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Newsletter of the Australian Library & Information Association

'A window of opportunity?' TAFE libraries and the clever country

YES, I KNOW it's a cliché: but clichés have their uses, not least of which is that they are universally comprehended. The recent TAFE/LRC Conference in Adelaide opened just such a window.

Conferences come and go; some are no more than pleasant get-togethers and information exchanges. Others are more pivotal, like this one: a ripe confluence of internal and external factors in a building wave of opportunity. For it is plain that this is a time of considerable reform and upheaval in the TAFE sector in which lie great possibilities for beneficial change, especially in relation to library services and LRCs. Change is never neutral, and it can always be shaped, capitalised upon.

Mr Dawkins' increasing interest in TAFE, culminating in his offer to the States to take responsibility for funding, and the release of the Finn Report, together with the conference, offer an extraordinary opportunity to us. The task will be to make the most of the chances which loom; all the signs are that the issue cannot (if it ever could) be left to educational administrators.

Both Finn and Dawkins make much of self-directed learning, but neither yet perceive the centrality of libraries to the process; it is our job to rectify this. If levels of funding for TAFE libraries and LRCs are to match the rhetoric of Finn and Dawkins, then the primary instrument will be the TAFE librarians, but they will need all the help they can get, especially from ALIA.

The timing couldn't be better; the country is turning its back on economic piracy, and is seeking new foundations

for growth; it has realised that there is no substitute for home-grown skills, the most primary of which is the ability to assume responsibility for our own learning on both a national and an individual basis. The 'clever country' rhetoric rests on a very real yearning for this country to take charge of its own destiny, and Dawkins has his own views as to how this might be achieved. The Vice-Chancellors may not agree, in their hearts, but their heads recognise the realities. And the State Ministers will also, despite their protestations, be glad to yield the TAFE initiative to Canberra.

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The Federal politicians too, will be looking for opportunities to repair the damage done to innocent bystanders (such as education and libraries) by fiscal opportunism. We should not squander the present opportunity by

squabbling with the bureaucrats over the latest TAFE restructuring. There are other, more important agendas.

We need to be working with our TAFE colleagues, reviewing, comparing, evaluating and lobbying, so that libraries and related resources in the TAFE sector are brought up to the levels where the kinds of learning which Finn hopes for and which Mr Dawkins demands, can occur. The new generation of TAFE students envisaged by Finn will need the high levels of 'literacy': symbolic, mathematic, conceptual, verbal, which are the essential, the absolutely vital platforms for self-centred (and there is of course, no other kind) learning.

If we accept that today's occupation-based skills are likely to be volatile, and will therefore need constant adjustment and upgrading, then we must centre the capacity to do that in the individual worker, who is closest to the task and most affected by it. This must be so obvious as to hardly need restating, but the Finn Report does not, I think, grasp all the implications of its own logic.

Certainly the workplace managers will be more interested in immediately applicable, highly specific, task-based skills, but without the broader, worker-centred autonomy in the learning process, the inculcation of fully intelligent, worker-managed learning will not be possible. At best, it will be far less effective.

Above all, none of it will be effective without adequate library services and LRCs. And it is here that we must find our voice, and develop a presence in the debate which is to come.

John Levett

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