

Translating practice into research: how we have come to define and structure 'vocational' education

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'Technical and further education' has a well-understood meaning in Australia, and 'vocational education and training' is usually defined as TAFE plus private providers. But what is the rationale for considering some courses 'technical' or 'vocational' and others higher education?

This paper reports an investigation of what we mean by 'technical' education, how TAFE came to have its common Australian meaning and how this has structured post-compulsory education. This is compared with the meaning and structure of vocational/technical education in two other federations, the US and Canada.

The paper argues, first, that there is no logical definition of technical or vocational education in Australia: TAFE and vet came to be defined incrementally over several years as 'not elsewhere included', or the sector of formal education left over after the other sectors of formal education – school and higher education – had been defined and established.

The second argument is that US and Canada have quite different understandings of vocational/technical education, that these arose quite differently to the way the sector was defined in Australia, and that therefore vocational/technical education is structured quite differently in the US and Canada. Or at least the US States and Canadian provinces chosen for close study: one of the interesting incidental findings is that for all the differences we notice between jurisdictions within Australia, these are minor in comparison with the differences between jurisdictions in the US and Canada.