

LIFE IN AMAZE OF DOCUMENTS: VICTORIAN SKILLS REFORM AND THE TRAIL OF TEXTS

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Abstract:

This paper is part of a larger Institutional Ethnography centred on the workplace implementation of 'Skills Reform' in the Australian state of Victoria. Skills Reform is the policy developed by the Victorian State Government that defines wide ranging reformation of the Victorian vocational education and training (VET) sector. Extensive changes are being made to: course funding models, access to qualifications, fee support, capital investment, VET teacher recruitment and the creation of a fully open and contestable training market. New enrolment procedures for students commencing Diploma and Advanced Diploma courses are the first aspect of Skills Reform to be implemented by most VET providers. The initial changes to course eligibility may seem minor in the full scope of the policy but they have in fact, triggered major transformation in enrolment procedures, institute budgeting, student recruitment strategies, result reporting, record keeping, procedural documentation and marketing plans. This paper traces the 'secondary texts' that are generated from Skills Reform policy to reshape the way work is done within the Victorian TAFE sector. From a single document that outlines the policy direction of the Victorian government, a cascade of texts are produced as policy is designed within government and then applied within individual institutes, eventually manifesting itself in a new and complex set of ruling relations for management, teachers and students.

Introduction.

The research undertaken in this paper is part of a broader Institutional Ethnography (IE) on the impact of the Skill Reform policy which has unfolded in one large single sector Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institute (here on in referred to as The Institute) in Melbourne between August 2008 and November 2009. The research explores the development of new polices and procedures, conceived for the purpose of IE as a set of 'texts' developed in order to enact Skills Reform policy within The Institute. The concepts and tools of IE are used to observe and record the development of new practices and procedures within The Institute and present them as a 'map of texts' that illustrate the ways in which TAFE teacher's work is organised as a coordinated set of ruling relations (see Approach: Institutional Ethnography (IE) below).

VET in Australia.

VET occupies a specific place in the strata of Australian education. Since the early 1970s VET has become specifically linked to economic development and the production of skills for the Australian workforce (Harris, Guthrie et al. 1995; Marginson 1997). VET in a literal sense focuses on the development of workplace skills to enable or improve the employment options for individuals. VET programmes can range from developing introductory skills in computer usage through to a wide variety of apprenticeships and professional level Advanced Diplomas. There is also an aspect of VET defined as the capacity building of individuals and communities; this may be evidenced in programmes that are structured to engage individuals solely in the process of learning where the measurable outcome is the actual act of engagement itself. This is not to say there are two competing versions of VET, however, there are concerns that economic imperatives now dominate the policy directions that shape the

sector (Anderson 2005) and imperatives that concentrate on capacity building (often undertaken through VET programs in the Adult Community and Further Education sector), compete for funding and resources (Clemans 2009). VET is also unique in a national context when compared with other Australian education sectors through national initiatives such as Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) governance, Training Packages, Competency Based Training and competition between public and private providers.

The introduction of Skills Reform into Victorian VET.

This research is located within the state of Victoria where significant change, known as Skills Reform, is occurring that will have an impact on those who work within the Victorian VET sector. Skills Reform was announced in August 2008 in the document: *Securing jobs for your future: skills for Victoria* (DIIRD 2008). Skills Reform policy is a significant shift in relationship between the Victorian government, Institutes of TAFE, ACFE providers and, private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). New funding models, course fees, eligibility for subsidised enrolments, sector investment and teacher training and recruitment strategies are all redefined within the policy text. The policy has significant potential not only to restructure the Victorian VET sector, but VET sectors within other states (Ross 2008). Core aims stated within the document are to increase the number of people in Victoria with higher level VET qualifications, provide enrolment fee assistance to students via the old HECS styled VET-Fee-Help, and increase the training market size through 'contestable' government funding. Contestability has become a key term associated with Skills Reform and describes the new funding relationship between the Victorian government and all public and private RTOs. Prior to Skills Reform the bulk of government funding was directed towards the TAFE sector and was known as Profile Funding. Under the new arrangements almost all funding will be distributed to public and private RTOs based on market driven demand, as such, funding follows the student as opposed to large institutional contracts. Contestability is essentially competition within a limited market with one supplier of funds. Competition for full fee paying students is already taking place in Victoria.

Skills Reform is part of a 3 year cycle of Ministerial Statements that set policy and priorities for VET in Victoria. In the immediate past Ministerial Statements have set training priorities to address skill shortages, announce new training programmes and detail capital investment; however, the previous two Ministerial Statements (Kosky 2002; 2006) did not contain the level of reform present in the 2008 version. The policy has been developed to introduce significant reform into a sector that essentially has been undergoing continuous change since the mid 1980s (Schofield and McDonald 2004; DEST 2005). The document that launched Skills Reform policy *Securing jobs for your future: skills for Victoria* is itself light on most detail for such a complex process of change, leaving VET providers with a significant amount that is unknown (Cull 2009). However, unlike previous ministerial statements, this one has comprehensive details on funding rates (the financial return to a RTO per hour of instruction per qualification level) over the next four years as well as detail on funding eligibility.

The cost of such extensive reform within Victoria is being underpinned by funding from the federal government via its Productivity Places Programme (PPP). Federal PPP funding has been split between the States with specific conditions applied to its use. Victoria is the only state that has received the funding unconditionally and is being used in Victoria to underpin the move to contestable funding and VET reform (Ross 2009). This frames Skills Reform as an 'experimental' shift backed by the federal government that in the long term could influence how VET is delivered across Australia. Certainly the federal Labor Government has declared

in its 2007 policy manifesto that “Australia’s training system also remains largely driven by the needs of providers and agencies seeking funding and subsidies, without a strategic focus on the needs of the economy or employers (Rudd, Swan et al. 2007)”. It could be argued that the experimental nature of Victoria’s VET reform is to enable a shift in focus, altering the funding relationships between institutes and government. This paper is focused on the implementation of the first stage of Skills Reform in one Victorian TAFE institute and maps the texts that shape the everyday work of teachers (Smith 2006).

Approach: Institutional Ethnography (IE).

IE is a sociology of the subjective experiences and day-to-day activity of individuals. IE was initially developed by Dorothy E. Smith as a feminist model of inquiry and understanding (Smith 1987). Since its development IE has broadened its scope to now be considered ‘a sociology for people’. The focus was not broadened to be more gender inclusive but to more accurately define the method as one that focuses on individuals, on people and how their everyday and local activities are organised and coordinated by texts (Smith 2005).

The data for this paper draws on this approach to describe many of the ways in which the everyday experiences of teachers are shaped by more abstract texts conceived as a set of ‘ruling relations’. Relations of ruling is a key concept in framing and understanding the focus of an IE (Smith 1987). The term refers to how the work of an individual in undertaking a basic everyday task is structured by texts that will have their root in a more complex and defined set of procedural or policy documentation. The texts can take many forms, whether they are based in media (advertising, narrative, images) or an institution (forms, policy, procedure) they are all replicable and can be “...read, heard, and watched by more than one individual, in different places, and at different times” (Smith 2005, p 165) . Mapping the texts that coordinate work and discovering linkages between texts that formulate a hierarchical structure is a core part of what an IE is. Understanding how texts shape the relations of ruling is what an IE discovers.

The starting point for an IE researcher is to locate themselves within the discourse without becoming the object of the research and observe individuals. From that point the researcher is able to become familiar with the work people do and search for the starting point of the research, the ‘problematic’ (Campbell and Gregor 2002). The problematic is a place or location where something unsettling is happening: change may be taking place, new work processes developed, policy is redefining relationships of access or equity or, just something new and unexplained is occurring. IE can reveal the occurrence of change and the sequence of actions that initiated change through observing, tracking and illustrating a trail of texts. The texts can be mapped against their point of entry within the organisational hierarchy of an institute or in their sequence of development and implementation within the institute. Once identified the problematic becomes the central dynamic driving the research and shaping the research question. The problematic that shapes this research is the arrival and implementation of Skills Reform, the question is what change Skills Reform makes to the work structures and ruling relations that coordinate the work of TAFE teachers?

The experiences of those in the workplace and proliferation of texts developed to effect Skills Reform provide a rich source of observational data. Data gathered for this paper has been collated and presented in the form of maps that display both the operational complexity of The Institute and the hierarchy of texts that exist within it. The maps were produced by tracking the progress of the first phase of Skills Reform into The Institute via information sessions before it was incorporated into Institute policy, procedures and forms. On its journey

the policy and its implementation has also been manifested in a wide variety of communication documents that include: emails, brainstormed butchers paper, project management tools, stacks of post-it-notes and other forms of planning records. Many of the planning documents are included in the map of texts. Data for the maps was accrued through attendance at some of the planning sessions, conversations with individuals involved with developing the procedures, maintenance of a journal and a collection of institute communications that provide a narrative of the process. The aim has been to produce a visual record of the production of secondary texts that can be tracked either from a primary document towards its manifestation in the workplace or from the workplace outwards, sometime to the workplace of others. The maps as such do not define the actual duties that TAFE teachers do within The Institute but define how that work is organised and coordinated via secondary texts.

Institutional texts can be linked and tracked through the hierarchies of an institute to single or multiple policy documents that themselves have been informed by other texts. The linkages between texts can be mapped to create an image on how work is organised and particularly as visual evidence of ruling relations. The map becomes a significant part of the data and material an IE can produce. By creating interlinked maps of documents the bureaucracy and complexity of in institute can reveal itself. In some large institutions specific issues to do with equity, complexity of process, workflows, and other impediments to an individuals access to services can be revealed through the textual mapping (Smith 1999). This paper demonstrates the ways in which such a map sheds light on the organisational world of The Institute under review.

VET and texts.

TAFE institutes and the delivery of VET in Australia create a work environment that is rich in texts and complex to navigate (Ball 2005). The underlying teaching and assessment method of competency based training itself produces a wide variety of documents that track and survey the progress of students against preset criteria (Edwards and Usher 1994). Competency based training is used as the educational model for Training Packages which themselves are a rich and varied store of documentation (Smith 2002; Schofield and McDonald 2004). Underpinning the teaching and assessment methods is the national guideline for registration of a training organisation, the AQTF. Meeting AQTF requirements has also increased the amount of documentation within VET to the point that some educators believe they are generating more documentation to meet compliance than they are to develop training strategies (Grace 2005). The increase in administration within a teacher's workload has contributed to the redefinition of teachers work and identity especially in TAFE were terms such as *new-vocationalism* (Chappell 2001) or the *new-VET-professional* (Mitchell 2003) have been used to describe a more service oriented form of education.

As VET and TAFE teacher identity is redefined there is a greater need for teachers to engage with policy to understand the trends and direction of their sector (Clayton, Fisher et al. 2005). There may be some assumptions made by policymakers that educators and teachers have connections, understanding and enthusiasm for policy; however this may not be the case (Ball 1994). Institutes themselves operate as a filter between policy and their teachers, with most TAFE institutes active in disseminating and distributing new policy, then providing staff with training and information to enact the policy (Hawke 2008). A teacher's relationship to policy may be less to do with critiquing the policy and more to do with the modification or reinterpretation of policy to meet their operational needs after the policy is announced (Honan

2004). It is in the filtering and contextualisation of policy that institutes can create a vast array of localised documents conceived as ‘secondary texts’ (Smith 1987). The policy itself is never used to directly organise and structure work but is instead interpreted and rewritten as operational procedures, forms and communications (Ball 1994).

The distillation of policy into local use is an essential concept for understanding how institutes organise and coordinate work via texts. Smith (2005) states texts are implicit in coordinating the organisation and structure of an individual's work through the development and distribution of policies, procedures, minutes, communications, conventions and other printed and replicable materials. In the process of locating, identifying and mapping institutional texts, it is possible to define a dependent hierarchy between texts and their relationship to the human resource structure of an organisation. That is to say, government policy will produce texts that are disseminated at the executive level of an institute. This will then produce more texts at the level of middle management to be further refined as texts that are applied and enacted at the operational level. Conceiving of a hierarchy of texts that relates to, and mirrors, the managerial strata of an institute allows for both the visualisation of an institute bureaucracy and also the relations of ruling that exists between the operational, managerial, executive and policy levels of an institute. This is the process and narrative that allowed for the development of the maps contained in this paper.

Notes about the Maps.

Map1 starts with the introduction of Skills Reform into The Institute in August 2008. The document quickly moves from discussions amongst The Institute executives into teaching departments via emails to managers and group (faculty) meetings where broader discussion about its impact is entered into the meeting minutes. As the operational impacts of the policy become understood, the Organisational Development (OD) section of The Institute starts a plan of action to ensure that The Institute staff are informed of the changes and prepares to initiate a broader discussion on Skills Reform's impact on the VET sector. Communications to meet OD's aims are produced and begin to flow through The Institute at the same time the Finance Department (FD) begin to make changes to budget procedures and income projections. This produces a new range of financial modelling documents and additions to strategic, budget and business plans are created at all levels of The Institute. Communication within the broader context of The Institute continues with executives visiting teaching departments to lead discussion on Skills Reform, this strategy culminates with an all-day, all institute event in December 2008 where group discussions are held on Skills Reform. The end result is the production of several action plans to be enacted in 2009. Unseen by many in The Institute significant work has begun in the Student Records (SR) section to start the complex process of remodelling enrolment procedures, reengineering databases, and setting up the infrastructures and processes for managing VFH. The process of applying for institute capability in offering VFH has also been a significant ‘text rich’ process in its own right

The most significant Institute push to develop procedures for meeting the first requirements of Skills Reform occur towards the middle of 2009. The development of new systems within The Institute is dependent on information on the new activity reporting (in the form of texts) coming from Skills Victoria. Prior to the start of Skills Reforms OD plans and coordinates a ‘lock down’ of essential staff to develop and refine the new procedures. Both planning and execution of the project produces a significant number of institutional texts that both describe and enable new course eligibility criteria, enrolment procedures and most significantly the broad and complex changes within the student management systems. All the documents used

in planning and enabling institutional change have contributed to reshaping the ruling relations of teachers and support staff within The Institute.

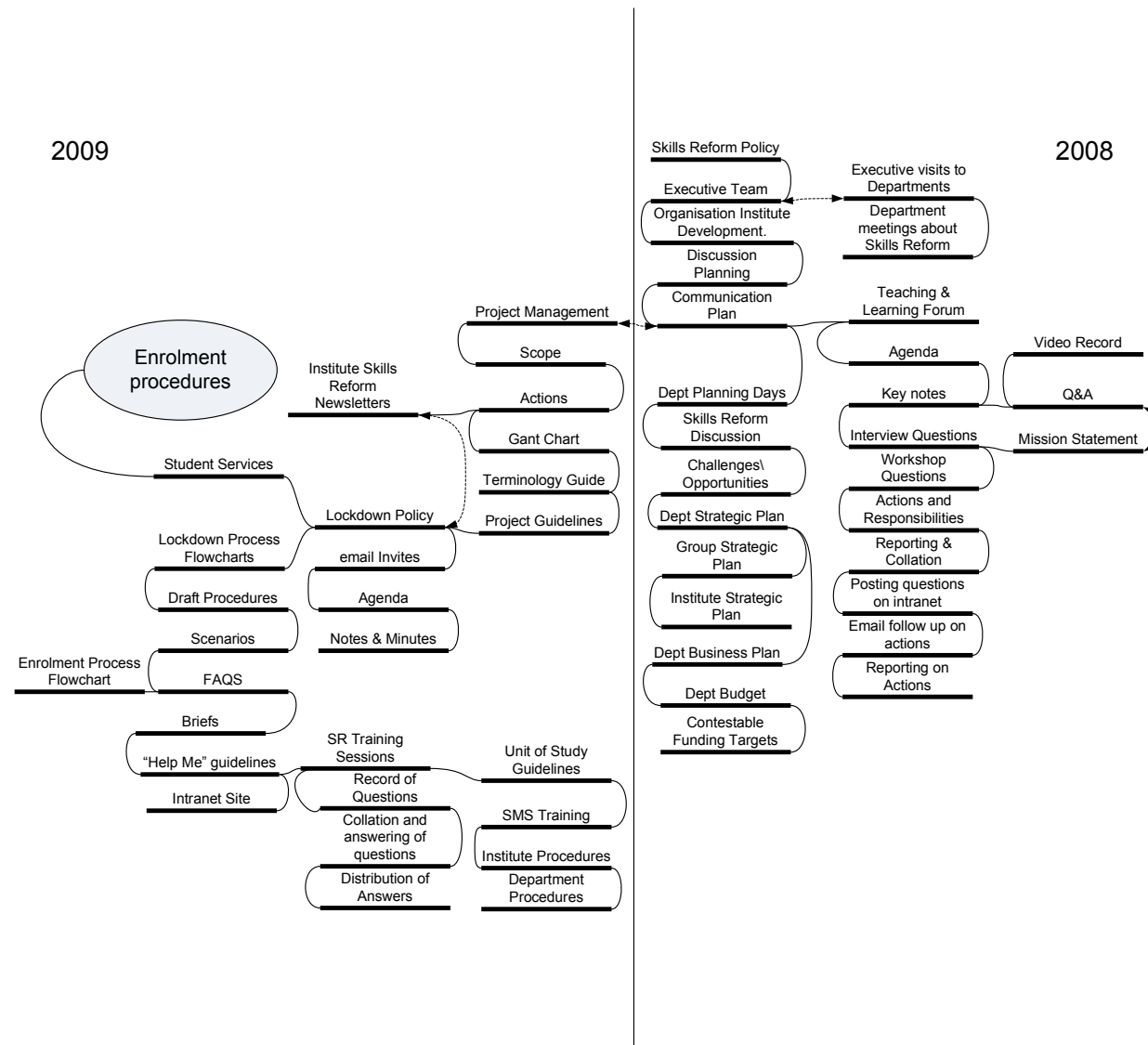
The inclusion of Map1 is to record the process and flow of change through The Institute as illustrated by the interlinking of texts associated with the events. Map 2 specifically illustrates texts associated with the new enrolment procedures that range from the student through to teaching department operations, student services and the policies and procedures of state and federal government. Map 3 illustrates the proliferation of texts that surround a TAFE teacher within The Institute as created by Skills Reform and those that already exist. The design of the map is intended to show both the interlinked hierarchy and the volume of texts. Those that are immediately used by the teacher 'T' are within close proximity with movement outwards to policy, legislation, governance and other 'higher level' texts. The texts do not define the duties an individual TAFE teacher may undertake but instead define the work that they do through a set of ruling relations as structured by policy and procedure.

Conclusion.

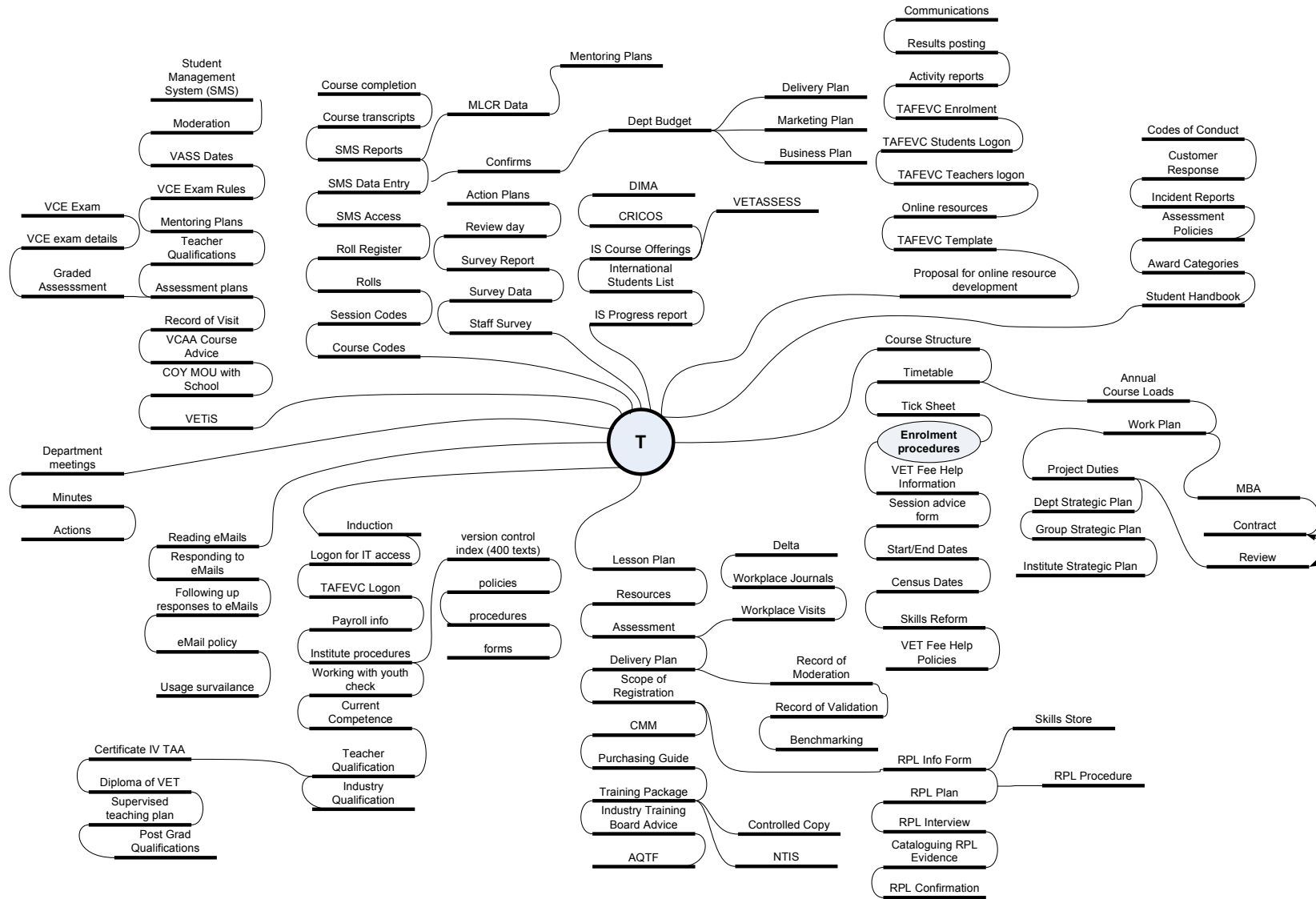
During the research process a significant number of institutional texts and new procedures were observed being created within The Institute to enact Skills Reform; the process has not stopped since the writing of this paper. The number of texts that shape the work of many Victorian TAFE teachers continue to grow and affect the work that they do. Certainly many of the texts mapped existed before Skills Reform but the core aim of the research is to illustrate how new texts are added to existing structures and how that may change the work of individuals via the concept of ruling relations. The mapping process attempts to show the materiality of the term ruling relations and its manifestations in texts and processes.

The process of tracking and mapping institutional texts provides insight into both the complex bureaucracy of a large TAFE institute and how the work of TAFE teachers is constructed by institutional texts. In this respect the maps come to define and shape the complexity of work in the sector and teachers work in particular. Certainly the new policies and procedures generated by the first stage of Skills Reform have changed some work practices. Alterations to enrolment procedures and student eligibility for courses may have only a moderate impact on the work of teachers. The implications of funding via new student activity reporting and the impacts of a contestable market may have a greater effect on how teaching departments are organised and the kind of work that TAFE teachers are asked to undertake.

Skills Reform is still in its early days and how it ultimately shapes the VET sector in Victoria and beyond remains to be seen. Initial measures of its success will more than likely be based on quantitative measures: students enrolled, training dollars spent and earned, number of Diploma level qualifications etc., however within the process of change and redefined service provision, the work styles and focus of those employed within the sector as teachers will change too. There should be some interest or measure in how their work is affected. The process of mapping and detailing the proliferation of texts that shape the ruling relations of a TAFE teacher's work will hopefully frame a deeper understanding of the context of their work and how its structure greatly affects their capability to meet sector expectations as well as an ability to conceive and define the work that they do. It is hoped that the capability to teach, train and assess effectively is not lost in a maze of documents.



Map 1: The 'trail of texts' from the introduction of Skills Reform to production of new enrolment processes.



Map 3: The textual ruling relations of a Victorian TAFE teacher's work.

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