The future for VET and VET research in Australia: Informing the business of vocational education

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Vocational education is an important and worthwhile project for:

developing the capacities required for meeting societal needs and wants (e.g. social and economic goals); and

assisting individuals identify with, become competent in their selected occupations and sustain that competence across lengthening working lives.

Yet, it suffers from low status, domination by external interests, negative societal sentiments, unhelpful regulation and is inadequately supported by appropriate educational practices.

Proposes – a mature system focussed on its principal objects (i.e. occupations and vocations), and informed by practitioners, learners and those supporting their learning locally.

It is about promoting the business of vocational education in an informed and mature way.
Progression

Standing of occupations and vocational education and how these have arisen

Consequences of enduring sentiments and privileging

Origins of vocational education systems and top-down bureaucratic processes

Privileging of industry and bureaucratic and industry leadership

Towards a mature vocational education system

What we know and what research tells us
The standing of occupations and vocational education is rooted in societal values

Across human history, ‘privileged others’ have decided the worth of occupations and their preparation (Billett 2011):

- Aristocrats
- Theocrats
- Bureaucrats (and other voices - economists!, academics!)

Decisions and conceptions usually advanced in the absence of voices of those who practice, learn and assist others learn those occupations

Yet, the vast majority of occupational learning occurs locally, supported by practitioners and is valued in how it meets local needs.

Also distorted through this process are its key objects, goals and stakeholders.

Let’s consider some of these traditions and their consequences
Hellenic Greece

Plato distinguished among:

*Artisans* - engaged in activities such as building, carpentry, pottery, weaving; - leading to tangible product or services;

*Artists* - musicians, painters, poetry who produce something concrete, beautiful and useful; and

*Professions* – medical, legal, professor, theological, military

Artisans and artists’ work belonged to that side of life which the average free born Greek citizen regarded as “banausic” and unworthy of his serious attention ..." (Lodge 1947)

Aristotle similarly claimed – ‘citizens must not lead the life of mechanics or tradesmen, which is ignoble and far from conducive of virtue’. (1964 p. 60, cited in Elias 1995)

“...the architects in every profession are more estimable and know more and are wiser than the artisans, because they know the reasons of things which are done". *Metaphysics*

He also changed the word describing craft workers (demioergos) to the term cheirotechnon - which means ‘hand worker’ (Sennett 2008)

Aristophanes referring to potters as “stupid buffoons” because of the work they do.
Also, Plato claimed artisans were incapable of generating new ideas, they "had to wait for God to invent a solution" to their problems (Farrington 1966: 105).

... human capacities had little to do with the effectiveness of their enactment – “... nature gives the increase. Human reason does little compared with nature.” (Lodge 1947: 16)

The nurse and ‘tutor’ were domestic servants, who were of no particular use in other respects (Lodge 1947: 35)

... the lowest form of education was for those who worked with their hands and not with their minds” – referred to as technical from the Greek techne – to make (Elias 1995)

**Imperial Rome**

“... now in regard to trades and employments, which are to be considered illiberal ... all craftsmen are engaged in mean trades, for no workshop can have any quality appropriate to a free man.” Cicero – De officiis (On Duties)

These sentiments are not fixed - artisans were celebrated in the age of Homer – as public men or women

Yet, these kinds of sentiments proposed and advanced by social elites shapes the standing of occupations and their learning are enduring and, some, are rehearsed now.
Two enduring sentiments beggar contemporary vocational education

1. Low standing and limited requirements of many occupations
   - simple, easy to learn (i.e. short-term training, low level certification), justifies reduced preparation, also NAFE;
   - measurable outcomes (e.g. competency-based assessment);
   - hierarchical qualification frameworks (e.g. AQF, EQF, DQF)
   - craft work only became worthwhile “when the economic role of the artisan was displaced“ (Adamson)

2. Limited capacities of many workers
   - beliefs about these workers’ capacities, complexity of their work and learning (i.e. spokespersons for them, DACUM)
   - vocational educators as ‘implementers’ of what others have decided is good for their students
   - often lowly ranked on qualification frameworks
# Occupational social desirability (Hope-Goldthorpe Scale 1974)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Occupations</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class I</td>
<td>High-grade professionals, managers, administrators and large proprietors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class II</td>
<td>Lower grade professionals and managers, and higher grade technicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class III</td>
<td>Routine non-manual workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class IV</td>
<td>Small proprietors and the self-employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class V</td>
<td>Lower-grade technicians and supervisors of manual workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class VI</td>
<td>Skilled manual workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class VII</td>
<td>Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Mental-manual divide**

Reference to techne in lower classes
Ordering of competence - Australian Qualifications Framework

Hierarchical ordering of occupations and qualifications appear to be based on these kinds of social desirability sentiments.

At least three bases of evidence question such simple hierarchies

1. Demands and complexity of work not given in the occupational description (e.g. Darrah 1996)

2. Non-routine work tasks (i.e. requiring higher cognitive demands) part of most forms of work (Billett 1994)

3. Massiveness and extent of knowledge - a product of situational factors – not given in occupational capacities

... an example of how VET provisions come to be shaped erroneously by ill-informed sentiments have become entrenched through bureaucratic means.
Vocational education systems often established in eras of industrialisation and formation of nation states:

1. Need for skilled workers
   - destruction/lack of family/workplace-based skill development
   - need for sufficient workers of particular kinds

2. Developing employable capacities of young people
   - avoiding unemployment
   - avoiding societal disengagement

3. Engaging young people/workers with the nation state
   - centralising control and governance (‘estate’ to ‘state’) (Billett 2011)

Led to vocational education:
   i) addressing state interests, ordered through bureaucratic and centralised means; and

   ii) emphasising entry-level training

Centralised control emphasised when there are real or perceived threats to state (i.e. social or economic crises)
Privileged others: Industry and bureaucratic leadership

Since the early 1990s, a strong and centralised control of Australian VET through ‘industry leadership’.

Enacted at all levels:

- membership of advisory bodies/agencies/boards
- formation of competence standards (i.e. measurable)
- national curriculum documents and specifications
- content and assessment requirements
- accreditation, registration and compliance measures etc
- priorities for research and valuing of findings/reporting

Based on the assumption that ‘industry’ (i.e. spokespersons of employers and employees) know what is best for the ordering of vocational education (and also research).

Educators do not understand the ‘business of business’ we were told
But, does industry understand the business of education? (2004)

German comparisons: what about localised decision-making/ emphasis on quality teachers?

Competency Based Training: building requirements for skilfulness and adaptability?

Teacher-proofing the curriculum – as though enactment does not exist, nor students decide with what they engage and learn

Yet on what bases was all of this advanced? Employer and union representative and government sentiment!!

There is a “worrying level of discontent among employers about the readiness for work of some young people exiting post-compulsory education” (Spring & Syramas, 2002: 5).

Ghost (2002: 63) exhorts educators to "recognise the constantly changing skill requirements of industry. What may be relevant today to enterprise’s skill needs may have no bearing on the same enterprise’s skill needs in five years’ time."

Wiltshire (2002) even hinted that incompetent (VET in school) teachers promoted youth suicide

Let’s have a look at some evidence
Let’s consider the:
Quality of teachers
Quality of provisions
Usefulness to jobs

In what ways do these data indicate learner and employer dissatisfaction?
### Table RC3.8: Ratings of aspects of courses

<table>
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<th>Items and rating</th>
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<tr>
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<td>58% [39%]</td>
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Sources: Graduate Student Survey (Regional Centre Institute of TAFE (RCIT)) and Provincial Centre #1 (PCIT#1) and Provincial Centre #2 (PCIT#2)

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Source: Graduate Student Survey (Regional Centre Institute of TAFE (RCIT))
Polesel, Davies & Teese (2004) a classroom-administered survey of 4915 students at 25 institutes, telephone contact with 771 students 1 year later

Figure 8: Teaching and instruction (AQF I, II, III) (% rating teaching and instruction as excellent or above average)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Instructors' knowledge of subject</td>
<td>85.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors' commitment</td>
<td>78.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors' ability to relate to students</td>
<td>75.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors' ability to explain things clearly</td>
<td>72.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors' organisation and preparation</td>
<td>72.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your understanding of assessment</td>
<td>64.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9: Quality of course (% strongly agreeing and agreeing that:)

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<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
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<tr>
<td>I have a good relationship with my instructors</td>
<td>92.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I receive adequate attention from instructors</td>
<td>89.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training material is well presented</td>
<td>88.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching sessions are well organised</td>
<td>87.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am informed about assessment of my learning</td>
<td>87.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have access to instructors when required</td>
<td>87.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction and practice are well balanced</td>
<td>85.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction allows for background/skills differences</td>
<td>85.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My interest and motivation are maintained</td>
<td>84.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A variety of instructional strategies are used</td>
<td>83.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class time is sufficient to cover topics</td>
<td>79.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I receive useful feedback on my learning</td>
<td>74.7</td>
</tr>
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</table>
“This study shows a strong endorsement by the students of the quality of instructional experience in TAFE, with particular emphasis on relationships with staff and quality of teaching. Overall, students tended to be *most* positive in their praise of their immediate instructional environment that is, their teachers. They highlighted relationships with teaching staff and respect for their expertise and organisation as significant factors in their instructional experience.”

Yet, it is these teachers who warrant micro-management and these students who are ignored as stakeholders.
Redressing distortions arising through these societal sentiments

The key objects of VET - occupations and vocations - need to be more clearly defined

**Occupations** – arise from history, culture and circumstance – they are societal facts (and practices)

**Vocations** – arise as personal experiences and to which individuals need to assent – they are personal facts (and practices)

Why are economic measures used to address cultural issues and spread sheets to account for personal facts?
Vocations as personal practices

The dominant vocation of all human beings at all times is living-intellectual and moral growth. (Dewey 1916: 310)
A vocation means nothing but such direction in life activities as render them perceptibly significant to a person, because of the consequences they accomplish, and are also useful to his [sic] associates. (Dewey 1916:307)

We must avoid not only limitation of conception of vocational to the occupations where immediately tangible commodities are produced, but also the notion that vocations are distributed in an exclusive way, one and only one to each person. (Dewey 1916: 307)

Hence, they are personally particular, ......

Opposite of vocations is not leisure – but idleness and parasitic dependence upon others.

So, securing vocations and coming to practice them is quite central to personal and societal purposes.

This is the case whether the individual is a student, worker or teacher
A salient distinction between occupations and vocations is what they mean to individuals

... being a teacher, a minister, a doctor, or a parent would not be vocational if the individual kept the practice at arm’s length, divorced from his or her sense of identity, treating it in effect as one among many indistinguishable occupations.

In such a case, the person would be merely an occupant of a role. This is not to say the person would conceive the activity as meaningless. He or she might regard it as strictly a job, as a necessity one has to accept, perhaps in order to secure the time or resources to do something else.

Thus, in addition to being of social value, an activity must yield a sense of personal fulfilment in its own right in order to be a vocation.” (Hansen 1994: 263-64)

Has to be assented to ...........

All this seems important when:

i) retention levels some courses and occupations are low;

ii) interest in much that vocational education offers is limited;

and

ii) need to sustain workers’ competence and across lengthening working lives.
So, from what we know, a worthwhile national VET provision:

- focuses on securing students’ vocations;
- engages with and giving discretion to those participating and enacting it (e.g. students and teachers);
- has curriculum models and processes accommodating local needs and requirements within a set of national goals, regulations and content;
- elevate the standing of vocational education and the occupations it serves; and
- promotes the excellence individuals want, not just the competence somebody else pre-specifies for them.

So, how do we as researchers progress ....
RE: Towards a mature national vocational education system: A research-based policy agenda (i.e. informing the business of education)

1. Based on what we know – a research based agenda

2. Considering what we need to know more about – some further research
Some bases for proceeding – what we know

Occupational requirements differ - national prescriptions alone are insufficient

Need to accommodate local decisions about occupational requirements, students’ readiness, available resources and experiences

Those teaching and supporting learners often best placed to make educational decisions

Acknowledge three forms of curriculum
i) Intended curriculum (e.g. training package)
ii) Enacted curriculum (i.e. what is afforded in workplace, training, college settings)
iii) Experienced curriculum (e.g. learners’ interests, construal and construction)

Individuals (e.g. students, workers) decide how they engage with and learn from what is provided them – taking up the invitation

Currently, too much emphasis on the first and too little on the second and third

Most of these matters that need to be understood and addressed locally

Regulating educational provisions and outcomes (i.e. compliance, and accreditation) – focused on quality of learners’ experiences, not micro-managing)
What research needs to be done: Three topics

Leadership and decision-making within VET

Evaluating the worth of strong bureaucratic control of VET

Equity in VET funding provisions

NCVER Research Priorities 2014
Topic 1: Leadership and decision making within VET

Minister’s briefing note: Finnish education system – highly successful, respected and envied

Why is it so effective?
Well educated teachers
  building a core of highly trained teachers
  building the teaching profession
“... the image of being a primary school teacher is pretty close to how you would describe a medical doctor.” (Sahlberg)

Not low class sizes – autonomy, responsibility, independence, respect and professional status
  Not prescriptive
  Responsibility for learning with students
Local decision making
Leadership and decision making: Research questions

In what ways has ‘industry leadership’ resulted in enhanced outcomes for the Australian VET system?

How have Australian enterprises’ investment in and commitment to vocational education improved over these years?

In what ways has the standing of vocational education in Australia been elevated since industry leadership was implemented?

How have policies and practices advocated under ‘industry leadership’ exercised coherence, consistency and been well-directed in developing a skilled and adaptable workforce?

On what premises should the advisory processes and decision making for VET respond to findings from these studies?

What needs to be changed to secure a viable and high quality VET provisions in which Australians and local enterprises will invest their resources?

NCVER Research priorities 2014
Topic 2: Evaluating the worth of strong bureaucratic control

Minister’s briefing note: Cultural factors are central to engagement and progress with developing occupational competence, and commitment to vocational education

Key examples of skills-based economic development and recovery second half of 20th century

Germany -
Japan -
Evaluating the worth of strong bureaucratic control: Research questions

Its not just economic, its cultural, stupid!
Given that national commitment to and standing of vocational education are usually premised on societal and cultural sentiments why is a strong regulatory emphasises still justified?

Given that societal interest in vocational education is cultural, what has to be done to promote appropriate societal sentiments in Australia?

How best can the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency – build the standing and status of vocational education?

What strategies should the AWAPA adopt to promote societal engagement and sentiments supporting a mature VET Australian provision?

How should the processes adopted by and board of AWAPA be constituted to achieve these goals?

NCVER Research priorities 2014
Topic 3: Equity in VET provisions funding

Minister’s briefing note: Many countries with high performing advanced industrial economies have broad provisions of vocational education, including almost universal apprenticeship systems for non-university bound students.

Yet, here the public provision of VET is unequal in funding and enactment across industry sectors

Focusses on narrow ‘pillars of the economy’ (i.e. agriculture, tourism, resources, and construction) employing a small proportion of labour force (16%)

Reinforcing inequities
Equity in VET provisions: Research questions

How does equity across industry sectors feature in the public funding of vocational education?

On what bases have some industry sectors done and continue to do so well from publicly funded vocational education and others done relatively poorly?

How should national VET funding be distributed to secure greater equity across occupations and industry sectors?

How will privileging the ‘four pillars of the economy’ within publicly funded vocational education provisions contribute to building a forwarding-looking advanced industrial economy?
In sum: Towards a research-informed mature vocational education system

Have educational intents and provisions that meet both local and national needs for skilfulness

Broader discretion by teachers, workplaces and students to meet local circumstances

Building partnerships within VET across communities develop localised responses

Developing teachers, those in workplaces and students’ capacities to learn occupational knowledge

Building the Australian Berufkonzept is a priority for national bodies, not micro-managing those best placed to organise and enact VET provisions

Be informed by evidence, rather than societal sentiments

All of these are important, because effective VET provisions are most important, as is the research which informs it