public education as a social good.

The study concludes that the NSW TAFE teachers' resistance has continued to act as a brake on the excesses of neo-liberalism. Some possibilities for an alternative vision of technical and further education thus remain.

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## Acronyms

ACCI	Australian Chamber of Commerce & Industry
ACE	Adult and Community Education
ACOTAFE	Australian Committee on Technical & Further Education
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
AEC	Australian Education Council
AEU	Australian Education Union
ALP	Australian Labor Party
AMWU	Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union
ANTA	Australian National Training Authority
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
ASCH	Annual Student Contact Hours
ASF	Australian Standards Framework
ATS	Australian Traineeship System
AVCTS	Australian Vocational Certificate Training System
AVTS	Australian Vocational Training System
BCA	Business Council of Australia
BVET	Board of Vocational Education & Training
CBT	Competency Based Training
DEETYA	Dept of Employment, Education, Training & Youth Affairs
DEIR	Dept of Employment & Industrial Relations
DET	Dept of Education and Training
DIRETFE	Dept of Industrial Relations, Employment, Training & Further Education
DTEC	Dept of Training & Education Coordination
EC	Establishment Control (part-time teacher pay system)
ESC	Education Services Consortium
ESD	Education Services Division
ESFC	Employment & Skills Formation Council
ESL	English as a Second Language
HOS	Head of Studies
IT	Information Technology

ITAB	Industry Training Administration Board
MAATS	Modern Apprenticeship & Traineeship System
MOVEET	Ministers of Vocational Education, Employment & Training
MUA	Maritime Union of Australia
NBEET	National Board of Employment, Education & Training
NCVER	National Centre for Vocational Education Research
NSW	New South Wales
NTRA	National Training Reform Agenda
PSA	Public Service Association
QETO	Quality Endorsed Training Organisation
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TAFETA	Technical & Further Education Teachers' Association
TCF	Textiles, Clothing and Footwear
TDC	Trade Development Council
VEETAC	Vocational Education & Training Advisory Committee
VET	Vocational Education & Training

# I Introduction

## Chapter 1: Introduction

I guess one reason is that I'm not stressed because I feel things are a mess [burst of laughter] - in the hierarchy. Maybe there's a question - is it organised chaos or is it just chaos, but I'm not at the moment as stressed out as I was because I feel [searching for words] the organisation isn't efficient as it - you know, maybe people saw it as being inefficient years ago, but we had a direction. We knew what we were doing. I had pride in my management before. I haven't got that same pride in my management. I have got more pride now in *myself*, and I know I can see what has to be done, and I'm not stressed as much, because I know that I'm more efficient than a lot of the hierarchy. *You let go the frustration.*<sup>1</sup>

Yeah - so I'm feeling better [laugh] I'm feeling better - isn't that a funny thought - when I think about that."

[Extract from interview (14:13<sup>2</sup>)]

When I began this study I defined it as using TAFE, and the TAFE teaching workforce, as a window into the changing world of work. I wanted to make better sense of what was happening to work: my work and that of my colleagues and thus, because our work is in vocational and further education, work in the wider society. Like my teaching colleagues, I was disturbed by what seemed to me to be a narrowing focus in TAFE. I was also questioning my complicity in enforcing management directives and imperatives that seemed to be inevitable, but which made me feel quite uneasy. I had become locked into short term, contingent responses to what seemed an ever changing agenda. I had always prided myself on my ability to adapt to change, but I wondered where the constant change was leading me and the organisation I was committed to. Most importantly, I began to wonder why I was working so hard to achieve objectives that did not fit with my sense of myself as an educator - an educator who could make a positive difference to people's lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout, italics are used to indicate my part in the interviews.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout, these numbers refer to interview number:page number in transcript.

I undertook this study because I wanted to gain a better understanding of the motivating forces behind the changes that had been occurring on a broad social scale and that were impacting on TAFE and on my work. It was prompted by a desire to challenge the justification for the changes, primarily the assumption that there was a need for Australia to be competitive in the global marketplace and that the challenge could be met only by taking a very particular "economic rationalist" path. Union debates on the changes and their effect on workers, both in TAFE and the wider society, were limited by the fact that they were conducted within the framework of the dominant discourse - somehow the ideologies of the "new right" had become generally accepted common sense. To challenge the primacy of the economic was to be branded out of date, a dinosaur incapable of adapting to a rapidly changing world. We were continually reacting, at best trying to salvage some of what we regarded as important, as rapid and constant change threatened our work and our working conditions.

As a committed public servant, I was also disturbed by the prevalent view that concepts common to the private sector were good, but those that had previously driven the public sector were bad. The public sector in which I had spent my working life had pioneered many progressive employment practices that had become a model for the private sector. These were now being swept away, and both of the major Australian political parties were outbidding each other in their efforts to promote "small government". Toohey (1994) quotes Jon Stanford, a member of Keating's Prime Minister's department: "Government spending on anything is usually regarded with suspicion: even in areas such as education or provision of infrastructure, priority should be given to allowing the market to determine the outcome" (p. 147).

As the study progressed, my focus became clearer - a focus on how neo-liberal economic restructuring has impacted on teachers, specifically teachers in technical and further education. Their situation confused many of the teachers I spoke to. While they knew they were not happy with where they were being driven as workers and as educators, they were unclear about the forces that were shaping their experience. The teacher whose comment gave me the title for the thesis, who said, "I think TAFE's

going to hell in a handcart"<sup>3</sup> is typical. While he spoke of the increasing divisiveness he saw in society, and argued that the changes in TAFE were "political", he also said that what he saw as an approaching "cataclysm" for TAFE was more a result of poor management than any broader cause. This localising of the cause of the significant changes that have occurred on a global level is perhaps not unusual. But it can limit strategies to resist the changes. This thesis aims to contribute to an understanding of how the global changes of the past few decades affect people at a local level and thus to help overcome that limitation.

As a provider of vocational education and training, TAFE by its very nature tends to reflect changes in industry and the workforce. When industries are rationalised, lose their market share, are moved off shore, are overtaken by technological change, shrink or disappear for various other reasons, the corresponding TAFE sections are also affected, with staff being redeployed, retrained, or made redundant as are their colleagues in the wider industrial arena.

Major shifts in industrial patterns, for instance the shift in employment from manufacturing to service industries in advanced industrial nations, cause changes in emphasis in TAFE's educational offerings.

Being a publicly funded provider, TAFE is also reflective of changes in priorities which occur at a political and ideological level. As governments make decisions to invest in publicly funded education in order, for instance, to deal with youth unemployment, or to increase the country's skill levels, TAFE expands. When governments argue for small government, or believe that competition policy should be applied to public institutions, TAFE is cut back or forced to tender for funds accordingly.

As an educational organisation, TAFE is subject to theoretical and ideological changes in educational policy and delivery. Competency Based Training, flexible delivery and other similar changes reverberate throughout the organisation. The link between vocational education and training and economic priorities (Marginson, 1993,

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<sup>3</sup> 32:15

pp. 20-22) has most recently seen a diminished role for further education in TAFE, as it concentrates on a narrowly defined vocational role.

NSW TAFE is a large organisation and, as such, it is prone to the kinds of organisational changes that are occurring in large organisations generally, as they respond to real or perceived changes in the global marketplace. The rise of "managerialism" (Rees & Rodley, (Eds.) 1995), the displacement of staff by the introduction of new technology, the emergence of a core/periphery workforce, new methods of working, the introduction of "flexible working conditions": TAFE is reflective of many of the issues raised by those who wish to analyse the epochal changes of our times.

The study focuses on teachers as workers, within the context of educational issues and of broader social and economic changes. Substantial analysis has been undertaken in the past twenty odd years of the major shifts occurring not only in industrially developed nations but also at a global level. But the predominant discourse of "globalisation", post-industrialism, post-Fordism, and the primacy of the economic can cripple at the local level any consideration of alternatives to the forces they represent.

The predominance of market thinking in educational delivery creates a tension for educators, a shift in emphasis from "student" to "consumer" or "client", and thus a shift from concepts of the common good to injunctions to be responsive to individual "client" demands. Outcomes that cannot be easily measured disappear from management rhetoric (Murdock, 1994, p. 241).

There is no doubt that TAFE teachers, like so many other workers, are under increasing pressure and it can be difficult under those circumstances to retain a strong sense of mission. Hargreaves (1994, p. 15) refers to the "intensification" process to which teachers are being subjected and Harvey (1990, p. 284) suggests that we are going through a period of intense time-space compression. Harvey (1992) also says that "Crises of identity (where is my place in the world? what future can I have?) arise out of strong phases of time-space compression" (p. 43). It is through the

personal experience of TAFE teachers and their sense of their own identity within the vocational education and training sector that I explore some of these broader themes.

There has been little research done on TAFE teachers as workers, and what has been done generally has been as a base for the production of policy documents internal to the vocational education and training system (for example, the publication *Staffing TAFE for the 21st Century*, VEETAC Working Party on TAFE Staffing Issues, 1992). But the role of the TAFE teacher has, under the pressure of the influences outlined above, changed substantially in the past few years, from traditional face to face teaching with clearly separated preparation time, to a role that incorporates a range of activities including as consultants to industry, "brokers" of courses, training assessors, workplace advisers, and tenderers for funds.

The scope and penetration of the changes have made it increasingly difficult for teachers to "retreat into the security of the classroom" which, as Ginsburg, Kamat, Raghu and Weaver (1995) note, is likely to allow "miseducative and inequality-reinforcing aspects of the system to go unchallenged" (p.17). Many teachers find the pressure to engage with changes they only partly understand to be extremely threatening.

The teachers in my study were in the throes of change, and had been for the past decade. Some were just trying to let it wash over them, having given up trying to make sense of it. Some were trying to adapt to the new TAFE - or the sequence of new TAFEs. Many exhibited deep levels of contradiction about their working lives in just about every aspect. They spoke of being unable to meet student demand for places because of funding cuts, yet of downturns in their industry areas that meant the flow of students had "dried up". In one part of an interview, I would be told that there were no jobs for young people, yet a little later in the same interview, I would be told that young people were too demanding and that the jobs were there if they really tried to find them. Some were dismissive of the language and discourse of the new business oriented TAFE, yet would also argue that it was necessary to accept the need to "change with the times", an attitude that was prevalent amongst the managers I spoke to. These kinds of contradictions could be interpreted by management as

"denial". They certainly indicate deep confusions, not just about what to do about what is happening, but about what is happening itself.

The teachers I spoke to had already undergone massive changes in curriculum, in the kinds of students they teach and in how they teach them. They were often overworked yet fearing redundancy. Some had retrained, either because they "saw the writing on the wall" or because they were told to, yet were facing redundancy again.

They were ambivalent about the future - theirs, TAFE's, their students', society's. They had tried to regroup and forge new pathways only to have the ground shift completely under their feet once more.

They were also ambivalent about the changes in TAFE. They told horror stories of the bad old days, yet also looked back with nostalgia and regret. They spoke with pride of their achievements and of their love of their work, and yet wondered if they could "cut it" in the new world that is being forced upon them.

In Parts III, IV and V, this thesis gives a voice to teachers in NSW TAFE. It records and analyses their responses to the changes wrought by neo-liberal restructuring, and documents their resistance. As far as possible, it uses their own words, within a framework of my thematic analysis. Their words recapture the tone of the interviews and communicate the issues in a vivid and powerful way.