

At the leading edge: enacting VET in the Northern Territory

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Abstract

The creation and maintenance of the Australian National Training System is a joint effort of state, territory and federal governments. The ethnographic application of the concept of 'enactment' supports the argument that the Northern Territory of Australia (NT) has been uniquely placed to take advantage of a clear separation of Vocational Education and Training (VET) policy development and delivery. It can be argued that this has enabled some leading edge initiatives in VET. This has been made possible by the coincidental yet parallel development of state-type government in the NT and creation of the national VET system. An examination of the extensive VET documentary record, confirmed by interviews with key policy participants, demonstrates that the ability to deal with multiple versions of VET provides significant policy freedom. Policy leadership allowed the NT to be the first jurisdiction to recognise skills-based rather than time-served on-the-job training, the creation of genuine dual sector training organisations and removing duplication of federal and state apprenticeship services.

Introduction

While the NT frequently promotes its unique characteristics, particularly when negotiating with the Commonwealth and other states over funding arrangements, it can confidently claim to possess significant policy freedom in the VET sector. The non-Indigenous story of the economic and social development of the NT places skills development and its contribution to population growth as a guiding principle in government policy-making since the end of World War Two (Hasluck 1989; Northern Territory Archives Service 1971-2003; Northern Territory Government 1999).

The NT's accommodating position came about because it assumed state-level policy responsibilities at the same time as the national VET system was being initiated. Both can trace their roots back to 1974 when the NT had its first fully elected Legislative Assembly, albeit with quite limited powers (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1974), and the Kangan Report paved the way for a national training system to emerge as a result of Commonwealth funding being given to the states to support training (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974). In the NT, this coincidence allowed for NT Government structures and policies to start with a blank canvas and respond to national imperatives in a timely manner with relative policy independence (Everingham 1981).

When 'self-government' was granted to the NT in 1978, the fledgling Government did not actually have policy control over VET as this resided with the Darwin Community College (Education Advisory Group 1978). The contestation for control of VET policy at this time gave rise to four-way struggle between the two government departments with responsibility for education and labour market programs respectively, the NT Cabinet and Charles Darwin University's predecessor institutions. This tussle continues today. Since 'self-government' there have been 11 different administrative arrangements for VET policy development and implementation in the NT. While some might view this continual change as producing some unhelpful by-products, ethnographic consideration of this situation reveals the creation of other opportunities.

The variety of bureaucratic structures represent multiple interpretations of training and give the policy participants a wide range of ways to ‘do’, or enact (Mol 2002), VET. The ability to move beyond a singular view of any subject allows it to be ‘performed’ (Goffman 1990) in a variety of ways and this should not be seen as a problem, but rather a strength that keeps open options for decision-makers (Law 2002). The ability to enact or perform VET as multiple has allowed the NT to be highly responsive to national VET policy initiatives and microeconomic reform as demonstrated by it being the first jurisdiction to legislate for competency based training, flexible delivery such as mobile workshops, dual-sector training organisations and devolution of financial responsibility to college councils (Industry Commission 1998).

Ethnographic Study of Documents

The empirical support for the NT’s leading edge policy position has been brought to light through my doctoral research program at Charles Darwin University. Information has been gathered through triangulation of my personal experiences in senior leadership roles in NT and national education and training organisations, interviews with key policy participants and, primarily, an extensive study of VET documents. In addition to the more than 48,000 items held by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research¹, Northern Territory specific documents have been accessed in the Charles Darwin University library, the NT Archives Service and the NT Library. The documentary record for VET is both extensive and comprehensive.

These papers are appropriate objects for ethnographic study as they “are artefacts of modern knowledge practices” (Riles 2006, 2). Document analysis reveals “key concepts, embedded assumptions and nuances of meaning” reflecting power arrangements in political, social and economic spheres (Wright 2011, 29). “Government reports, speeches, official documents, minutes of meetings and newspaper articles” can all contribute to an ethnographic study of policy (Shore 2011, 173) and have been used in this VET research project. The combination of personal experience, interviews and comparison of a wide variety of documents has provided no suggestion that these documents are other than as represented – an accurate, if sometimes veiled, record of the thinking and considerations that informed VET policy-making at the time.

Having identified this rich and varied source of primary data, the next step was to apply a theoretical perspective to the materials in order to increase an understanding of how VET policy has been ‘done’ in the NT. The starting point was the continued application of my previous studies as a public servant that revolved around organisational behaviour based upon the extensive research literature from business, economics and management (Greenhalgh et al. 2005; Stacey 1996). However, this theoretical perspective resulted in a simplistic chronological recounting of significant events. While that provided a mildly interesting record of *what* happened, it did not reveal *how* it happened. An understanding of how VET policy was being developed and applied in the NT was no closer.

The French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault’s proposition that documents help produce the very persons and societies that use them provided a new perspective for this investigation (Burchell, Gordon & Miller 1991). When combined with the notion that social interactions are actually performances made by individuals to control the impression one gives to others (Goffman 1990), I came to envisage VET policy documents serving as a

¹ These items are catalogued and freely accessible through the VOCEDplus database at: <http://www.voced.edu.au/index.html>

record of how VET has been performed. A similar, and much more extensively tested, process of ‘enactment’ describes the productive, definitional power that arises from any particular paradigm being used to observe a phenomenon (Mol 2002).

The crucial point is that different actors in the policy process can ‘enact’ what is ostensibly the same event in various ways depending upon their own personal training, role in the policy process or the technologies available for their use. Instead of having a single phenomenon, there are multiple versions of an object, each of which can be ‘enacted’ differently (Mol 2002). This paper argues that a complex phenomenon like VET policy is created by the processes and documents that report and describe it, but is also ‘enacted’ in different ways by a range of participants over time. There are multiple versions of what ostensibly passes as the same VET policy and, far from being problematic, they facilitate communication and joint action by diverse groups of people who have an interest in VET but have ‘enacted’ it differently. Each ‘enactment’ can be represented to different policy stakeholders as responsive policy-making on the part of government actors (Law 2002). In the NT, this ‘enactment’ is facilitated and structured by the separation of policy and delivery functions.

Findings and Discussion

Adaptable governance structure enables flexible policy development

The NT does not currently have the status of a state (the NT Government’s authority derives from an act of the Commonwealth Parliament) but it does exercise most state-type functions including education and training policy as a result of ‘self-government’. The progressive assumption of policy responsibility by the NT actually set the scene for proactive responses to the development of the National Training System.

The Northern Territory’s first Chief Minister following ‘self-government’ in 1978, Paul Everingham, noted the flexibility being exercised in the NT when he described, “In many facets of Territory life, we are laying the groundwork. We are setting precedents where other Australian governments are only modifying them” (Everingham 1981, 2). The development of a national VET system commenced when the 1974 Kangan Report recommended Commonwealth Government funding be allocated to the states to support Technical and Further Education delivery and infrastructure development (Goozee 2001). This is the same year in which the first fully elected NT Legislative Assembly commenced preparations for the handover of most state-type functions from the Federal Government. Fortuitously, it suited both local NT political development agendas and those of the Commonwealth (with its desire to exercise influence over training) to have the NT emerge in a form resembling a state (Urvett, Heatley & Alcorta 1980). The NT Government had the ability and capacity to respond to national trends as it assumed powers not previously in its possession by constructing the structures and processes of government.

Training had been an area of interest to those who administered the NT prior to ‘self-government’ as well. The very first act passed by the semi-elected Legislative Council at its inaugural meeting in 1948 provided for the establishment of the Apprenticeships Board in order to establish “a machinery whereby apprentices may be trained in a regularised manner” (Northern Territory of Australia 1948, 93). The NT’s preoccupation with mechanisms to control training policy is present at the very beginning of representative democracy in the jurisdiction.

The absence of state-level government in the NT allowed for the newly created Darwin Community College (DCC), officially opened in 1974, to be given virtual full policy control

over training, except for those functions (registration of contracts of training and monitoring individual apprentice progress in the workplace) held by the Apprenticeships Board. DCC's responsibilities included determining the entire range of courses on offer and the locations in the NT where training would be provided (Darwin Community College Planning Committee 1970). The DCC was in the position of both setting VET policy and implementing it through its legislated responsibility to deliver training programs.

Much to the annoyance of the NT government-in-waiting both the DCC and the Commonwealth Department of Education, that operated NT schools, fought a determined campaign to retain responsibility for education and training. Their joint position was argued on the grounds of national interest, the new government's lack of experience in making policy decisions and the perceived threat to the Community College's academic independence (Northern Territory Archives Service 1974-1987; Urvett, Heatley & Alcorta 1980). This resulted in the handover of these functions being delayed until 1979, a year after the declaration of formal 'self-government' (Heatley 1990). This dispute between the NT Government and the DCC resulted in strained relationships that lasted for decades (Northern Territory Archives Service 1984-1991).

Distinguishing policy from delivery

During the year leading up to the handover of VET, the freshly-minted NT Government established a broadly-based consultative process to advise the Minister on the preferred structure to administer education and training in the NT (Education Advisory Group 1978). The NT Cabinet carried out extensive debate about how much control to exert over the DCC. In a move that laid the foundations for the domination of VET policy-making, Cabinet decided to leave course content and the delivery of training with the DCC while taking responsibility for policy into the NT Government (Northern Territory Archives Service 1977-2003b). This aligned with the NT Government's very early decision, made during the NT Cabinet's third meeting, to accept responsibilities for apprenticeship training through the restructuring of the Apprenticeships Board into the NT Industry Training Commission and separating its ministerial reporting lines from previous links with the Education Department (Northern Territory Industry Training Commission 1981).

By the end of 1979, the NT Government had consolidated VET policy responsibilities as part of the Cabinet decision-making process with ministerial responsibility while keeping the delivery of training at arm's-length. The dispute between the NT Government and the Darwin Community College is a reflection of their different ways of enacting VET. The focus of the politicians and public servants was upon the building of the structures of government in order to control VET policy which was considered to be a vital contributor to the future social and economic prosperity of the new jurisdiction (Northern Territory Archives Service 1977-2003a, 1977-2003b, 1977-2003c). On the other hand, the DCC was enacting VET as an educational program subject to considerations of academic freedom, professional judgement and resisting undue interference being exerted by politicians (Urvett, Heatley & Alcorta 1980). At the start of 'self-government' there were at least two VETs in evidence, but this number would grow over time. Over the next three decades, the NT Government would enact VET through a range of bureaucratic mechanisms that included the creation (and abolition) of commissions, departments and authorities². These roughly aligned

² Based upon the annual reports tabled in the NT Legislative Assembly the following bodies had either major or total control of VET policy in chronological order commencing in 1948. The Apprenticeships Board; from 1974 the Darwin Community College; from 1979 the NT Industries Training Commission; from 1982 the Vocational Training Commission; from 1985 shared between the NT Department of

with the national government's use of similar bodies. For example, the Northern Territory Employment and Training Authority's existence roughly corresponded with that of the Australian National Training Authority from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s. This was predated by the use of arm's-length commissions and followed by a preference of more direct ministerial control of VET policy through departments at both levels of government.

Various enactments

This variety of ways of 'doing' VET policy is a further demonstration of its multiple natures (Mol 2002). Different ministers and public servants could enact VET policy in diverse ways based upon their own beliefs and the political climate of the time. The three examples that follow are drawn from interviews with those who made these decisions in the NT Government and represent the spectrum of views that made political sense at the time.

The former Country Liberal Party Chief Minister and Education Minister, Shane Stone, strongly supported the use of commissions and authorities because more members of the public could be involved and the result is "better public policy". For Stone the primary consideration was industry's view that if VET was inside the bureaucracy "it would wither on the vine" and it would be subject to continual "departmental interference". Stone enacted VET policy as a public and industry-driven process to be supported by government structures and was content to work with an arm's-length authority structure. This distance also served to insulate the Minister and Government from risks of market failure and potential criticism.

At the other end of the continuum, former Labor Party Deputy Chief Minister and Minister for Education and Training, Syd Stirling, believed the NT Employment and Training Authority funding priorities were "undirected" and did not align with "emerging industry needs". VET policy "needed to be brought under the control of a minister through a department". Stirling enacted VET policy as a direct tool of government to be wielded to achieve desired policy objectives such as increased VET offerings in schools. In a demonstration of the bi-partisan possibilities of enacting multiple VETs, Stirling's position concurs with first Chief Minister Everingham's Country Liberal Party position.

I wasn't going to become Chief Minister and hand over whatever control I had [to commissions]. It doesn't matter whom you put on those statutory bodies. They can be your best friends but they soon turn into crazy megalomaniacs and empire-builders (Paul Everingham quoted in Heatley 1990, 89).

David Hawkes served as both the Commissioner for Public Employment and the Chief Executive of the NT Department of Labour and Administrative Services. Unsurprisingly, his views fall somewhere between those of the two politicians. For Hawkes, "it did not much matter if it is either an authority or a department – having a separate identity and role is the important issue". In his experience of working with government structures, VET policy needed to be "located in the agencies that were seen to be linked to the long term development of the NT". Hawkes enacted VET policy in terms of its contribution to good

Education TAFE Division and the Department of Industry and Small Business; from 1986 joint Education Department and Department of Business, Technology and Communications responsibility; from 1987 shared between the Education Department and the Department of Labour and Administrative Services; from 1992 the NT Employment and Training Authority; from 2001 the Department of Employment, Education and Training; from 2011 the Department of Business and Employment; and from 2012 the Department of Business. The newly elected (2012) Country Liberal Government's campaign policy position is to re-establish the NT Employment and Training Authority.

public policy. This can successfully be handled in a variety of structural ways although he did believe that linking training with education “made little sense”.

Good public VET policy is firmly linked to the economic development that would support improved social conditions in Hawkes’ enactment. As a senior public servant, Hawkes intuitively accepts the opportunities of enacting VET policy as multiple. Three very influential people enact VET as either an industry-driven pursuit, a technology of government management or as a responsive public policy process. While these are not mutually exclusive, they do demonstrate that VET policy is not singular, but multiple.

The multiplicity of VET has allowed the NT Government to focus upon the machinery and technologies of government policy while positioning potentially conflicting roles of delivery and regulation at arm’s-length. This gives each actor a chance to get on with their own version of VET – educational, quality-endorsed, departmental, and industry-responsive – while having a common link with this thing called VET which promotes communication from differing perspectives.

At various times, the NT Government has moved to become more directly involved in the delivery of training in response to Commonwealth Government funding arrangements or perceptions of public demand. However, the advantages of a clear separation of policy and delivery have prevailed. When it suits political or financial imperatives, the NT Government provides training in areas like Police, Fire and Emergency Services, Prisoner Education and some health-related areas. The Labor Government’s prioritisation of VET delivery in schools gave rise to an expansion of their training scope. However, on balance, it has progressively divested itself of delivery functions. The NT Open College and the Adult Migrant Education Program had their functions transferred to both the NT University and Centralian College in 1994 (Finch 1993). More recently, two major arm’s-length training organisations, Katherine Rural College and the Alice Springs-based Centralian College were merged with the NT University to form Charles Darwin University in 2003 (Charles Darwin University 2004).

In addition, the NT Government has been able to be an early adopter of national partnership agreements and policy initiatives with very little political angst evident because of the separation of policy and delivery. This stands in stark contrast to the adverse media reports (Dodd 2013; Duncley 2012) and strong reactions to changes in the VET systems that have been flagged in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. These states are caught in a bind created by having direct responsibility for both policy and delivery.

The content and delivery of training programs, other than costs, appear to be of no interest to those who ‘enact’ policy in the NT. VET policy-making in the Northern Territory has had virtually nothing to do with the transfer and acquisition of technical and occupational skills with the exception of the NT Government’s minimal financial support for the Technical and Further Education National Centre for Research and Development in the 1980s and early 1990s (TAFE National Centre for Research and Development 1982). VET policy has been ‘done’ by focusing upon the administrative and bureaucratic arrangements to manage training and the related policy processes. I have not been able to find anything other than an unstated and unquestioned acceptance on the part of those who enact VET policy that merely attending a training institution or learning on the job in pursuit of a nationally recognised qualification is an automatic good for the individual student.

Conclusions

Unlike the states, the NT has never had a government operated training system (most often known as TAFE although this acronym for Technical and Further Education is rapidly disappearing from the public political discourse). This afforded the NT Government the maximum policy freedom as it very seldom found itself conflicted by holding simultaneous responsibility for funding, regulating and delivering training. In the process of building a new state-type bureaucracy, the NT Government was able to pick and choose from policy procedures from ‘new public management’ (Hill & Hupe 2002) and ‘active social policy’ (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2005) in addition to more traditional bureaucratic agency arrangements. The NT had the ability to take a purist approach to implementing new ways of governing as things were literally being built from the ground up in terms of government mechanisms and technologies. This provided a leading edge environment as governments had choices between traditional Westminster approaches (Erfat 2013) and more modern conceptualisations of the role of government.

The tactics of new public management and active social policy allow governments to retain policy control over technical experts (Colebatch 2006) through a process of the ‘principal’ hiring ‘agents’ to perform the work of government. Contracts specify the outcomes and related costs; considerable flexibility is granted to the ‘agent’ in how to achieve the desired results. Many of the risks associated with the now contracted activity are also moved away from government and onto the provider (Castel 1991). The NT’s enthusiastic assignment of responsibility for quality control mechanisms to the Australian Skills Quality Authority, unlike Western Australia and Victoria (Evans 2010), is yet another example of the ways in which different enactments of VET deliver the NT maximum flexibility. The NT, as ‘principal’ still retains policy control, but shifts the operation, results and risks of quality assurance to another ‘agent’. Conceptually, this is identical to the outsourcing of training delivery functions to Registered Training Organisations while centralising policy functions.

This is not to suggest that this policy flexibility does not come with potential costs that were described in the interview with Shane Stone as “political casualties”. In some ways, each of the eleven changes of administrative arrangements for VET policy management in the NT produced casualties when individual public servants lost their jobs and departments or authorities lost funding and policy responsibility that determines an agency’s power and influence. According to Stone, these casualties are often the result of a new government having to be seen to be different than the previous administration. For Stirling, there is also a need for a new minister to exercise his or her clout over the agency resulting in political casualties. In addition, the critics of economic rational styles of government believe that social equity is sacrificed when governments pursue new public management (Marginson 1997; Pusey 1991).

Nevertheless, the NT’s selective adoption of a variety of policy processes allowed for creative Government responses to training. For example, apprenticeship support and regulation functions in the NT operate from the nation’s only joint Commonwealth/NT Apprenticeship Centre whose services are contracted from the private sector. In addition, the NT was an early adopter of flexible training delivery options that included mobile workshops used in remote communities, the NT Open College with adult educators based in larger remote communities and the creation of genuine dual-sector organisations. These have included the Darwin Community College and its various incarnations into Charles Darwin University, the joint secondary-VET Centralian College and the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education with both VET and higher education like CDU.

The controversy accompanying changes to Victorian VET policy (Dunckley 2012; Mather 2012; Ross 2012) could have been side-stepped if their approach to policy avoided a singular version of policy, regulation and delivery. Separating responsibilities makes it much easier and more productive for government ministers and public servants to enact different and multiple versions of VET. “The world of policy is populated by a range of players with distinct concerns and policy-making is the intersection of these diverse agendas” (Colebatch 2006, 1) and the concept of enactment provides an explanation of how the NT has been able to use this junction to be at the leading edge of VET policy development.

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