

# Change and VET – thinking the unthinkable

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## **Abstract**

The story of Vocational Education and Training is guided by a grand narrative which consists of five elements. This presentation will explore the most commonly cited element – the notion of relentless, disruptive change. If the future of VET is being created on a foundation built upon an uncritical acceptance of turbulent change – what are the consequences if the widely held view is not accurate? The theoretical perspectives of Michel Foucault and their further adaptations by Peter Miller, Nikolas Rose and Ian Hacking as to how governments operate in advanced liberal democracies and the importance of the use of statistics will guide the exploration of change in the VET sector. After a brief overview of the ubiquity of the change theme in VET, the presentation will compare three landmark documents: *The Kangan Report* 1974, John Dawkins' *Improving Australia's Training System* 1989 and the most recent Skills Australia discussion paper *Creating a Future Direction for Australian Vocational Education and Training* in 2010. The results of this comparison through the use of both narrative and auto-ethnographic methodologies by a former senior education and training bureaucrat will invite participants to think the unthinkable and open new ways of conceiving of the role and place of VET.

## **Background**

Vocational Education and Training in Australia is a very large undertaking. In 2009 some 1.7 million students were enrolled in the public system with an annual expenditure in the order of \$6.8 billion (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2010). The VET sector is the predominant provider of post-school education and training in regional and remote areas of the country (Bradley, Noonan et al. 2008) and is increasingly viewed as a source of school programs to increase school retention rates which have been legislated in each state and territory (Council of Australian Governments 2009).

In its conventional narration, the contemporary history of VET in Australia is based upon a linear progression of externally imposed and sometimes conflicting changes and breakpoints that have kept the sector in constant turmoil. This paper will describe an alternate view of the development of this major enterprise, and will argue that the sector has been characterised by a relatively consistent set of actions that are related by their contingency.

Five elements have been identified which constitute the VET sector's grand narrative: Reformism, Dualism, Disesteemism, Ascetism and Exceptionalism. Each of these elements places limitations on the ways and means by which alternate views of the sector can be explored. Published titles such as 'Between a Rock and Whirlpool' (Harris, Guthrie et al. 1995), 'Steering

Through Rapids' (Lundberg 1996), 'Clash of the Titans' (Schofield 1994) and the theme of this conference last year 'Leading and Responding in Turbulent Times' are typical of descriptions that dominate the sector's narrative about itself. They have created an enduring story about reform of the VET sector.

## **Reformism**

This paper analyses Reformism which arises from the view that there has been constant change in the sector with major break points. The Kangan Report (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974), the so-called National Training Reform Agenda (NTRA) (Dawkins and Holding 1987; Dawkins 1988; Dawkins 1989; Keating 1994) and discussion papers and policy statements from Skills Australia (2009; 2010) are often cited as major breakpoints. Reformism has created a particularly powerful discourse which is most succinctly exemplified by Wheelahan when referring to the NTRA, "Henceforth, VET was subordinated to national economic imperatives and the Kangan vision was gone from policy" (2010).

Contrary to this view, the 1945 White Paper on Full Employment in Australia (Coombs 1994) intimately tied training to post war economic development and national priorities. In particular, the Commonwealth Employment Service had a specific mandate to meet the needs of individual employees by matching them with suitable, productive employment. The major initiative proposed to achieve this economic goal was the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme in addition to special training plans for both civilians and ex-service personnel. Although a more ambitious proposal for a national system of adult education by W. G. K. Duncan in 1944 was not adopted, he canvassed enduring themes to directly link adult education to industrial efficiency as a national economic imperative, use modern technologies (such as the gramophone), establish a joint State and Commonwealth funding agreement for delivery of training and increase the amount of research in the area of adult education (Whitelock 1973).

The VET grand narrative is built upon the wide-spread acceptance of an image of the individual that emerged from the Commonwealth's review of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) which was initially chaired by Myer Kangan (Kearns and Hall 1994; Goozee 2001; Kinsman 2009). Again, Wheelahan (2010) neatly encapsulates this crucial component of the grand narrative associated with the Kangan Report when she states, "TAFE's interdependent purposes were to prepare people for work, develop the individual and provide second-chance education." The primacy of the individual with rights and aspirations (Lee and Wickert 1995) which became so widely accepted by the sector neglects a key feature of Kangan's reference to the individual – his or her intended contribution to the good of the community and as efficient employees.

Kangan's professional background had positioned him to become the Australian expert on personnel management (Kangan 1964). He had unambiguous views about the nature of the individual's ability to contribute to the improved productivity and efficiency of the workplace. He repeatedly makes the point in *Personnel Management for Australia* that a productive worker

must also be satisfied. His views have a significant philosophical lineage in the concept of utilitarianism (Mill 2004) which defines that for anything to be right (as opposed to wrong) then the measure is how much happiness this thing or event brings to the most persons.

Kangan's emphasis on managing personnel, which included carefully matching the appropriate types and levels of training to the capacities of the individual worker, has strong connections to management practices from the United States of America with a focus on a low-skills, highly segmented workforce requiring significant amounts of direct managerial supervision (Esping-Andersen 1990; Thelen 2004). In short, Kangan believed that a well-supervised, satisfied worker would be more efficient and productive and make a greater contribution to the economic development of the country. This view, again, tightly links the role of VET to economic ends which has been excluded from the dominant narrative.

While at one level it might appear that the 70 landmark national reports since 1969 and the 60 landmark state and territory reports from 1976 to the present (VOCED data base (<http://www.voced.edu.au/landmark/index.html>)) would support the notion of constant change, there are other signs that suggest significant continuities. For example, in the Northern Territory during 1976 there were 836 apprentices in the traditional trades (Department of Education Northern Territory Division 1977), while in 2009 there were 800 apprentices in the equivalent categories (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2010). With the problem of skills shortages, high levels of youth unemployment, years of supposed reform and the large financial and infrastructure investment in VET, how has it arisen that with more than double the population in the Northern Territory, the same numbers of apprentices are being trained?

## **A Comparison**

In order to explore the proposal that there is a continuity of themes in the VET sector, three landmark papers that cover the period from 1974 to 2010 have been chosen as representative of the types of issues that were considered important to policy and program developers over time. The three documents are *TAFE in Australia: Report on Needs in Technical and Further Education (Kangan Report)*, *Improving Australia's Training System* from the then Minister for Education John Dawkins and from Skills Australia, *Creating a future direction for Australian vocational education and training*.

Dawkins' paper and its six major areas requiring reform is used as the reference point as it is situated in the middle of the time period and offers a vantage point from which to gaze both forward and backwards. While the language in each document represents the relevant decade, for example, manpower in 1974 versus workforce in 2010, the descriptions of issues under discussion remain remarkably consistent. Dawkins noted the "new demands for training and skills at all levels of the workforce" (1989, p. iii) while the Kangan Report (p. xxiv) notes "shifting job specifications resulting from technological and social change, and especially with

new employment opportunities which open up”. Skills Australia summarises this matter as a ‘new mandate for the sector’.

Secondly, Dawkins (1989, p. iii) calls for “an increased emphasis upon on demonstrated competence rather than time served” which is described in Kangan as ‘self-learning’ and ‘self-paced’ with increasing reliance upon a variety of learning environments and new technologies. The area of competence is addressed by Skills Australia under the heading of ‘re-engineering apprenticeships for life-long learning’.

The third item even uses the same word from all three sources – flexibility. Each calls for more flexible approaches to teaching and learning.

Where Dawkins (1989, p. iii) calls for “greater national consistency in training standards and certification arrangements”, Kangan (p. xxviii) recognises the nature of a federated style of government and calls for “different State authorities to produce equivalence and acceptable interpretations” for technical college qualifications. Skills Australia’s contribution focuses clearly upon a nationally mandated and operated scheme for both quality and governance. All three believe that workforce mobility is important to support Australia’s economic prosperity.

In the fifth theme, Dawkins (1989, p. iii) proposes “improved access to training for disadvantaged groups” and includes women in this heading. Kangan recommends unrestricted access to training for all Australians regardless of the geographical location and makes a special case to provide support for women. Skills Australia’s heading of ‘Improving the VET Experience’ also calls for increased access to training for identified groups without reference to gender.

Finally, all three papers call for better articulation between the educational sectors (VET, school and university) and clearly defined pathways for individuals to follow. The issue is well described in the Kangan Report (p. xxiii-iv), “The proper perspective for the fourth quarter of the twentieth century is for technical and further education to be seen as an alternative – neither inferior nor superior – to the other stream of education, but so organised to enable interchange without personal disadvantage.”

The consistency and continuity of themes (higher skills, responsiveness to individual needs, flexibility, national consistency, increased access, articulation) over a period of 40 years stands in stark relief. If the major themes running through the public policy debates have remained so constant, how has it come to be that there is such a strong adherence to the notion of reformism?

One possible explanation might be that the operations and workings of VET are under-theorised. Certainly lack of research is a matter raised in the Kangan Report (p. xxxvii) and was revisited by McDonald (1993) and Harman (1999). It has been proposed that theory has not been able to keep up with the rapidly evolving neoliberal techniques (Ong 1991). Much of the research

activity in VET falls into one of two categories – case studies (Hall 1999) or statistical analysis. The collection of greater amounts and types of data and the ever present call for more information gathering (Shergold 2010; Skills Australia 2010) have become integral parts of what is often referred to as research in VET. The significance of this recurrent call for ever increasing data will be explored later in this paper.

### **An Alternate Analysis**

Instead of following the more linear traditional accounts of the history of VET (Goozee 2001; Kinsman 2009; Ryan 2011) this paper will draw upon a series of techniques developed by Michel Foucault. From the outset it is crucial to note that Foucault did not believe in grand theories nor did he consider his body of work as having a unifying theme. Foucault presents a series of techniques or a toolkit that can be used to develop ‘histories of the present’ (Oksala 2007). In particular, he developed a genealogical approach to study power and knowledge in western society (Foucault 1976; 1979). As suggested by the name, a genealogical approach looks back at the characteristics of a particular discourse that built the current state of affairs in order to explain how we have come to understand the existing situation in regard to truth and what is considered to be normal in the relationship between the state and its citizens (Rowan and Shore 2009). Foucault believed that there were no grand theories of human nature or methods of governing that were timeless and totalising. This view would lead Foucault, for example, to reject a basic foundation of Marxism sometimes described as the eternal struggle between capital and labour (Miller and Rose 2008).

In particular, Foucault became very interested in the development and role of the modern state in western democratic societies. How did this particular form of government come into being and how does it operate? A feature of the modern European state which was identified by Foucault’s genealogical technique was the ability to conceive of the citizens as a population to be managed. Instead of exercising control of each individual for the overall economic and social prosperity of the nation state, techniques have emerged that allow the state to encourage particular norms of behaviour and action that are seen to be beneficial for the good of the entire population (Foucault 1979). In order to exercise a non-coercive power in the population and to build upon the productive capacity of power and knowledge, the state required a centralisation of information which gave rise to both bureaucracies and the use of statistics. Hacking (1990) uses a genealogical approach to describe how an understanding of probability that can statistically link two or more events has become the major tool used by states to manage populations and measure what is considered to be normal in society. He also recognises how contingent this process can be depending upon what and who is measured.

Several centuries ago as large European cities and nation states were developing, areas of concern to government included health, family structures and related sexual activity, public safety, economic development and national border protection (Foucault 1975; 1976; 1979).

Once normal has been determined for a state in addressing particular problems, measures such as public health campaigns could be taken to ensure that individuals are conforming in a variety of areas believed to be of benefit to the nation state. At the same time in Western Europe notions of liberalism and democracy were exerting strong influences over the manner in which states should exercise power in the absence of an all-powerful sovereign which had proved to be unworkable as the cost of enforcement and coercion was too great.

One prominent solution that arose was to consider the population as a set of self-managing individuals who would both understand and work to be normal. In this way the state could look after the population in terms of economic and social matters and encourage individuals to make appropriate choices in the conduct of their personal affairs which supported the broader national goals (Barry, Osborne et al. 1996). With the collection and centralisation of statistics and other information, the state could simultaneously manage a population and monitor individual behaviour. Direct intervention by the state could be reserved for circumstances when abnormal behaviour is detected. These techniques have been enhanced and made more ubiquitous through the use of modern information technologies which almost paradoxically allow for greater information about the population to be gathered while simultaneously knowing more about the individual in a manner not possible in previous times (Hacking 2006).

The overall result from Foucault's genealogical study of several centuries of the interaction of the state and the citizens was his identification of a characteristic rationality of government. He believed that these governments had a certain mentality in regards to the conduct of their citizens and coined the phrase 'governmentality' (Burchell, Gordon et al. 1991). The governmentality that characterises neoliberal approaches is not an overarching methodology or mechanism of control – it is a way of thinking about issues and a set of ubiquitous and highly mobile techniques (Ong 2007) that have been broadly applied in advanced liberal democracies that espouse the critical importance of individual choice.

The state does not just randomly pick and choose areas of activity. The starting point for governments is always the identification (and sometimes creation) of a problem. Governments cannot act in a specific sphere unless a problem has been identified. Bacchi (2009) uses a Foucauldian approach to describe the process of problematisation in the Australian context and reminds us of Foucault's insistence upon the contingent nature of the process. It is important to identify what assumptions underpin the representation of the problem. What is left unsaid about the problem, what are the effects of presenting the problem in this particular manner and how has the problem been produced and disseminated? Unless these questions are addressed, a whole variety of different ways of both thinking about the problem, possible solutions and unintended consequences are likely to be ignored. Or, in fact, there may not be a problem that is amenable to government action present at all if one makes a deeper analysis.

The major role for most organisations seeking government funding is to create or highlight a problem (or even a crisis) that will require government action. The constant reference to the shortage of skilled labour in Australia is a relevant example (Skills Australia 2009; Skills Australia 2010). Due to governmentality, problems can only be framed in specific ways amenable to the rather limited range of government responses. Governments can only conceive of problems in certain ways, prepare and implement programs under tightly controlled conditions and monitor the outcomes by reference to rather limited types, but large amounts, of data and information.

### **Returning to VET**

In addition to accepting Foucault's rejection of grand narratives as a matter of principle, the history of VET policy in Australia has been driven by a doggedly persistent and consistent group of issues that seriously undermines the basis of Reformism. The economic need for higher skills, responsiveness to individual needs, flexibility of teaching and learning, national consistency of standards for worker mobility, increased access for disadvantaged groups and articulation across the education and training sectors have guided the policy responses of all Australian governments since the end of World War Two.

In contrast to VET's grand narrative, it is proposed that the neoliberal conception of *homo economicus*, the economically rationale, choice making individual (Burchell, Gordon et al. 1991) was well and truly entrenched in Australian governmentality well before Dawkins and the National Training Reform Agenda. Certainly, Kangan's approach (Kangan 1964) to personnel management was driven by the desire of employers to reduce the mobility of skilled workers seeking higher wages and better conditions. Both the employer and the nation would benefit from the efficiency gained by having the best possible match between the workers' skills and their deployment in industry. The importance of his 1974 reference to the individual as part of the grand narrative of change in VET generally neglects the total aspects of Kangan's individual – that of a rational choice maker, contributor the Australia's economic development and, therefore, a suitable subject for the neoliberal techniques of societal management.

In comparing the three landmark reports, it is clear that the issues being faced in managing the Australian economy have been remarkably consistent. There is a perceived need to develop a workforce with the appropriate sets and levels of skills to compete in a globalised marketplace. In alignment with other western democratic countries (Burchell, Gordon et al. 1991), Australians have accepted that the responsibility for managing the economy as a central rationale for the very existence of the government as opposed, for example, of leaving the matter to the private sector market. Although, Pusey (1988) notes that Australia has a unique view as to the role of government when compared to other advanced liberal democracies in that the state is expected to intervene and protect the rights of the individual and is generally viewed a less coercive than the United States or Britain.

As Foucault has identified, governments generally only respond to a particular issue if it is portrayed as a problem and bring to bear a specific rationality. Certainly, since World War Two, this governmentality has been dominated by a neoliberal set of beliefs and techniques that are aimed at producing self managing citizens who will rationally choose to behave in manners which have been identified as normal. They are monitored at the population level through gathering vast amounts of information on individuals. The importance of gathering data to allow for neoliberal states to respond to problems cannot be overemphasised (Hacking 1990; Rose, O'Malley et al. 2006). The creation and longevity of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, its ownership by state and federal ministers and the mechanisms used to collect 90 fields of information on *every* individual who enrolls in a publically funded VET unit demonstrate the critical role of information to governments.

While at one level of analysis, having the responsibility for apprenticeship training in the NT rest with nine different agencies since the 1970s and the creation and disappearance of several bodies such as the Australian National Training Authority and the Enterprise and Career Education foundation at the national level (Australian National Training Authority 1995; 2004) appear to be a lot of change for those directly involved, a Foucauldian analysis suggests the major issue of supplying a skilled workforce for the economic and development of Australia has not changed.

Is it time to think the unthinkable? Has the grand narrative of VET uncritically accepted the notion of change as a given fact of life and, as a result, limited the conversations and discussions of the much deeper policy issues facing Australia? This analysis supports the case that little has fundamentally changed in the rationale for the existence and role of the VET sector and governments' limited responses mostly in the form of infrastructure and bureaucratic reorganisations. There has been lots of activity in response to the recasting of problems in order to attract and retain government funding, but very little change.

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