

Warming up on the training track

From lawyer to political adviser to VET Director, there's one clear thread that runs through the career of **aaron devine** – making a difference where it's needed most.

interview

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In 2006, you moved from one end of Australia to the other, from Tassie to the Top End. What lured you from the role of General Manager of TAFE Tasmania and Executive Manager of the Drysdale Institute to join CDU as Director of VET and Teaching Quality?

I thought the role in the Top End was very exciting. I hadn't worked for a dual sector organisation previously and that was also a point of interest. My wife, Sandra, and I were ready for a bit of an adventure before our children got more settled in school, so we were looking for work overseas and I was following up some opportunities in China. Moving to the Top End was like a mini-adventure, a long way from Tassie, remote, different and exciting.

far right

Aaron Devine

Did you have any first-hand experience of the NT before you ventured up?

No, none. I'd never been here.

What was the biggest surprise?

The beauty of the place, the landscape both in Darwin and Alice. It was so different from the Tasmanian landscape. The colours are different and the lushness of the Wet was fantastic.

Your early career as a lawyer and then senior policy and political adviser to a former Tasmanian Premier, the late Jim Bacon, suggests more than a passing interest in politics. Why the switch away from politics to education management?

I loved politics and still do! I will never completely walk away from it, and in some ways I do see VET as another way of assisting in making people's lives better. I spent nearly six years in a premier's office, working maniacal hours and usually in a very high-pressure environment. Working for politicians also has a tendency to give you a jaundiced view of life. You're normally called into issues because something has gone wrong or an issue can't be easily solved. So you spend a lot of time in crisis management and less than you'd like on

policy management. I really liked working for Jim Bacon, he was extraordinary. His mind was exceptional and his vision for Tasmania and the implementation of that vision was great to be a part of. I gave my all to his time in office and after six years was ready for a change.

I personally wanted to try something different and to try to get a work-life balance. I'd worked closely with industry policy and VET policy, and really liked that area. It's a positive area of government policy and that attracted me.

How did your interest in politics develop?

My father was always interested in politics and was, for a while, a member of the Tasmanian Parliament, so I always was interested. My individual passion escalated when I was at uni and also working and living in a community drop-in house in one of Hobart's poorest suburbs. It was during the depths of the Keating "recession that we had to have" and things were dire in Tassie with unemployment rampant and cutbacks in social programs the order of the day. At the same time as I was working with families that were literally struggling to feed and clothe their kids, the State Government under the Liberals awarded politicians a 40 per cent pay rise. I was outraged. The most critical opponent of the award was the head of the union movement in Tassie at the time and his name was Jim Bacon, so I went and introduced myself to him and we became friends. Jim's wife and I ran his campaign for Parliament. He got elected with the highest vote of any new member in Tasmanian history.

VET at this university is an impressive enterprise. It represents almost 75 per cent of the student base, delivers training into more than 100 remote communities and offers a great assortment of programs. How did you view the task when you started?

I was initially surprised by the unique parts of the VET enterprise at CDU, in particular remote delivery and the dual sector nature of the business. I really had no experience of remote



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delivery when I started and I wanted to try to understand it quickly. Like any new job, you have to put the hours into understanding the issues and seeing how you can assist in improving outcomes.

I had a fantastic trip “down the track” from Darwin to Alice in my first few weeks. The Director Rural and Remote, Paul Fitzsimons, together with Jason McIntosh (who had also just started with CDU as PR officer) and I spent the week travelling around the NT. We dropped into remote communities and visited all our main campuses and centres. It was hot, fun, enlightening and the start of some great friendships and also my understanding of remote communities and their training needs. It’s an understanding that’s still developing.

And now?

I think that the national training framework is failing remote communities. We clearly need a different approach to engaging with remote communities and I think that needs to be built around community engagement and development programs that are established by the communities themselves. Equally, training for jobs where they exist is also important. This is the challenge moving forward for the VET system, trying to find a system that works better than the current one. I think that both local and federal policy makers understand this and I know they’re trying to improve outcomes.

CDU certainly has the expertise to engage in this debate and to shape the policy. We’re the experts in this field and have some really passionate and hard-working staff who are committed to Indigenous Australians and improving the skills and capacity of all Territorians.

You were recognised with a major national award in the VET system, the AUSTAFE Award for Educational Leadership in 2008. It recognised your leadership and contribution to VET. What are the hallmarks of a good leader in this sector?

It is critical for the modern VET manager to recognise the importance of VET to the economic base of Australia. Being a capable manager of change is critical due to the ever-changing policy environment. Having entrepreneurial skills is now critical. The best VET managers are also passionate about VET!

What are VET’s top three challenges for 2009?

I think maintaining the level of apprentice training will be a challenge for VET generally and for CDU. With the global financial crisis, we must do all we can to try to keep apprentices in training so we don’t dig another skills shortage hole for the Australian economy for when things improve.

The policy environment is pretty turbulent, so dealing with the outcomes of the Bradley Review into Higher Education and the Cutler Innovations Review will keep us all busy.

Finally, and most importantly, the third biggest challenge is improving the outcomes for two key client groups of CDU, school students and Indigenous communities. I hope CDU can be a catalyst in developing some alternate pathways for people who leave school without completing year 11 or 12... And I hope to be able to work with both levels of government with a clean sheet of paper on how we can assist Indigenous outcomes in remote communities through the national training system.

Do you want to talk about the opportunities?

CDU is a great VET provider, and it’s interesting that many Territorians don’t realise that compared with TAFEs in other parts of Australia, CDU comes out exceptionally well. The student and industry satisfaction data at CDU is first class, so if the customers like what you do then there is a great opportunity for CDU to grow both in the NT and outside the borders.

I think the other great opportunity for CDU is in pathway development and providing our students with seamless pathways between vocational training and higher education. Unlike a TAFE, CDU can provide both hands-on practical skills to students through VET and then good credit arrangement for a degree.

Finally, I think we need to grab the opportunity to up-skill existing workers with higher level qualifications. We need to assist business in building their productivity and be a partner in improving profit outcomes for businesses.

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