

Equity Ahoy! The State of Equity in TAFE in Victoria

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Abstract

In his contribution to the NCVET publication *Equity in Vocational Education and Training: Research Readings* (2004), Robert Bean explored the notion of whether equity in VET is 'built in' or 'bolted on'. This idea neatly encapsulated the thinking espoused in VET policy and the research literature about VET over the last ten years and underpinned one of the central research questions for a major research project conducted by the Equity Research Centre in 2006: *The State of Equity in TAFE in Victoria*.

To explore the nature and extent of systems and structures within TAFE that support successful outcomes for disadvantaged learners, we conducted an extensive review of current literature and policy around equity in vocational education and training and used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. We analysed the AVETMISS data for government funded places in the eighteen major TAFE institutions in Victoria, profiled the content of TAFE websites, consulted with policy makers and practitioners and examined the implementation of initiatives designed to support disadvantaged learners within TAFE.

Introduction

Reflecting on the findings of our research project, we find a maritime metaphor illuminating. If TAFE institutions were sailing vessels, we might ask whether we are on board a luxury liner, a container ship, a frigate, a tugboat or even a flotilla. This spawns a series of questions such as:

- What are its sailing orders? How constraining are these?
- Whose flag does it fly?
- Is it a one class ship?
- What is the composition of its passengers and crew?
- How are they distributed the length and breadth of the vessel?
- What bilge water does it discharge and where?

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Mythological images such as the *Titanic* sinking, the Sirens luring seafarers or the perils of negotiating the Straits of Messina between Scylla and Charybdis raise other questions and ignite new understandings. Of course, as we look at equity from policy, practice and learner perspectives, we find that questions can be as vexed as any answers they elicit.

Evolution, revolution, status quo (even stagnation); all appear in various guises in the national and state VET policy context and in the often dynamic interplay among TAFE institution policy makers and practitioners.

The State of Equity in TAFE in Victoria was a major research project commissioned by the Office of Training and Tertiary Education (OTTE) in Victoria and conducted by the Equity Research Centre in 2006. In our exploration of the nature and extent of systems and structures within TAFE that support successful outcomes for disadvantaged learners, we used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods including an extensive review of current literature and policy around equity in vocational education and training, analysing the AVETMISS data for government funded places in the eighteen major TAFE institutions in Victoria, profiling the accessibility and content of TAFE websites, consulting with policy makers and practitioners and examining the implementation of initiatives designed to support disadvantaged learners at individual TAFE institutions.

The central focus of this paper is the ways in which TAFE institutions in Victoria perceive disadvantaged learners and how, as large organisations, they incorporate them into their education and training provision.

Our analysis of VET policy and review of the VET literature published over the last ten or so years, suggested a cluster of core considerations:

- Indicators of disadvantage are more closely related to combinations of learner characteristics than to single signifiers such as those assumed by previous concepts of equity target groups
- Equity is more effectively measured by analysing the Australian Qualifications Framework course levels in which learners are enrolled and the outcomes they achieve than by relying on high rates of participation by disadvantaged learners
- Inequity among learners is currently addressed through provision of specifically targeted courses and programs that often operate parallel with rather than integrated into mainstream programs
- For disadvantaged learners to be well served by TAFE, equity needs to become a central organising principle of TAFE provider policy, strategy and practice.

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To what extent these are distinguishing features of TAFE in Victoria gave rise to a number of questions for exploration in the course of this research. For example:

- What is the current understanding of equity in Victorian TAFE institutions?
- How do TAFE institutions attract and retain disadvantaged learners? How do they support and encourage successful outcomes?
- How do TAFE institutions' strategic frameworks impact on access and equity initiatives? To what extent are they embracing equity as a central organising principle?

Since the status of our research is that of a report to OTTE which has not, to date, been released for publication, I am unable to reveal its findings *per se*. Hence I have chosen to create a metaphorical interpretation of what we found to be some common ways in which equity was being practised in 2006 in the eighteen very various TAFE institutions in Victoria. For this purpose I found a maritime metaphor illuminating. If we imagine TAFE institutions as sailing vessels, we might then ask whether we are on board a luxury liner, a container ship, a frigate, a tugboat or even a flotilla. This spawns a series of questions such as:

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As you read this paper, I want you to imagine that you are a TAFE learner. Although you might be able, accomplished and clear about your training purpose, you might, nevertheless, from time to time experience one or even many of life's vicissitudes: an emotional upheaval, a psychological problem or a change in means. Or you might come to your training already burdened by adversity: you might be homeless, penniless, Indigenous, disabled, unemployed, underqualified, redundant, a sole parent or a refugee. Either way you may be disadvantaged whether this is temporary or chronic. Which are you?

In your preparation for entry to TAFE you have been told that there are six classes of vessels that sail under the Victorian TAFE flag each departing from different ports at different times across the state, taking different routes and bound for different destinations. Which class of vessel is for you?

TAFE Container Ship Tampa

Flying the Victorian Government flag, TAFE Container Ship *Tampa* is managed by a small and powerful crew. Container ships rarely carry passengers however the *Tampa* does have a cargo of learners locked in containers according to course, level of study or learner type. In some containers are specific cohorts of disadvantaged learners all of whom are assumed to be homogeneous; Indigenous, disabled, functionally illiterate, refugee or culturally and linguistically diverse. From time to time there are containers that contain young people at risk of disengaging from school or the labour market or mature aged learners with 'old' skills and low level qualifications. Each container is assigned a set of resources: a budget, teachers, support staff and learning space, materials and equipment. At the end to the voyage, a term, a semester, the containers are unloaded and the log that has been kept of inputs and outcomes is submitted to the commanding officers who, in turn, forward the full ship's log to the TAFE authority.

Between voyages, teachers and staff can exchange experiences with their counterparts from other containers and, subject to time restrictions, board other vessels in the TAFE fleet to ascertain their arrangements. On its next voyage, TAFE Container Ship *Tampa*'s sailing orders may be different from those of the previous voyage with consequential jettisoning of some containers, loading of new ones and re-organisation of others with concomitant changes in instructions for the imminent voyage.

On TAFE Container Ship *Tampa*, the cargo is segregated, sealed and secured in containers which are hoisted and stacked in precise order above and below. The massive size of the ship restricts its passage to a limited set of shipping routes, lanes and channels, makes coming about cumbersome and unwieldy and stopping suddenly impossible. The largest of this class of vessel cannot navigate shorter, time-saving routes like the Panama Canal and must travel around Cape Horn increasing the length of its voyage from eighty kilometres and nine hours to 5,000 kilometres and at least seven days.

Perils at sea

Piracy, terrorism, running aground, icebergs, containers lost overboard, cyclones, maverick owners.

Excerpt from passenger log

The enrolment staff assessed us and assigned us to a container. Most of the other students in my container were like me in some ways although different in others. The teachers, staff and program were great for our commonalities but not for our differences. We all study the same courses at the same levels and with the same teaching methods. I found this very frustrating. I wonder if it's the same in the other containers? They don't operate when the ship is docked and once the journey began we couldn't ever get out of our container to see if there was something different that would suit us better.

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TAFE Luxury Liner Queen Mary 2

The pride of the Victorian training fleet, TAFE Luxury Liner *Queen Mary 2*, is the longest, widest, tallest and heaviest passenger ship ever built. It carries thousands of passengers and an enormous professional crew. Passengers travel in different classes which are aligned with her twelve decks. The first class passengers are on the top decks in luxury staterooms while the lowest class passengers share small cabins just above the hold and often within earshot of the ship's screw.

The crew are highly trained and work in teams. They know, without ever having to ask, just what activities and entertainment passengers most enjoy, what food they like and what services they need and provide them according to class. Passengers of different classes are not encouraged to mingle. Indeed lower class passengers are forbidden access to most areas of decks above their own. Except when they need services provided to all passengers, they are restricted to their own areas and served by their allocated crew. Services from above do visit below when the need arises. Each class has its own program of activities and entertainment, its own menu and facilities.

The class at which passengers travel is determined by their capacity to pay. The currency is ability. Ironically, it is assumed that the more ability passengers have, the more services they will need. For this they are rewarded with the highest staff numbers and qualifications and the best facilities, activities and menus. The less able the passengers and the more services they require, the lower the class they can afford with commensurate decrease in staffing, services and activities.

Like TAFE Container Ship *Tampa*, the *Queen Mary 2* is restricted to a limited number of shipping lanes and has needs extensive space and time to stop or change course. She needs considerable assistance from pilots and tugboats to dock and then can only enter ports with sufficient draft.

Some of the service staff work across classes and there is regular formal and informal contact among cruise staff. However, the staff structure is hierarchical and those working on the upper decks and closer to the bridge regard themselves and their passengers as superior and often patronise those working on the lower decks.

Perils at sea

Terrorism/high jacking, running aground, colliding with an iceberg in atypical locations due to the effects of global warming.

Excerpt from passenger log

First class travel is beyond my means because my abilities are limited and I need extra services. Because I suffer from cerebral palsy I am confined to a wheelchair. I'm smart and intelligent but need more time than most not only to do most basic things like shower and dress and get from place to place but also to complete activities. I dropped out of school because the support I needed wasn't available. I live independently on a disability benefit and have recently been assessed by Centrelink (Work Choices) as having the capacity to work fifteen hours per week. Because of my lack of qualifications I am allowed to spend time in training. Fortunately I have a roof over my head but I do have difficulty affording all the extras not included in the ticket price.

I've mostly enjoyed this voyage because the staff on my deck understand that I'm not stupid, unlike some staff on the top decks who treated me like a moron when I had cut my finger and was looking for the medical office. It also gets pretty frustrating at times being surrounded by so many people who have difficulty learning for intellectual reasons or who don't really want to learn at all. It's so different from my private life. All my friends have enough ability to be up in first or second class but I can't mix with them on board unless they come below. And why would they most of the time? From what they tell me everything is so cool up there. I wish I could be there too. I'm sure I'd cope OK so long as people understood that I'm only slow and awkward on the outside.

I wonder whether I'll ever get enough qualifications for an interesting job. I wonder whether anyone will look past my disability and employ me.

TAFE Cruiser Pacific Sky

Although at 240 metres long the TAFE Cruiser *Pacific Sky* is considerably smaller than the *Queen Mary 2*, it carries almost as many passengers and crew. Pacific Sky is a one class ship which means that all its passengers mingle and share activities. Cabins are allocated on a first come basis rather than primarily on price. For example, a recent advertisement for the ship explains

- ✓ Not ALL cabins are the same size with some up to 3 times larger for the same price. We can find you *the largest cabin available* in that category for your cruise!
- ✓ Not ALL identical cabins cost the same, with savings up to 60% and more through exclusive specials often released and sold first here. Sometimes the better cabins are cheaper! We can find you *the lowest price* for your cruise!
- ✓ Often the lower deck cabins can be identical in size and furnishings, but quieter, more comfortable in bad weather and significantly less in price. We can find you *the best value* for your cruise!

✓ Identical cruises just days apart often cost far less or more due to seasonal fluctuations. We can find you *the best time to cruise* to suit your budget.

The cruise staff are highly trained and are rostered throughout the ship. They are a more close knit team than those on the Queen Mary 2. They meet frequently among themselves and with command and share information about how the ship is running, how well the passengers are faring and discuss ideas about improvements they could make. They are all very supportive of each other. Like their counterparts on the Queen Mary 2, they are highly organised and prepared to provide what they believe the passengers want. However, their programs are more flexible and responsive to passengers' ideas.

Perils at sea

Terrorism/hijacking, cyclones, viruses, other passenger behaviour.

Excerpt from passenger log

I am a refugee recently arrived from Sudan. I don't speak or write English very well. I only went to school for a few years because there were no schools in the refugee camp where I had to live with my brother from age ten to age nineteen. There was no work for anyone either.

I was offered a free cruise on the Pacific Sky. I know I'm very lucky but I'm finding it very difficult to get used to the ship. There are so many things I have never seen before and so many activities that I don't understand. I've learnt that reading and writing are very important here. At home the cleverest people are the ones who remember everything and don't have to write it down. That's what I think too so I sometimes get frustrated and impatient. I also find it strange that boys and girls sit together in class and have cabins close to each other. In my country this is not OK so I find it very embarrassing.

It's good that there are some other people from Sudan on the ship but unfortunately our cabins are all in different decks so it can be difficult finding them. Also, the others have been here for much longer than I have and seem happy to act like Australians. I think they have forgotten many important things from our country and I am sometimes ashamed. I don't know whether I can change that much or even if I want to.

TAFE Frigate Anzac

The TAFE Frigate *Anzac* is an Anzac class frigate and with a length of just 118 metres is much smaller than either the *Queen Mary 2* or the *Pacific Sky*. On board there is a clear chain of command. Everyone on board takes orders from above, carries out their pre-determined duties and is fully accountable for their own actions and those of their subordinates. In the frigate's hierarchy everyone has been assigned a rank which defines their needs, expectations and entitlements.

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With rare exceptions, a frigate carries no passengers. The entire crew from commander to deckhand is highly trained and perfect performance is required at all times. On duty there is no tolerance either for individuality, spontaneity or human foible. Conformity is paramount. Protocols and duty-of-care are a fundamental protection both against enemies without and erratic behaviour within.

The frigate is on a mission which determined its sailing order. At any time a directive may come from TAFE central command to abort the mission together with the outline of a new mission and new sailing orders. Immediate obedience is required. The length of time at sea may change without notice.

Perils at sea

Enemy ships, torpedoes, mines, submarines, straying into forbidden waters.

Excerpt from cadet log

I was sent to join the crew of TAFE Frigate *Anzac* after the Kraft biscuit factory in Broadmeadows closed down. It was the only job I ever had and I'd only worked there for two years. I was never any good at school work except at doing things with my hands. I was lucky to get the job on the assembly line and I really liked it. Now Centrelink have sent me here because even though I'm 25 I only passed Year 9. I thought I'd hate being on this ship but after I did a pre-apprenticeship they gave me a full apprenticeship. It's very strict and we work really hard but we get the job done and I've learnt a lot. A couple of mates I've met on board can't hack it and they're leaving as soon as they can get off. They think it's stupid to have to do things properly or get bawled out. They're always complaining about not enough free time and trying to sneak off for a joint. The instructors are much more patient than I thought they'd be.

Everyone to their own. I've decided I like it here. People look out for each other. I wouldn't like to be one of the girls though. They sure get hell.

TAFE Tugboat Melbourne

TAFE Tugboat *Melbourne* is one of seven tugboats assigned to help TAFE Container Ship *Tampa* navigate the Port Phillip Bay shipping channels and dock safely at the Port of Melbourne. Like the other tugs with which it cooperates, the Melbourne has a specific function in the piloting and docking operations. The appositeness of a tugboat to its functions lies in its strength and stability, its manoeuvrability, and the knowledge and skill of its small crew in maximising dexterity and agility, power and delicacy. In this the tug's own crew works closely as a team as well as in clear dialogue with the other assigned tugs, port traffic control and the bridge of the containership itself. At every moment every player in every capacity is mutually aware of their orders and assignments.

Balance between forces is the name of the game as several tugs work together to deliver TAFE Container Ship *Tampa* safely at Appleton Dock. TAFE Tugboat *Melbourne* is one of two tugs with responsibility for controlling its lateral movement. Too much push and the dock might collapse, too little and the aft tugs might lose purchase pushing the hulk into the ship ahead.

Tugboats are tubby. They are unprepossessing. They are rarely the objects of wonder and awe inspired by the bulk and capacity of contemporary containerships. Yet without them the Leviathan flounders, it languishes at anchor weak and helpless in shallow water or tricky channels with its cargoes denied its purchasers and often at risk of spoiling.

Perils at Sea

Being run over by a containership, colliding with another tug, terrorism

Excerpt from cadet log

I've just completed a cadetship in the Certificate in Seagoing Training (Deck). It's a really excellent course. Growing up in a remote Indigenous community I saw pictures of the sea and dreamed what it might be like. I never expected to be a seafarer. It's taken a long time since I arrived in Melbourne seven years ago for my English to be good enough to get into this work and to have learnt enough maths and science to be able to study by distance education through the Australian Maritime College because that's the only way this course was available. Now I'm temporarily working on the *Melbourne*, where I did my initial shipboard training, while I wait to start the Engineer Officer: Engineer Watchkeeper course in Launceston.

I've liked this training because it's been so well organised. You're an important part of a small team that's part of a large team and if all the teams don't work well together then we face catastrophe. For me too, working and studying in a small group of people was great especially since I've become mates with lots of the blokes. It's also helped my

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English and my grasp of nautical terms. I'm sitting my IELTS test next month and because of the great training on and off the job, I'm sure I'll score six quite easily.

The QE 2 Flotilla

Yachts, schooners, skiffs, surfboards, rowboats, jet skis, power boats, fishing boats, dinghies and launches ride pell-mell on the sparkling white caps on Port Phillip Bay. The *QE 2* is on her way through the Heads and the welcome is frenzied. Is there anyone in command of this vagabond confusion? Certainly not a Victorian TAFE.

Last Chance

Enrolment day is tomorrow. Which vessel will you choose for your TAFE journey?

BIO NOTES

Dr Helen Kimberley

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Helen manages the Equity Research Centre research program. Her past research includes *Community Learning: the Outcomes Report* (1986), several projects about VET and ACE with the University of Technology Sydney, *The Perils of Pokies*, about older women with gambling problems and, most recently, *The State of Equity in TAFE in Victoria*.

Previously Helen spent several years as an organisational development consultant, ten years managing the Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres and ten years as an adult educator.