

‘Do you want VET with that?’ Some implications for lifelong and lifewide learning in an era of universal VET

*Barry Golding and Annette Foley
University of Ballarat, Ballarat, Victoria, Australia*

Abstract

Our paper seeks to explore what might have been lost with the gains as vocational education and training (VET) in Australia has tended to become a universal part of lifelong and lifewide education and training transactions. The idea for our paper’s rhetorical title, ‘Do you want VET with that?’ comes from a service catchcry in a fast food chain that seeks to ‘add value’ to the sales transaction by adding the option of ‘French fries’. In exploring the question and its presuppositions about the value of ‘added VET’, it critically examines a range of recent Australian and international policy and research literature. The paper addresses several AVETRA conference themes, including the work of VET and its workforce, learner success and skilling for Australia’s future. Our paper critically examines the extent to which ‘value adding with VET’ has permeated contemporary education and training discourses in all sectors. It seeks to deconstruct some of the prevailing presuppositions about the universal utility of vocational learning. We use some of our previous research around community learning contexts to examine how some of the important links between learning and a range of non-vocational outcomes, such as benefits to health and wellbeing have been lost, as VET has become part of most sectors and pathways from secondary school onwards. Our paper provides evidence from the literature examined to challenge the notion that learning for vocational outcomes alone is sufficient for lifewide and across the life course. In doing this it draws on critical insights from recent research from Europe and its component states that confirms how learning can produce outcomes that benefit people’s lives and self-esteem beyond work. We argue that there is room in contemporary VET discourse/s for an expanded discursive field where health and wellbeing might be acknowledged, enhanced and valued as an important ‘outcome’ of learning alongside vocational skills development.

Introduction

A brief look at some fundamental transformations since the 1970s

Education and training sectors in Australia in the four decades from between when we respectively completed university in the 1970s and 1980s and today (in 2011) have been fundamentally transformed from a provider and supply-driven system to a market based one. Part of this transformation is a tendency for vocational education and training (VET) to become a part of most education and training offerings in all sectors. In this sense, the possibilities for having ‘VET with education’ are much broader than they were in 1970s and a broader range of ‘consumers’ arguably has more ‘choice’ in the ‘market’ for vocational skills. Our paper does not question what has been gained in this market-based transformation. Rather, it looks critically at how some aspects of demographic change in this same period have increased the need for other forms of lifelong and lifewide learning, and seeks evidence of what may have been lost as a consequence.

Before the 1970s in Australia (Connell, Campbell, Vickers et al., 2010) and in most developed nations (Lakes & Carter, 2004) education and training was widely regarded as being largely for young people as part of preparation for life and work. It was underpinned by an expectation of school for all until age 15, a school-based technical trade and apprenticeship option (mainly for some young men), university for a relative minority and post-school paid work for most. The advent and growth of TAFE (Technical and Further Education) in Australia as a consequence of the Kangan Report (Kangan, 2004) from the mid-1970s provided a range of new and broader training and further education options that have since narrowed to a set of market-based programs and vocational education and training (VET) providers structured around national industry competencies (Connell, Campbell, Vickers et al., 2010), but with a much broader range of sites in which Australian VET is provided. Aside from multi-sectoral universities, TAFE and private Registered Training Organisations, these sites include public and private secondary schools, paid and voluntary work, labour market programs offered both onshore and offshore as well as via the internet.

In the same period, accompanied by credential creep in a diverse range of professional and para-professional fields, there has been a proliferation of universities, now rebadged in 2011 as 'higher education', as well as a shift towards VET becoming firmly embedded in upper secondary school programs. As the further education offerings offered within universities, the 'FE' part of the TAFE acronym and also the adult and community education (ACE) sector have been diminishing in Australia, the options and sites for 'adding VET' to school, ACE, and higher education have broadened. VET now delivers a very wide range of nationally accredited, industry-oriented programs at levels from Certificate 1 to higher education degrees,

Cognition, wellbeing and prolonged life beyond work

Parallel to these gains in the breadth and depth of VET provision over four decades, it is useful to reflect on what else has changed and what might have been lost in the transformation summarized above. In the four decades since the 1970s, the main demographic change in Australia and most other nations of the world has been the significant increase in longevity with advances in medical diagnosis, prevention and treatment of previously fatal conditions. Due in part to increased longevity, but also to delayed entry and exit from the workforce, children born in 2011 will spend a far lower proportion of their adult lives engaged in paid work than when we were born in the 1950s and 1960s respectively. Aside from an increased need to make productive use of significantly more time out of the paid workforce, there is increasing interest in investigating the factors and contexts that enhance wellbeing and cognition parallel to life beyond paid work (Cooper, Field, Goswami, Jenkins & Sahakian, 2010). We identify an irony here. On one hand, people in developed nations are becoming more aware of the critical relationship between factors such as age, sex, family background and initial schooling on life outcomes (Gorard, 2010, p.357), On the other hand, there is a tendency to reduce the options for lifewide and lifelong learning other than through market and industry-based mechanisms.

Meantime most educational research, including most Australian VET research conducted through NCVER, has been directed towards reducing metaphorical

'barriers' to participation, based, as Gorard observes, 'almost entirely on the self-reports of existing participants in education' (Gorard, 2010, p.355). As markets have progressively shifted the cost to participants of all forms of education and training 'from the general taxpayers to the students and their families' (Gorard, 2010, p.355), hearing why non-participants do not proceed with formal education and also why learning is not pursued beyond work become increasingly important. Gorard (2010, p.354) concludes that the most obvious barriers to learning are situational, stemming chiefly from the life and lifestyle of prospective learners. If the focus is exclusively on the half of Australian adults in work who have not completed any formal course beyond school, the question has to be raised as to how a range of factors, specifically:

... family poverty, lack of role models, a sense of 'not for us' coupled with poor experiences of initial learning can conspire to create a kind of lifelong attitude to learning, a negative learner identity. (Gorard, 2010, p.357)

On two matters the recent, international research (Cooper, 2010) is unequivocal. The first is that 'Learning through life has a critical role in unlocking a range of benefits, both for the individual and society' (Feinstein, Vorhaus and Sabates, 2010, p.308) including wellbeing, mental health and social cohesion across all age groups. The second is that 'labour-market outcomes do not depend only on qualifications and on educational attainment such as achievement in tests of cognitive skills' (Feinstein, Vorhaus and Sabates, 2010, p.310). A wide range of attributes variously called 'non-cognitive skills', social and emotional skills, soft skills, personal development, and wider skills have been shown to be:

... very strong predictors of engagement in risky behaviours such as poor sexual health, engagement in antisocial behaviour, criminality, suspension from school, and drug and alcohol misuse, as well as these skills being important for positive life outcomes and life chances.

Given these recent research findings, our attempt in the balance of the paper is to use a lifelong learning research focus in Australia and elsewhere in the world to critically reflect on whether the widespread addition of VET to the post-compulsory educational mix might be enhanced post-2011 by widening the scope of VET to be inclusive of this wider set of non-cognitive skills.

Learning options in Australia in 2011

Despite the fundamental changes in VET availability, the terms Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education and particularly their acronyms VET and HE remain poorly recognized in 2011 in Australia beyond practitioners, researchers and policy makers. Most other Australians still talk about education as comprising school, university or TAFE.(Technical and Further Education), though the TAFE acronym is rarely expanded and several Australian states including Western Australia have recently dropped it altogether in favour of Polytechnics. Adult and Community Education and its acronym, ACE, are even more poorly known or understood in Australia, and ACE as a sector is effectively missing in several Australian states including Queensland. Given the tendency over the past four decades for progressively adding specific vocational competencies to most other forms of education because of its presumed universal and transferable value to people, communities, governments and the economy, it is of interest to examine why previous calls from VET academics for a similar set of skills were not pursued. Stevenson (2003, p.35), for example, noted that calls in Australia:

... for specific competencies in the 1980s gradually became supplemented with calls for what have variously been called key, core or necessary competencies or skills ... aimed at securing transfer of knowledge in changing circumstances [d]espite the substantial body of literature that sees the ideas of such transfer as misplaced.

Our fundamental concern, also articulated by Stevenson (2003, pp.36-37), that the use of various economic agendas to legitimate universal vocational knowledge *in the absence of other forms of learning*, 'can get in the way of individual construction of meaning. ... For individuals to cope with new situations', it is false to assume humans of any age can be taught from an abstracted list of universal competencies. Rather, as Stevenson stresses (p.44), there is a need, as in all education, to proceed from the learner's perspective, situate learning, engage in understanding interrelationships, share meanings and build connections between meaning.

Looking for leads from elsewhere in the world

Our wider aim in this paper is to look beyond Australia in 2011, particularly to battles currently taking place in Europe between VET and wider life skills. According to Szekely (2010, p.256), 'Europe seems to have become the scene of a tacit battle between vocational education and job-skills on the one side, and the wider holistic non-vocational education and life skills on the other', in the aftermath of the recent Global Financial Crisis (GFC) that Szekely (2010, p.256) describes as 'one of the worst economic downturns modern society has known.' Szekely (p.256) stresses that '... the problems of unemployment and poverty [were] caused by an economic recession that had little, if anything to do with education.'

Our concern applies to all sectors of initial education. We agree with Schuller and Watson (2009), writing in the UK as part of a comprehensive *Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning* in the UK, that initial education does not serve as a secure foundation for lifelong learning. Schuller and Watson (2009, p.49) noted that:

... a system which achieves its immediate objectives of raising young people's qualifications, yet leaves them without an appetite to carry on learning has, failed. Too much schooling is focused on heaving students over hurdles and into the next phase of education'.

Maintaining and improving an individual's capacity to be effective in their working lives is held to be central to securing individual, local and national economic and societal wellbeing (OECD, 2000). At a national level, a common manifestation of this concern is a policy focus on developing and sustaining the competence of a skilled workforce able to maintain or improve national economic performance in an era of global competition (Billett, 2010). There is much less interest and concern about the value and nature of learning in the many aspects of life parallel to work and the increasing proportion of people's lives which will lie beyond paid work. Certainly there is agreement that in most OECD countries, birth rates are falling and the populations of these countries is aging which is providing challenges for industrial nations associated with the effects of this demographic change. An international comparative study undertaken by the German Institute for Old-Age Planning (DIA, 2005) identified that in Japan, US and European countries, the aging of the population presents similar problems to those identified in the OECD study. While these developments take a moderate form in the US, they are leading, according to the ESREA network (2009, p.1) a 'massive increase in the section of population over 60

years of age in that country. Currently, people over 60 make up to 17% of the population in the US, 27% in Japan, and 25% in Germany’.

For Gayonadato and Kim (2007) global population aging is characterised as ‘[o]ne of the greatest social challenges of the twenty-first century. ... So profound is this demographic revolution that every aspect of social life and society is affected’ (p.13). So too, in Australia older adults (50+) are living much longer and risk becoming further isolated through not being educated and/or not working during the information and communications revolution of the past two decades. What has made the imperative for lifelong learning essential in the past decade in particular is improved knowledge of the interaction between education and the social determinants of health. As the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2008, p.27) concluded, the ‘evidence is compelling that business as usual is increasingly unfeasible. ... Yet policy-making all too often appears to happen as if there were no such knowledge available.’

While knowledge of the relationship between learning and wellbeing in Australia remains poorly known, international, state-of-the-art, scientific and other evidence is now available from the UK government *Foresight* research, published in 2010 as *Mental capital and wellbeing* (Cooper, 2010), That research ...

...focused on the challenges posed in a number of domains, including globalisation and associated demands for competitiveness, together with increased pressures on our working lives and the disruption of our work-life balance. In addition there are challenges from changing family structures and care responsibilities not only for children, but also for older relatives. (Cooper, 2010, p.xv)

Along with Schuller and Watson’s (2009) *Inquiry into the future of lifelong learning* and its supplementary research papers, we now have evidence, albeit from a different but culturally comparable society in the UK, of the wider role learning plays in but particularly beyond work. It is arguable that VET in Australia remains largely disconnected and disassociated from these insights and debates about what Schuller and Watson (2009, p.1) describe as the intimate connection between learning and ...

the achievement of freedom of choice, control over individual and group destinies, health and well-being, cultural identity and democratic tolerance. We begin from the premise that the right to learn throughout life is a human right. (Schuller & Watson 2009, p.1)

While adult learning beyond VET and higher education remains poorly known or researched outside of Australian ACE circles, ACE is known from UK research (Field, 2009, p.36) ‘... to be particularly effective in enhancing *the wellbeing of our most vulnerable citizens*. Nevertheless the notion of education involving context, and cognitive structures that adults bring to their learning, including through informal settings is gaining ground. Forrester and Payne (2000, p.3), for example, argue that adult learning in a formal setting is problematic because of the inability of formal providers to engage with different learning styles and individual differences. They argue that with a lack of context and meaning around learning, adult learners lose enthusiasm. Billet more recently looked at the notion of lifelong learning for adults and subjectivity. For Billet (2010), what is at the heart of effective work and learning practices:

...is the conduct of work that is salient and meaningful for individuals’ sense of self and identity, and its effective conduct is increasingly essential to maintaining and developing workplaces’ capacities in the turbulent and globalised contemporary work

context ... In effect, the mobilisation of self seems to be core... Yet, this empowerment [of self] will not be directed just to reflecting government and employer's goals, if at all. It is most likely to be enacted in individual's interests: their goals, interests and sense of self, (pp.13-14).

Research undertaken by the Centre for Research and the Wider Benefits of Learning at the University of London (2008, p.19) looked at learning and its associated benefits to individuals and more generally to society as a whole. Findings from this research clearly indicate that people attending adult education classes take more exercise and display greater awareness of self. The research findings show strong evidence that:

Participation in adult education contributes to positive changes in behaviours and attitudes, for example increased civic participation and more healthy living ...[L]earning can promote societal cohesion and strengthen citizenship. Such a system can extend and deepen social networks and support the development of not only shared norms but the values of tolerance, understanding and respect.

Holmes, (2008 pp.2-3) contends that, when addressing Australia's national policy imperatives around lifelong learning and adult education:

It is beyond dispute (and possibly at risk of being under-appreciated because it has been for so long a commonplace of political rhetoric) that education is the single most important contributor to individual and social wellbeing and to a country's economic success. Lifelong learning must therefore assume its fundamental role in helping to deliver the economic, cultural, social, health and environmental outcomes that Australian governments are seeking to achieve.

All our major national policy imperatives express a lifelong learning requirement, and enjoin all citizens and institutions to cooperate in their realisation. The Australian government must act to support and resource adult and community education providers because they have a proven capacity to enable people of all ages and abilities to acquire new knowledge, develop new skills and to grow in their civic responsibilities.

Supporting the value of adult learning in a European context, the Commission of European Communities (2007) presented an Action Plan for adult learning that incorporated a focus on individuals who are disadvantaged because of low literacies. These included migrants, older people, those with a disability and women. The Commission's approach was set on the premise that adult learning was no longer a point of discussion, and that adult education opportunities would address problems associated with the persistently high numbers of early school leavers, the problem of poverty and social isolation and the integration of migrants into society. We have previously argued that 'Australia would do well to look to Europe to develop policies that include agency around discourses of equity, inclusion, health and wellbeing and not just a de-facto education system that is valued only for vocational outcomes and competencies' (Golding & Foley, 2010, p. 9).

The benefits of learning beyond work

Lifelong and lifewide learning are important for all adults, but particularly for adults who are not in paid work, including the growing proportion of older adults as a consequence of population aging. Knipsheer (2004, pp.192-193) identifies a split between the 'adult working world' and the world 'of older people' linked to the advent of industrial capitalism. In this split, Knipsheer suggest that 'human value

became equated with productivity, and at the same time, retirement was institutionalized as a symbol of non-productivity'. In this split, adults in work tend to be subject to a demanding work setting and pressures to take on more roles, skills and training. By contrast people, not in work live in an ambiguous world characterized by a 'strange mixture of leisure, self-interest, volunteering and material and emotional need' (Knipsheer, 2004, p.193). Being retired, not in the paid workforce or unemployed are not easy to learn about. Nor are the necessary attitudes and skills required for leisure, volunteering and meeting much changed and often difficult material and emotional needs, at prime age and particularly in retirement.

In particular, learning other than vocational learning, can be a way for people not in paid work to address the social determinants of health (WHO, 2003). Aside from unemployment itself, these determinants include social exclusion, difficult early lives, stress, inadequate food and substance abuse. Learning, even for people in work, can be an important way of addressing these same determinants, giving an interest, activity and identity aside from work and home: in effect allowing people to re-create their lives and identities beyond paid work. Jarvis (2008), in the context of a discussion about lifelong learning, suggests that the very result of learning changes a person, allowing them to be more experienced, grow and develop. 'Learning, then is both a human and social necessity and through it human beings learn to be and to be members of the wider society' (p.16).

Griffin (1999), when looking at lifelong learning and its importance in social democracy, suggested that there have always been problems when understanding lifelong learning as an object of public policy in the same way as other categories of education. Griffin notes that: 'The most obvious of these is the fact that whereas education can be compelled with public sanctions, lifelong learning cannot' (p.330). For VET these public sanctions come in the form of defining and measuring learning outcomes and skills acquisition. The measurement of outcomes in-line with education policy becomes more problematic when looking at policy in relation to lifelong learning. The problem lies with defining education outcomes around health and wellbeing measurements and not necessarily or always around vocational or work skills. The role of the state for implementing and determining policy is fundamental to the understanding that lifelong learning is a form of education, and that this requires a shift for governments around policy making to formulate policy strategy/imperatives.

While Australia prides itself on being a democratic and culturally diverse society, we agree with Holmes (2008), when referring to adult community education that within this broad characterisation of Australia lies a marginalised Australia that comprises...

[C]itizens who are poorly educated, disconnected from the labour market, alienated from the broader community and denied opportunity... It is timely to refocus on the question of how to implement lifelong learning (p. 2).

For Australia to recognise the value of lifelong learning we conclude it is time for the Australian government to develop policy that recognises the fundamental role of ACE that has an important contribution in delivering economic benefits around health, wellbeing, community and social benefits.

We acknowledge that while learning can provide or smooth a passage from unemployment to employment for some adults, vocational education and training on its own is insufficient and sometimes inappropriate. Offering vocationally oriented re-

training programs which come with the promise of work and that do not actually produce work can be cruel for those wanting work and unable to secure it, and irrelevant for those unable to work for whatever good reason aside from a lack of vocational skills. Our argument is centred on the importance of lifelong and lifewide learning for creating opportunities in peoples lives. We support Jarvis (2008, p.33) when he suggests that education:

... captures something quite deep in the human psyche which is the desire for a better/perfect world. And learning both in and beyond education [and vocational outcomes], is the driving force of the human being. We are the result of our learning and so, in an oversimplified form, is our society.

Conclusion

We conclude that there is a desperate need in Australia to learn from what is happening elsewhere in the world and ask a different or parallel question to ‘Do you want VET with that?’ and ask ‘Might you also want ACE with that, or instead?’ In some ways, Australia’s physical isolation, its tightly controlled immigration and its dependence on export of resources have protected its formal ‘traditional learning cultures’, as defined by Dehnbostel (2009). There are few places or sectors in Australia where learning is oriented toward the constructivist and experience-based pedagogies where the learner is the active and reflective subject. Such ‘new learning cultures’ Dehnbostel sees as being associated with the acquisition of a reflective capacity to act, in natural learning environments, where learning contents are not definite and where knowledge is socially constructed.

Adult education providers can be seen as possessing learning strategies that engage with constructivist theories of learning through their identified flexible and innovative learning approaches (Foley, 2011; Nechvoglod & Beddie, 2010). Adult learning strategies and flexibility enable those who are most vulnerable in the community to engage with learning through providers who:

...[C]an draw on their flexibility and innovation in the provision of courses specifically designed to meet the needs of individuals in a non-threatening environment. All these features are key elements that support positive engagement with hard to reach learners’ (Nechvoglod & Beddie, 2010 p.49).

Formal, mainly instructional learning at school, then university, TAFE or work in approximately equal proportions, have become the norm in Australia. Arguably these forms of educational provision do not cater for the vulnerable or hard to reach learners in our society. We go further than arguing that lifelong and lifewide learning opportunities are not on the educational policy radar. We contend that they are effectively missing in practice in many Australian towns, neighbourhoods and communities. For the main part there is sufficient support and commentary both here in Australia and in European countries to suggest that there is a mutually beneficial association between, lifelong learning, societal and health benefits (Field, 2005). The associated implications that these benefits raise for policy directions in Australia, we argue, require considerable attention and further national research, in the style of Schuller and Watson (2009) and Cooper et al. (2010).

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