

“The Road Ahead”

GTA NSW MANAGERS CONFERENCE – BOWRAL OCTOBER 2004

Approaching the end of 2004 – GTA Ltd and the group training network are well placed.

Internally – the network arrangement is working well and delivering benefits – we are seen as a far more cohesive and effective national unit and this is acknowledged by government and opposition alike as well as every other key stakeholder and industry group.

However, an important management issue for us is what to do with the level of the network fee following our initial 2 year membership fee freeze – this will no doubt concentrate the minds of all of us, for better or for worse.

Externally GTA Ltd and the network have had a very good year with recognition and acknowledgment by both sides of politics in the recent election campaign. This has been a genuine turning point for group training – it has been our day of graduation after a long apprenticeship.

The Labor party announced two major policy initiatives during the campaign designed to address national skills shortage – both were to be through group training and resourced to the tune of \$183 million over 4 years.

The Coalition announced one of their key skill shortage policies during the campaign at the Qld Group Training Managers Conference. A series of specific group training initiatives were announced by the Coalition - \$13.6 million on pre-vocational training programs through group training arrangements; \$17.9 million to deliver an additional 7,000 school based new apprenticeships through group training arrangements; \$35.5 million to deliver an additional 15,000 New Apprenticeship Access Program places over the next 3 years, and adjusting current incentive policy payment arrangements to ensure that the issue of poaching does not become a financial burden for employers of new apprentices. This latter issue has been a *major* concern to many in the group training network following the changes to the employer incentive regime a few years ago, most particularly given the fact that the weight of payment was to be changed to 20% up front and 80% at completion.

The Coalition package totalled \$71 million over 4 years. These policies were not just plucked out of the air by both sides. Engagement and advocacy by GTA Ltd over the past few years went a long way to the outcome we all saw during this campaign.

Yet as important – if not more – was the very active and constructive advocacy role that GTA Ltd played in getting the wider issue of skill shortage and VET onto the mainstream political radar screen. This has been a triumph for patience and advocacy and proof positive that getting on the front foot on an issue early before it was fashionable really has paid off on this occasion.

In the final days of campaigning – the PM sent out direct mail to million of voters indicating the “**The first 7 things we will do if re-elected**”. Skill shortage and the building of 23 technical schools was listed as number 1. Fighting terrorism was listed as number 6! Quite a turnaround.....

While the policy initiatives are very important and great recognition of the role of group training in solving skill shortage there is a parallel issue that is very important here I think and one where GTA is very keen to play a role.

A little while ago I wrote an article for Campus Review regarding what I saw as the next big policy and political challenge for any Commonwealth government in the VET area. I had no hesitation in nominating the burgeoning bureaucratic Commonwealth-State relationship in vocational education and training as the number one challenge. I called for genuine national leadership to be shown – for a national political leader to cut through the bureaucratic maze and to lead from the front. At a time of national skill shortage we cannot afford more of the same, nor to leave VET in the cold dead hands of eight jurisdictional bureaucracies.

The announcements by the PM in the area of VET have given me great heart and cause for optimism. For the first time in living memory – a Prime Minister of this country is talking about what we do on a daily basis – for the first time a Prime Minister is saying “this is my issue now” and for the first time in a very long time, a Prime Minister is saying to the Australian people

“I want to see an Australia where a trade apprenticeship is just as valued as a university degree”.

This is a huge step forward for all of us in the vet business. There is now a big opportunity for us in the group training sector. We must grab it and run with it.

There is also another extremely important issue and that is the future direction of ANTA. I have been a great supporter of the entity that is ANTA but it would not be stretching it to say that the past 12 months has been what the Queen would call a “annus horribilus” for the statutory authority. It has seen it’s recently appointed CEO depart after less than a year of service. It has seen the appointment of 3 new General Managers and then seen the resignation of two since the departure of the former CEO. It has seen a number of senior people leave the organisation over the past 12 months. It has basically come to a standstill in regards to policy and political grunt. There is still no new ANTA Agreement.

Indeed the Federation of VET seems to be crueiling the capacity of ANTA to achieve substantial policy progress in areas that are critical and which have concentrated their minds for sometime now: user choice, school to work pathways, school based new apprenticeships, structured workplace learning and a range of other policy areas. Put simply, ANTA needs to change or be changed.

The very obvious moves and announcements from the Coalition government that they now want to take a more active and lead role themselves in VET comes as no surprise then – they are no longer prepared to wait.

I believe in an entity called ANTA – I think we need a second Commonwealth arm commissioned to do a lot of the grunt work on behalf of the Commonwealth in the VET area. However, I do not believe that the current construct of ANTA is achieving the desired and required results. It is time for an overhaul. Let’s hope that the new CEO to be appointed in 2005 will do the trick! I look forward to working with him or her. In a positive way, I believe the problems that have bedevilled ANTA of late offer great opportunity and challenge.

At the same time, now that the Coalition has flagged a major political and policy onslaught on skills shortage and vocational education and training – I believe that the government should seriously consider introducing certain machinery of government changes as well to better assist the government to achieve it’s stated objectives. There are now very good reasons for a merging of the Departments of Education, Science and Training and Department of Employment.

We stand at the cusp of potentially one of the more exciting and radical reformists periods in the history of VET. The talk and the chatter have been so very welcome – now it must be backed up by action and importantly by bold and clever leadership.

Group Training Australia and the group training network have positioned themselves well to now take advantage of this new political imperative.

Now more than ever then – it is absolutely essential that we maintain a cohesive, professional and well re-sourced national association – and we can only do that with your continued help.

Thank you