

# Has the role of the cookery educator been de-valued over time?

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## Introduction

I am a part of a Victorian TAFE system-wide network of cookery program co-ordinators and have been interested in their generally held belief that changes within the TAFE system have led to us providing poorer quality training than we have in the past. It is also believed that these changes mean that our graduates are of a poorer standard and that we are consequently dismissed by industry as ineffectual. Different members of the cookery network have produced this concept at each network meeting as a cry to arms for various changes. Some members wish for a return to the “good old days” and some would like to take some elements from the past and combine them with some new concepts. All of these teachers are lobbying for changes including design of Training Packages<sup>1</sup>, funding, the selection of students and the issuing of qualifications. All of the members of the cookery educators network are chefs and the majority are focused on preparing and training students to prepare fine food. The cookery educators identify closely with their counterparts in industry and generally describe their occupation as “chef” or “chef-instructor” rather than teacher, instructor or educator. There is a general feeling that they are losing face with industry because they are mired in the administration required to pass audit rather than focusing on the skills that the students need to enable them to cook.

The comment that we are no longer able to provide training that matches the quality of the training of the past is a familiar one within cookery departments. Many teachers believe that students are completing the Certificate III in Hospitality (Commercial Cookery) with inferior cooking skills compared to the past because their time and funding is directed toward tasks and projects designed to control them. This perception appears similar to the case Seddon makes about the deskilling of the TAFE teacher work force. Seddon describes top down reforms resulting in managerial control of information and control and in teachers being directed to such an extent that their work becomes a series of atomistic tasks (Seddon, 2004). Some researchers describe this as the proletarianisation of teachers where the teachers become technicians rather than technologists (Apple and Teitelbaum 1986)

Based on a small empirical research project, I believe that the issues surrounding the concept of a loss of quality and the subsequent loss of standing of the cookery educator are not simple and are a part of many other larger changes within educational policy, the Hospitality industry and societal attitudes to work and education. I think that apprentices are doing less cooking in the Certificate III (Commercial Cookery) course in 2005 than they have in the past and believe that overall there has been a loss of quality in cooking skills. However, although this is a tragedy to a food-focused chef, it is possible that these changes benefit most of the young learners and much of the Hospitality industry.

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase “Training Package” is by convention capitalised when it refers to the Australian national VET qualifications packages

## **The interview**

My research consisted of a long formal interview with a teacher who had been working as a culinary educator for fifteen years. The information from this interview was analysed in the context of the informal information received from members of the cookery program coordinator network. The interviewee works regularly as a chef and has up to date links with industry. He has been around for long enough to observe many changes but has maintained a degree of impartiality to TAFE issues because of his dual working life. Because of his active industry workload he could not be described as institutionalised or out of touch and this lends his comments currency.

As he spoke, he put forward a view expressed many times before by other cookery educators. What all of the chef –instructors have in common is a devotion to high quality cuisine. They like to prepare it and they like to train others to be able to prepare it. They are not interested in the lower end of food production and they are all from a fine dining background. The changes that have occurred in the way that cookery is taught has led to a decrease in the hours that the cookery apprentices actually spend cooking. This combined with a tightening of funding leading to a decrease in food costs has led to a decreased cooking skill set on completion of their apprenticeship.

The interviewee believes that in earlier times, there was a much closer relationship with employers of apprentices, assisted by weekly contact between the employer and the chef-instructor. Apprentices had to complete a logbook that was signed weekly by their employer. The course was more flexible and chef-instructors could introduce minor changes into the program within a week in response to feedback from employers. They regarded this degree of autonomy essential for staying current and responsive to industry needs. The interviewee said that administrative tasks, the requirements of the Training Packages and the audit trail now required means that there is less time for liaising with industry and that minor changes are slow. He believes that this makes the TAFE appear bureaucratic and so slow to respond that they appear to be out of touch. He thinks that the close ties between chefs in TAFE and chefs in industry were one of the great things about vocational education. He thinks that the ability of TAFE to reflect what is happening in industry and produce workers that are sought after and perform well in industry has been undermined.

The interviewee states that he considers himself to be a numbers processor. His role is now 50% teaching and 50% proving it. He feels that his role used to be one where the chef-instructor upheld high industry standards and that the industry expected him to do so. Apprentices and employers held him in high esteem, as he was the gatekeeper to qualification as a chef and held the keys to knowledge. The industry was smaller and less diverse than it is now and the employers of apprentices were a more homogenous group. Most employers had attained a qualification through the same or a very similar system and understood clearly how the system operated.

When the chef was questioned further about the issues that he had with the introduction of Training Packages, the reply was interesting. It was not the format of the individual units themselves that he had issues with. Most of the traditional units such as “Prepare and cook poultry and game” are still present but in a reduced format. He disagreed with the structure of the course itself, particularly with the inclusion of

some of the core units. The Training Package has included some theory based core units that he believes should not have a place on the program. These units include such subjects as “Promote products and services to customers” Although it could be argued that these offer a more balanced education to apprentice chefs and could be of benefit, he believes that it is wrong to drift away from our core business which is teaching apprentices to cook. He thinks that an apprenticeship program should devote itself to developing trade skills and that the non-cooking related units should be offered at Certificate IV level. He regards these units as interlopers, robbing the funding and time from more important units. He also believes that there is not enough time to do them well within the program and that the current format provides mediocre standards across a broad range, rather than excellence within a more narrow range.

Over all he thinks that the “interference” from the Victorian Department of Education and from the individuals that produced the Training Packages combined forces to set a mediocre standard for training. Administrative demands combined with the imposed course design have created mediocre cooks. The training is no longer of an excellent standard but it is consistent and accountable. He describes it as the “McDonaldsisation” of cookery training. It is not delicious, it is not nutritious but it is controlled and safe and can be reproduced exactly over and over again.

### **Changes within the Hospitality industry**

The hospitality industry in Australia has changed dramatically over the past 50 years.

A young couple dating in Melbourne in the 1950s were unlikely to dine out in a restaurant regularly. They were more likely to go to the cinema and have a milkshake afterwards. Meals were almost exclusively enjoyed at home. Restaurants at the time were expensive and exclusive and out of reach for any one but high-income earners or for very special and isolated occasions. The alternatives were take away establishments such as Chinese restaurants or fish and chip shops. Many families integrated one of these meals into their week. Some cafes operated but these were mainly working men’s lunch stops.

By contrast in 2005 a young couple would eat the majority of their weekly meals either out or in the form of a pre or partly prepared “meal solution” in the home. They may eat breakfast away from home as often as 6 days per week. This may be in the form of a catered breakfast meeting, a café or a portable breakfast. Many do not eat breakfast but purchase morning tea from a café, fast food outlet or canteen. It has become common practice to meet friends for “coffee” which may consist of coffee, a snack, juice or other beverage. Lunch and dinner may be enjoyed in a variety of outlets for a variety of costs or they may use a pre or partly prepared meal from the supermarket or food outlet. All of these food outlets and food choices employ people with Certificate I, II or III in Hospitality.

As the number of outlets employing cooks exploded over the past 50 years, there has been a huge increase in the diversity of workplaces and the numbers of staff employed by hospitality businesses. These businesses are lower end restaurants, bistros and cafes rather than fine dining establishments. This is happening globally as well as locally. Jeffery Steingarten describes the trend in Paris for chefs from 3 star Michelin

restaurants to leave and set up their own small business. These restaurants are local bistros serving everyday, competitively priced meals and are more economically viable than the fine dining restaurants (Steingarten G, 2002) Locally the trend continues with nine fine dining restaurants closing down in Melbourne within the last five years and a surge in popularity of simple pizza restaurants such as Lladro and Mr Wolf who are employing chefs who would have been traditionally employed in fine dining restaurants. (The Age Magazine, 2005)

The cause for this increased demand for out-sourced food preparation can be attributed to significant and complex social change.. Briefly, the reason people feel the need to eat meals out or purchase pre-prepared or partly prepared food can be attributed to time pressures, lack of ability or confidence in the kitchen or a need to move outside their own walls and connect with others in a public place.

If there is a partner who is not involved in paid work there is a greater likelihood that someone within the household has the time to prepare a meal from scratch. Economic pressures now mean that few households can afford the luxury of having one partner running the household while the other adult partner works. The structural changes in Australian society described by Pusey in Axford and Seddon's article are illustrated by the typical members of a time poor household who do not have time to prepare meals, are too tired to commence meal making when finishing work or feel the need to "treat" themselves after the rigors of the day. The time pressure is also felt more by those workers living in outlying suburbs and commuting to the city or a place far from home. The extreme urban sprawl of Melbourne robs time from workers as they commute, rather than unwind from the day.

Empirical evidence derived from teaching high school students indicates that many people no longer have the skills to prepare meals from raw ingredients. Few of the students studying at Box Hill Institute in the VETIS program regularly cook and eat with their family as both parents are either working or they are living with a single parent who is working. Students are unfamiliar with raw ingredients and cooking methods. They often describe the texture and smell of raw produce as "disgusting or gross" and have no skills such as chopping and slicing. These students are at least the second generation; many are the third generation of parents who have both had work imposed time pressures. They do not have the ability to prepare quick, nutritious and cheap meals for themselves and others. The ones studying cookery at Box Hill will eventually be able to do so, but the rest will probably remain largely incompetent.

The other contributor to the increase in food service outlets is the need for individuals to move out of their home environment to connect with others. Some of this could be a result of the globalisation of culture where we have adopted some of the social trends from Europe where there has been a "café culture" and a culture of entertaining outside the home for many years. Some deriving from the human need to be surrounded by others as our social structures break down due to mobility of families and the increase in single person households.

The increase in the number of food outlets servicing this increased demand has had several results. There has been an increase in demand for relatively cheap or simple meals and snacks. There is a trend away from traditional meal structure and meal times. Many businesses now offer all day breakfast or grazing menus. Employers of

apprentices accommodate this by serving food that is partly or completely prepared before it enters the premises. This reduces the number of staff required and addresses some of the food safety issues. The skill level required in these businesses is not as broad as the skill level required of the traditional cookery apprentice. Many of them will never need the skill to bone out a chicken or make a stock. They need to know how to produce sandwiches and other partly prepared items in a safe and timely manner.

The incorrect but socially accepted definition is that a cook is unqualified and a chef is qualified. Institutions such as hospitals, aged care facilities and prisons traditionally employed cooks rather than chefs. Many of these new businesses involve the work of a cook rather than that of a chef. If there was no other imperative to train new employees, they could have been accommodated on the old system of an experienced cook training young school leavers to work in a food outlet producing limited, simple food.

One of the major influences that have driven this change is a focus on food safety. There has been a great increase in the incidence of food poisoning over the past 25 years due to more food being consumed outside the home, produced in larger quantities than before and more food being processed in some way. This led to the Food Act 1998 and subsequent amendments.

The introduction of the HACCP system (Hazard Control Critical Control Point) over the past five years is important. This program was developed by N.A.S.A to ensure the wellbeing of astronauts. The program identifies risk areas during food production and strives to manage those risks. This system has been introduced into Australia in a series of steps. The first businesses to be forced to comply were those servicing high-risk groups such as hospitals, aged care facilities and child-care centres. All businesses serving food to the public now have to lodge a food safety plan and submit to regular audits. Elements of risk that need to be managed are cooking temperatures, shelf life, health of employees, hygiene processes such as hand washing and staff training.

To understand how this system impacts on businesses and their employees it is possible to look at one element, food storage. It is vital that high-risk foods are stored at the correct temperature so that they remain fit for human consumption. Under HACCP all refrigerators must have a temperature dial. This must be consulted and the results written in a log every five hours. If there is a deviation to the temperature the action taken must be also entered, such as discarding food, calling technician etc. The temperature dials must be calibrated every six months and the records kept as proof that they are giving a true reading. It must be remembered that this is only one element of the system designed to give us all safe food. There are many other minor procedures and checks that must be recorded for audit. It is clear that this system is time consuming but vitally important. The work-load is usually distributed with a kitchen team and for that to be successful, each member needs to have basic literacy skills, an understanding of how the system works and what the consequences may be if it is not carried out carefully.

All staff employed to handle food must now have a Food Handlers Certificate. This qualification covers the requirements of the Health Act and the HACCP system and

some knowledge of the legal and health consequences if it is not adhered to. It is possible for non-literate staff members to be passed competent in this unit with modified assessment but they would not be able to contribute to the workload if they cannot write or transcribe measurements and temperatures. This makes them less attractive potential employees and it has effectively closed off employment in the hospitality sector to most people in this category. Many people who have poor literacy skills who would not usually choose to undertake further study after leaving school are being forced to do so to remain employable. This group of people constitute a new market for TAFE and many challenges for the teacher.

The complex changes within the hospitality industry has meant that we are training a more diverse group than we have in the past. As the industry needs workers that can assist them meet their legal food safety obligations, they require accredited training. To imagine that TAFE chef instructors can distance themselves from a large part of the training market is obviously economically unviable. The challenge in the future for these instructors and TAFE management is to recognise the worth of this sector and value them appropriately. Currently it seems that the chefs themselves and certainly the culinary leadership team at Box Hill Institute are more focused on the students who produce high quality food who have the skills to win awards and kudos for the Institute. They expend little energy and thought on the competent producers of Veal Parmigianna and chips who are paying the bills.

### **Changes in Education**

Although I only have access to enrolment records at Box Hill TAFE, there is no reason to believe that this Institute is in any significant way different to others in Melbourne.

The age of our apprentices has increased. In 1984 the average age of a first year apprentice was 15/16. They had generally completed year 10. In 2004, the average age was 17/18 and 70% had attempted year 12. Approximately 20% of apprentice cooks had attempted a Certificate II in Hospitality (Operations) as a part of a VETIS program.

If we compare the profile of a cookery apprentice now with that of a cookery apprentice from thirty years ago there are several differences. The obvious one to chef-instructors is that there are more cookery apprentices today than in the past and that the skills that they learn at work are in some cases crude. The profile of the employers of the cookery apprentices has changed over the past 20 years. These small businesses or large businesses owned by interests such as brewing groups were not traditional employers of apprentices and all that is now required is that they employ a qualified chef to supervise. In the past many of these would have employed unqualified but in many cases very experienced cooks and recent, unqualified school leavers. The workers employed in small cafes or very large operations serving pre-prepared food do not have the exposure to food preparation that constitutes the work of a chef in the eyes of the chef-instructors. These workers would traditionally not have studied further after leaving compulsory education but been quite employable.

Our current employer profile at Box Hill Institute contains only 50% of what would be regarded as traditional employers creating traditional food. The chef educators still regard this group of apprentices as being the “real” ones and want the Certificate III in Hospitality (Commercial Cookery) to reflect their needs.

In the early 90s under the Kennett administration the beginnings of the new apprenticeship program made it possible for businesses that had not previously employed apprentices to do so. Hospitality businesses have traditionally run on small margins. The introduction of GST and HACCP (A food safety system)<sup>2</sup> within a five-year period closed many businesses down, as they could not wear the financial and time burden of these structures. The new apprentice system provides financial incentives to employ apprentices and in businesses operating on even tighter margins it is financially attractive to do so. In some cases the businesses would not be viable if they did not have assistance in the form of subsidised staff available. Employers are employing staff as apprentices who would not? have been employed as full time workers or cooks in the past.

The increase in businesses employing trainees and apprentices rather than unqualified but experienced full time staff could be seen as manifestation of the trend of government encouraging members of society to increase their intellectual capital. I believe that it is being driven by the employers on one hand who want government incentives and have a legal requirement for qualified employees and the other hand are the individuals and parents of young people who are insecure after years of economic reform. Apprentices do not need to complete year 12 to enter an apprenticeship. It is desirable to have attained a level of maturity that enables an individual to cope with a balance of work and study but a year 12 qualifications is not a pre-requisite.

Parents of young workers now want their children to attain the highest qualification they are able. A possible explanation for this is described by Pusey who says that “Anyone who turned forty with the new millennium will have spent all of their adulthood living through what we so blithely call economic reform” (Pusey, 2003b, p.132) As this age group are the parents of students entering post compulsory education, it is not surprising that they seek what ever advantage they can for their children. They have made the connection between post compulsory education and the ability to be employed. This has turned into such a frenzy of certificate chasing that in the worst instance we have been presented with instances of intellectually disabled students suffering great loss of self esteem as parents try to push them into Certificate III studies. Unfortunately for parents of sub-literate children, there are no longer many positions available for sub-literate workers in the Hospitality industry. In the past a sous-chef (assistant chef) did not have to be able to read and write. The head chef could take care of the tasks involving literacy and the sous could just cook. They would not have attained a qualification but they were employable. Due to changes within the industry this is no longer possible. These students are now present in TAFE. They are proceeding through the Certificate III program with assistance from student support. In some cases this is successful, in many cases it is stressful for the teachers and students alike.

Box Hill Institute runs a program called Growth and Pathways for students in year 9 and 10. These students come to TAFE one day per week to study some base units in cookery to see if they enjoy the work. In the past they would be the group that would likely have left school early and attained a job as a kitchen hand. From that position they could have worked their way up in a large organisation to a position of cook or if they showed particular flair, been taken on as an apprentice after a period of time. Changes within the new apprenticeship scheme mean that employers have only three months to sign new workers on as apprentices. This is designed to encourage employers to support training however it has also had an unfortunate side effect. Some young people take longer than three months to become competent in their jobs. Some undergo a maturing process when they are in the workplace that means that within 12 months they are ready to involve themselves in further training. If the training is not funded or available at that time then these workers are further marginalised. They may find themselves with no qualification at all unless they are able to pay fee for service rates. For individuals employed as kitchen hands this is unlikely. Most kitchen hands now hold a Certificate I in Kitchen Operations.

Another trend in cookery training, which reflects the growing diversity of the industry, is the increase in demand for different pathways to attaining a Certificate III in Hospitality (Commercial Cookery) Many of our apprentices now present with credits in several units from the Training Package that they may have picked up during a GAP or VETIS Program. This is such an established pattern now that some students and parents at Institute Open Days have expressed concern when the student has not studied any Hospitality units at high school that they will be excluded as a prerequisite for gaining an apprenticeship. The appearance of these students presents a challenge for the administration and timetabling of classes. It is possible to schedule a unit class and discover that half of the class are exempt due to previous studies. This means that the class runs with the same costs but half of the income. Staff working on timetables have to work more creatively and try to combine classes to ensure that these introductory units are not bankrupting the course.

There is also a new type of student appearing in our Certificate II Commercial Cookery Course. In the past this course has attracted many mature aged students who are seeking a career change or new employment after a redundancy. They may have been accountants or truck drivers who decide that they wish to cook and open a small business. In the past they have completed the course and happily gone out to pursue their goals, today they are much more likely to want to go on to further study and complete Certificate III Studies. The Certificate III in Commercial Cookery has been designed to meet the needs of apprentice cooks. Apprentices have at least two years of cooking experience before they enter the third year of Certificate III, ex-Certificate II cooks may have had no workplace experience but have completed units up to the level of a Second Year Apprentice. When we timetable these diverse students together, we discover (not surprisingly) that the ex Certificate II Cooks are much less skilled than the Apprentices. OTTE is now commissioning a study to discover what competencies come out of an apprenticeship other than those listed in the Training Package. The ex-Certificate II Cooks usually struggle through the course and in time pass the competencies. The chef-instructors and members of the Cookery Educators Network are very unhappy at this arrangement and believe that it is a major contributor to a loss of quality in cooking skills. Until they are able to identify the elements that make

an apprenticeship unique they will be unable to refuse inclusion in the course to non-apprentices.

## **Conclusion**

I do not think that the role of a cookery educator has been de-valued over time but believe that it has changed significantly. This has been disorientating to chef-instructors and the traditional employers of apprentices.

The control that is extended and increasing over all TAFE teachers and their work practices has seemed to have a demoralising effect on many staff. According to the brief interviews conducted for this study, many feel that they no longer have sufficient autonomy to teach their classes in a way that ensures the best outcomes for students.

The Certificate III in Hospitality (Commercial Cookery) has to accommodate an increased diversity of students. Not all of these students are aspiring to produce fine food from raw ingredients, some are working in places where they produce 500-200 covers of partly pre-prepared food. This requires a very *different* skill set to that of a traditional apprentice but not necessarily *less* skill. As the industry continues to grow, we may need to divide the Certificate III in Hospitality (Commercial Cookery) into different streams. Fine Dining, Bulk Catering and Small business are three easily identifiable areas that have different needs. I think that the current grouping of these industry types together and the compromises that must occur when this happens is causing some of the unrest amongst cookery educators.

The other change within the cookery department is the appearance of students who are now enrolled in courses who would never have returned to study if they could avoid it. This is the less publicised outcome of push toward capacity building combined with a tightening up of the Health Act. Historically cookery has attracted students who are passionate about it. The hours and pay compare unfavourably with those of other apprenticeships such as carpentry. A cookery qualification usually condemns the recipient to Saturday nights at work and is more limited in opportunities to set up as a small business. Students who undertook a Certificate III in Hospitality (Commercial Cookery) did so because they really wanted to cook fine food, there were no other drivers. The current presence of a large number of reluctant students who often have special learning needs is another change that the chef-instructors have had to accommodate.

The thought of workers gathering certificates and knowledge as they proceed through life is a seductive one. I do not think that this has been driven by the latest glossy management book in the hospitality industry or by alluring government references. It would be nonsense to suggest that the increase in workers undergoing Certificate III training has been driven by employers striving to invest in the intellectual capital of the workforce to capacity build their café. Instead it has been motivated by the age-old winning combination of carrot and stick. The carrot is the incentive that employers receive when they employ a new apprentice and the opportunity to pick up a cheap pair of hands. These are even higher if they employ some one that falls into the “youth at risk” category. The stick is the legal obligation to employ workers who hold a food handlers certificate as a minimum qualification.

Many of the changes within the Commercial Cookery Course over the last thirty years have reflected the Hospitality industry and its standards. Some have been made to reduce the cost of the training and increase control of the teachers. As the industry has grown and become more diverse the course has had to become more generic to accommodate these needs. It is possible that we will see this turn into more specialised courses as the groups become large enough to divide and form special interest streams.

Perhaps the cookery educators have not become ineffectual or devalued but are trying to suit a generic course to an industry with diverse needs.

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