

ATC – A Walk Down Memory Lane or Radical Future?

GTA WA State Conference, 18 March.

There has been a lot of talk lately regarding the proposed Australian Technical Colleges and that somehow this is a back to the future and retrograde step.

The critics say we are now revisiting an era that should stay*long buried*.

Now, whilst not wanting to bore you this evening with a long policy dissertation on the pros and cons of the Australian "Tech College" era, I thought it might be useful and timely (with due regard to anonymous Internet contributors) to remind you just what sort of environment and community we all lived in when we last had something called "Technical Colleges" – you might find it instructive as you contemplate the current policy debates.

It was an era when life was a lot less complex and complicated.

An era when:

As kids we rode our bikes – wore no helmets – just thongs and fluorescent clackers on our wheels

When we drank water from a hose and not a bottle and it still tasted the same

When as kids we would leave home in the morning and play all day – and no one would be able to reach us the entire day and remarkably, no one seemed to mind

An era when we did not have Play Stations

Or X Boxes

No video games

No 99 Channels and nothing on

No mobile phones

No personal computers and no chat rooms

We had things called "friends" and we went outside and found them

We made up games with sticks and tennis balls and ate "live" stuff

And although we were told it would happen...

We never got our eyes poked out

And that "live" stuff didn't stay inside of us forever

It was a time when our actions were our own – consequences were expected – the idea of a parent bailing us out if we broke the law was unheard of!

Indeed, our parents actually sided with the law!

So it was a time – not that long ago – of which many of us look back with a certain yearning and through rose coloured glasses – a time when values and ethics seemed to stand for a whole lot more than they do now.

A time also when something called Technical Colleges dotted the nation and talk of a national skills crisis was non-existent as trades and apprenticeships were part of the everyday fabric of our national psyche and culture.

So my question is: Will the latest iteration of Tech Colleges return us to this blissful past of thongs, clackers, hose water and "live" stuff?

I think probably not.

And whilst the return of Tech Colleges in 2006 will not in itself represent a step back in time, I must say I look forward to the time in the future when we again value the trades, apprenticeships and training like we used to in the good ole days.

To me, the future of VET and trade training is not to be found by wiping the slate clean and starting all over again.

It is to be found by taking stock of what we have, what works, what does not and what is in need of an overhaul.

There is no need to throw the baby out with the bath-water.

Fundamentally, employers, parents and the entire community want to be assured that the education and training system is delivering quality apprentices and trainees at the right quantity.

Whilst reviving Technical Colleges won't necessarily automatically and solely guarantee that "Quality" and "Quantity".

I have no doubt that it will begin to change the culture and attitudes on school campuses across the country.

The real and underlying problem at the moment is that the system is not being adequately supported by all key players in all jurisdictions to deliver the outcomes that are needed.

As far as I am concerned, VET in schools, Pre apprenticeships and school based new apprenticeships programs are three policies that provide as much long term potential than the introduction of Australian Technical Colleges to solve the current and future skill needs of this country.

During the last election, Group Training was singled out for special attention by both sides of politics in these critical areas and we are flat chat at the moment discussing with government as to the implementation details and specifics of these election policies.

In announcing these policies, the government recognised the value and role of the national group training network – 150 group training organisations employing 40,000 apprentices and trainees and being a driving force behind many pre-apprenticeships and school based programs around the country and with a particularly critical role to play in underpinning traditional trade training.

The story is no different here in WA.

The very latest in-training statistics show that in many traditional trades, group training organisations here in WA are leading the way in providing opportunity and delivering outcomes:

24% of total automotive trades-persons; 32% of all electrical; 43% of all construction; 24% of all Trades-persons and related workers; 50% of all indigenous and 17% of all disability.

Group Training is responsible for employing just on 18% of the total number of apprentices and trainees “ in training” in the State of Western Australia or 4,663 out of a total of 26,308 – Indeed, if you strip out existing workers from the figures, group training’s proportion of the total jumps to 22%

There is no doubt that we are on the cusp of a new era in vocational education and training in this country.

We in Group Training welcome it.

As a nation, we can no longer sit on our hands and simply do more of the same.

More of the same has lead us into a national skills shortage crisis.

Something has to be done and it has to be done with a sense of urgency.

We can no longer can afford the jurisdictional dogs breakfast that is our so called national VET system.

A new system and a new approach is needed.

The commonwealth must get more involved.

It must take a leadership role.

It must invest more.

A genuine training culture must be created.

Attitudes towards training must change across the board.

We all have a role to play.

And group training stands ready to do it’s part.

Here in WA – a sea-change is occurring within the group training association and network.

There are some of the best and brightest in all of the national group training network, here in WA.

As an association, it is now better placed than ever before to play a critical role in rolling out these new key national policy programs.

It is to the credit of all involved – Ian, Cheryl, Ian Mac Dougall, Stan Liaros and so many others – that has seen this situation turn around so rapidly.

So whilst we might all pine for the good old days of the Tech Schools when life seemed simpler and we had little more to worry about than wearing in our new pair of thongs and hoping that the clackers on the bike will hold out until the end of another day long bike ride – we know we have a job to do as the very future of Australia’s training and apprenticeship system lies very much in the hands of people like you and me.

Group training has a wonderful tradition but we now have to take that tradition forward. We now have to deliver on the heightened expectations that government have of us. I am confident that by working together we will indeed deliver the results and then some. WA Group Training will be critical in that process.

Like me, I am sure you are looking forward to the challenge.

Thank you.