The implications for VET policy and practice arising from the findings of PhD research exploring the impact of privately owned RTOs in Victoria.

Joan McPhee, RMIT PhD student

Abstract

This paper draws on data gathered as part of a PhD study undertaken to assess how the nature and scope of the VET system has changed, as a result of the entry of privately owned RTOs into the Victorian market for accredited training. A purposeful sample of 21 privately owned Victorian Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) which were either Commercial, Industry or Enterprise RTOs were interviewed in 2003/4.

The methodological approach and relevant literature are briefly recounted; with a particular focus on my own role as a research instrument.

The findings to be discussed include

- The ways in which the RTOs interviewed differentiated their services, focused on their client's needs and met changes in the training environment quickly and decisively.

- The high degree of flexibility and adaptability exhibited by these RTOs in the mode, timing and location of delivery for those clients who were employed in workplaces

- The extent to which customised and contextualised training ensured 'fitness for purpose' and enhanced the relevance and quality of the training provided by these RTOs

- The problematic nature of assessing quality when the focus has been on procedural compliance through the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) rather than on

finding ways to improve the relevance and value of program content, assessment and delivery.

- The increase in diversity, choice and competitiveness illustrated by the presence of privately owned RTOs.

- The consequences of my findings for a number of stakeholders in the VET training system are discussed briefly.

This paper represents work in progress. Comments will be very welcome.

Introduction

In 2005, I presented a paper (McPhee 2005) at the AVETRA conference providing insights into the activities and views of 21 privately owned Victorian Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) interviewed between October 2003 and February 2004. Since that time, further work has resulted in an assessment of how the nature and scope of the Victorian Vocational Education and Training (VET) system has changed as a result of the entry of privately owned RTOs into the Victorian market for accredited training. The implications of some of these findings are reported in this presentation

In 1990, the Victorian Labor Government introduced the *Victorian Vocational Education and Training Act 1990 (1990) ,* to allow for the registration of private providers to deliver accredited training. The implementation of this Act meant that the previous monopoly which TAFE Colleges had over the delivery of accredited training ceased.

Privately owned Registered Training Organisations (RTOs)

As indicated above, my focus for this research has been on a particular group of RTOs for which I coined the phrase 'privately owned RTOs'. They comprise commercial, industry and enterprise providers. The number of RTOs in these three categories reached a total of 760 in 2002/3 which represented 69% of all categories of RTOs. Appendix A gives details of the annual registrations of each type of these RTOs from 1991 to 2001/2.

For ease of reference the term Registered Training Organisation (RTO) is used in this paper generally to refer to 'registered private providers'(State Training Board Victoria 1993; State Training Board Victoria 1993) although this term was not widely used until 1997-8 (Department of Education Science & Training 2005) when it encompassed all types of RTOs.

Reforming VET

In undertaking my research, I have limited my definition of the VET training market to those privately owned RTOs registered in Victoria which provide accredited courses. In opening up the VET training market to private providers, initially in Victoria and ultimately nationally, policy makers hoped to achieve reforms which would improve the provision of VET, in a number of ways and would overcome the perceived rigidities that existed (Dawkins and Holding 1987; Dawkins 1989; Dawkins 1992; Keating 1994). In particular it was intended to improve the

- responsiveness,
- flexibility,
- diversity
- quality
- competitiveness
- choice, and
- national consistency

of the VET system..

The political and economic context for these changes is not documented in this paper but the rise of economic rationalism (Pusey 1991; Campbell and Halligan 1992; Marginson 1993), the high levels of employment, the lack of international competitiveness and the growth of globalisation (Seddon and Marginson 2001), from the late 1980s and beyond, form part of this context.

It should be noted that I have referred to relevant literature throughout this paper rather than having a separate literature review.

Research Method

The epistemological approach adopted for my research is best described as interpretive inquiry which is '*concerned with how the participants in an inquiry interpret and give meaning to their world.*' (Caulley 1994, p.4)*.*   I have used multiple techniques of data collection.   This triangulation assists in establishing a degree of trustworthiness, reliability and credibility (Wiersma 1995; Arksey and Knight 1999; Williamson, Burstein et al. 2000). The collection includes historical and economic data, statistics made available to me by the Office of Training and Tertiary Education (OTTE) in Victoria and the qualitative data from my interviews. These interviews were conducted with the CEOs, or their nominated representatives, in 21 RTOs, together with an additional two expert informants. The 21 RTOs (McPhee 2005) represented a purposeful sample (Caulley 1994) and the interviews conducted were semi-structured (Arksey and Knight 1999; McPhee 2004).

My own knowledge and experience as an active participant in VET underpins my data collection (Lincoln and Guba 1985). This reflects the '*self as an instrument*' (Garman, 1996, p.27) and is justified by the tacit knowledge I have gained over many years as a training practitioner and

manager in public and private VET. Appendix B includes a personal work history detailing the extent of my participation in the policies and practices of the VET system.

I have used the idea of having different 'voices' throughout my research. The first 'voice' is that of the system which is articulated through the quotations and comments of VET stakeholders (including policy makers, bureaucrats politicians, employer bodies) to communicate the reform objectives through slogans (Deveson 1990; State Training Board Victoria 1991; State Training Board Victoria 1993; Australian National Training Authority 1994; State Training Board Victoria 1994; Australian National Training Authority 1998; McPhee 2005). Another 'voice' is that of the providers, expressed through my interview finding. The third 'voice' is my own.

In examining the historical data I use the concept of 'framing' (Lakoff and Johnson 1981; Rein 1983; Ryan 1999) to explain how the slogans used to describe the intended reform agenda enable complex issues to be simplified so that they can be easily understood by those to whom the policy makers are 'selling' the reforms.

I found that the meaning of the words used by policy makers differed sometimes from the meaning given by the practitioners in the VET sector (Virgona et al, 2003; Foucault, 1973). Thus it became apparent that there are two different but related discourses. One is the discourse of the policy makers and the other the discourse of practice. The policy discourse represents the meaning assigned to the slogans by the policy makers and others which as Virgona et al (2003) suggests may be abstract and de-contextualised and '*which makes sense only at a distance*' (Virgona, Waterhouse et al. 2003). These abstract meanings may be impracticable in the real world where the action occurs.

The discourse of practitioners gave different meaning and interpretations from that of the policy discourse for a number of the slogans which communicated the VET reform agenda. A number of these differences have led to tensions and frustrations between RTOs and the Victorian regulatory body.

Findings and discussion

My findings focus on the reforms listed above. The grounded experience of the RTO representatives who were interviewed forms the basis for this report.

I found the term 'responsiveness' included being client focused, having closer links with industry, differentiating services and providing demand driven training. The RTOs I interviewed actively anticipated their client needs, developed new products and services and put them into the market place to gain business. Many examples were provided of how they met client needs and/or provided customer service. For instance, some RTOs believed it was critical for their trainers to spend time with each client, prior to developing a training program, to find out in some detail how the organisation operated and what the client's employees needed to improve their skills.

The privately owned RTOs interviewed, demonstrated they were capable of responding quickly and decisively to changes in demand and/or the training environment. Without the presence of privately owned RTOs, the skill training needs the government saw as priorities could not have been met as expeditiously.

The second slogan listed above is 'flexibility'. The RTOs I interviewed assigned different meanings and interpretations about flexibility to those identified by policy makers. Policy makers tended to focus on e-learning and technological improvements as ways to increase flexibility (Australian National Training Authority 1994) but the RTOs I interviewed went much further

with their approach to flexibility. They delivered accredited training at times, places and through methods which suited their client's needs. They perceived being flexibility as a necessary part of providing customer service.

Some enterprises sought registration as RTOs in order to gain flexibilities. For example, continuous or on-demand enrolment processes and program scheduling aligned to the ebb and flow of an industry clients' business operation were part of normal day to day operations for many of those I interviewed A number referred to using 'blended solutions' for training delivery. This encompassed on-the-job training and assessment, formal classroom sessions, computer based learning, short sessions using employee experts, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and block training in workshop sessions away from the workplace, to name the main ones identified.

For users to whom adaptability or flexibility are critical issues, the entry of privately owned RTOs provides an alternative to TAFE Institutes. There is still a perception that most publicly funded are more inflexible in the way they approach their training processes – whether it is the enrolment period, the timing of classes for their students or other embedded rigidities.

The third slogan relates to diversity. With the entry of private providers, users can now choose from a diverse group of registered RTOs. This contrasts with the position prior to 1990. I found considerable variation in the day to day operations of private RTOs, whether it was the breadth of their markets, the client groups they serviced or the range of approaches applied to the delivery of their training. Further, I found (as a Training Recognition Consultant (TRC) – see Appendix B) that significant diversity in relation to the size of RTOs and the multiplicity of industry sectors in which they operated, existed among my numerous clients.

Although much of this diversity is laudable, one downside which became apparent from my research was the complexity that it added to the VET system. Its increased complexity is perceived by both RTOs operating on a day to day basis and by the users of the system. Both groups have expressed concern about this (Australian National Training Authority 2003; Chappell 2003). Indeed it is apparent that complexity is an unintended outcome of the opening up of the VET training market.

I found that privately owned RTOs, on the whole, possessed a very good understanding and knowledge of the VET system and, to some extent, modified the concerns of their clients about the complex aspects of the system. More complexity may be the price we have to pay for the privatisation of the system. If the diversity, responsiveness and flexibility of the VET sector were emphasised and promoted, a reduction in the level of anxiety and tensions about complexity may be alleviated.

The fourth catchphrase identified above is 'quality'. Although the meaning of quality is open to some debate (Gibb 2003) ultimately, judging quality is in the eye of the beholder. For example, at the provider level, possessing high quality resources can still go to waste if the trainer is not adequately experienced and/or skilled enough to use the materials or to facilitate the training process. I found that the policy makers mainly relied on the quality assurance (QA) of administrative processes as a means of judging quality. But administrative processes do not deal with the quality of teaching and learning. I acknowledge that the 2007 AQTF Standards have now extended the assessment of compliance to include indicators of quality outcomes, including aspects of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, the best way to judge quality of outcomes is not necessarily through a general and uniform measure which deals with a macro focus of quality but rather to judge the extent to which an RTO continues to work with clients through repeat business and develops an ongoing relationship with that client. My interview findings confirm the extent to

which the 21 RTOs have achieved success over a prolonged period. I concede that this still does not provide an absolute guarantee of quality – other issues may be involved. It is possible that RTOs may lack a genuine and honest approach to training delivery, or the capability to deliver the desired outcomes to occur (Gallagher and Anderson 2005). Ultimately, despite my caveats, I believe that the survival of the privately owned RTOs I interviewed over an extended period of time, together with their capacity to win repeat business and new clients by word of mouth, is a reasonable prima facie indicator of quality.

Another area which relates to quality is the extent to which customisation and contexualisation of training to enhance fitness for purpose and relevance of training takes place. Prior to the entry of private RTOs, there was little incentive for training to be customised and contextualised. However, my research found many examples of how these private providers ensured the 'relevance' of training (Townsend and Waterhouse 2005). In addition to the example given above in the discussion on responsiveness, other specific examples include:

- Ensuring that field work is carried out at appropriate sites and that this is representative of the type of workplace in which the student is engaged
- One very large national enterprise expecting its trainers to spend time 'on the floor' periodically to make sure that they were aware of what the employees were expected to do and to ensure continuing authenticity of the training.
- Using industry experts or trainers with specialist skills

The fifth and sixth of the reforms referred to above, relate to achieving greater 'competitiveness' and 'choice'. The Victorian government's competitive tendering and allocation of user choice funds to privately owned RTOs have been additional ways in which both competitiveness and choice have increased (State Training Board Victoria 2000). However, the actual extent of

competitiveness which exists cannot be established without market share data and I was unable to obtain this. From a macro perspective there are more suppliers in the market (see Appendix A) and as a consequence there is greater choice (Kemp 1997).

From a micro perspective, the Commercial RTOs interviewed felt that competitiveness in the market place was a significant issue for them. Not surprisingly perhaps, they saw the TAFE Institutes as their major competitors, citing advantages that TAFE had in relation to price, volume, resource, branding, infrastructure and status. However these RTOs also recognised that TAFE suffered disadvantages due to size and structural constraints (such as being bound by the terms and conditions of employment of their unionised workforce and being subject to government regulations and reporting requirements). The interviews revealed examples of how private providers were able to respond quickly to changes in the training market or to meeting the specific needs of their clients. One particular example cited by a commercial provider was when he was asked to deliver a course in Sydney only one week after the initial request was made. He described contacting the trainer and putting him on an aircraft that week (on the Tuesday) to deliver the training as requested.

Overall, the nature and extent of competition in the Victorian VET sector has increased with the privatisation of the market and there is more choice.

The last of the slogans listed above related to 'national consistency'. This has been omitted from this discussion.

In concluding this paper I set out below some of the consequences arising from my research for a number of stakeholders in VET.

- *Policy makers:* The privately owned RTOs expressed a number of frustrations with the regulatory authority (STA). They felt a lack of connection with the STA except in relation to formal responses to compliance issues. Having RTOs compliant with the AQTF is only part of the story. If the system is to continuously improve there needs to be more emphasis on development, particularly in relation to building the capability of providers through PD. For example, having all RTOs able to develop customised, contextualised and flexible training which results in improved skills and expertise is one important developmental challenge. My research shows that, in some respects, privately owned RTOs are leading the way. If care is not taken public providers will be left behind.

  Opportunities are needed to build bridges, develop feedback loops, and learn more about how providers and regulators perceive their role. Further, a shift from compliance as the 'main game' to a development role could enable the regulator to learn more about what happens in the field. Finding ways for all stakeholders to interact with one another more in different forums could result in the STA having a greater knowledge of how the RTOs operate on the ground. Another would be an improvement in the capability of all categories of RTOs to provide relevant training. The State Training Authority (STA) could highlight and publicise the advantages which private providers have demonstrated by managing professional development (PD) activities and encouraging private providers to share their leading edge practices and expertise with other RTOs.

- *Public Providers:* TAFE Institutes, according to one of the expert informants I interviewed, need to improve their customer relationships and build the capability of their teaching staff through PD. Their private provider competitors are, on the whole, more responsive, adaptable and offer timeliness and relevance in their training activities. In some instances successful collaboration has occurred between both public and private

providers. This can help to disseminate information of cutting edge practices. More partnerships and collaboration between public and private providers would help reduce the rivalry that exists and offer another way of achieving overall improvements in the VET system.

- *Private Providers:* My findings suggest that size is not a critical factor, but rather the strength of relationships which an RTO builds up with its client base. Other data suggest that:
  - o To increase their success in the marketplace, private providers could benefit from reviewing their client relationships and building systems to ensure ongoing and regular contact with clients.
  - o Working across state borders for national clients has contributed to the success of some of the RTOs I interviewed. National companies value highly the potential for consistency in training delivery by using a single provider nationally. This suggests opportunities for growth for small providers, particularly if they have a good knowledge of the VET system on a national basis.
  - o Niche providers have put time and effort into making sure they met the specific needs of their clients, through flexibility in the timing, modes and location of training, as well as customising and contextualising their materials and delivery. To some extent these actions could be perceived as 'barriers to entry' and discourage new entrants and thus protect existing niche markets.

Privately owned RTOs need to take up every opportunity to ensure that the government decision makers are made aware of the specific benefits they have brought to the VET training market in Victoria.

- *Researchers* : A greater knowledge and understanding of the role of private providers in VET could result if my research was compared with other states and territories to identify the common features and the differences which exist (Caulley 1994). Two major national surveys (Anderson 2005; Anderson 2006; Harris, Simons et al. 2006; Harris, Simons et al. 2006) have provided valuable data for researchers but the response rate of surveys depends on the support of a total population and does not always reflect all information available. Other benefits also arise from interviewing groups of providers to enable them to express their opinions and concerns less formally. My study has been limited to one group of RTOs in one State. It is possible that my findings may have some transferability in some other context (Falk and Gunther 2006).

Conclusion

The Victorian VET system today is very different to the one in place 17 years ago before the entry of private providers. It is more responsive, more flexible and more diverse. Quality improvements of various kinds have occurred. There is more competition and choice. The system is more complex. The entry of privately owned RTOs into the system has played an important part in contributing to these changes.

Acronyms

ACCI	Australian Chamber of Commerce & Industry
AIG	Australian Industry Group
ANTA	Australian National Training Authority (abolished on 1 July 2005)
AQTF	Australian Quality Training Framework - these are the nationally agreed quality arrangements for the VET system agreed to by the ANTA Ministerial Council.
CBT	Competency Based Training
DEST	Dept of Education, Science & Training - Commonwealth
EFSC	Employment and Skills Formation Council
MTIA	Metal Trades Industry Association
NFROT	National Framework for the Recognition of Training
NTRA	National Training Reform Agenda
OTTE	Office of Training and Tertiary Education
PD	Professional Development
QA	Quality Assurance
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RTO	Registered Training Organisation
STA	State Training Authority
STB	State Training Board
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TRC	Training Recognition Consultant
VECCI	Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Industry
VEF	Victorian Education Foundation
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VETAB	Vocational Education and Training Board (Victoria)

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Appendix A

Privately owned Registered Training Organisations (RTOs):
Annual registrations each financial year according to date of initial registration
1990/1 o 2001/2

Financial year	Commercial RTOs	Industry RTOs	Enterprise RTOs	Total private RTOs	Percentage of Total all RTOs	Total all RTOs
To 30/6/91	6	1	0	7	87.50	8
1991/2	6	6	5	17	85.00	20
1992/3	15	13	7	35	39.77	88
1993/4	17	10	3	30	71.42	42
1994/5	13	19	7	39	75.00	52
1995/6	29	26	14	69	73.40	94
1996/7	18	19	7	44	65.67	67
1997/8	42	21	13	76	80.85	94
1998/9	53	33	20	106	57.29	185
1999/0	80	41	19	140	76.50	183
2000/1	65	31	11	107	69.93	153
2001/2	69	17	4	90	79.64	113
Total	**413**	**237**	**110**	**760**	**69.15**	**1099**
Percentage of Privately Owned RTOs	54	31	15	100		

Source: Data provided by Office of Training & Tertiary Education

Appendix B – Personal work history

In summary, my work roles of direct relevance to the VET sector have included:

❖ Being a manager in a large national industry association which became one of the early RTOs with its own accredited Certificate in Supervision. I was responsible for gaining this accreditation and the registration of the RTO in January 1992.

❖ Being appointed by the Governor-in-Council as an employer representative on the Vocational Education and Training Accreditation Board (VETAB) in Victoria from 1993 to 1995 appointee, (the Board was abolished in 1999). Following the merger between Caulfield Institute of Technology and Monash University, I served as a member of Monash University Council (as a Governor-in-Council appointee) from 1990 to 1999.

❖ Working as a Training Recognition Consultant (TRC) delegated by the Victorian Department of Training & Tertiary Education[1] to assist organisations which desired to become RTOs in the Victorian VET system. I held this appointment from the beginning of 2000 until I resigned at the end of 2006.

❖ Being a member of the Business Skills Victoria Training Board in 1994.

❖ Since 2002, acting as an evaluator for the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and later Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) of finalists in the Small Training Provider Award for the annual Australian Training Awards.

I have set out below more detail about my personal work history.

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[1] The area of the Victorian Department of Training & Tertiary Education which has been responsible for registration and recognition has had a number of names over the years – they include Office of Training and Tertiary Education (OTTE), Office of Training and Further Education (OTFE), Office of Compulsory Education, Training and Employment (PETE) and Office of Education, Training and Tertiary Education (OETTE) .

While studying part time for my undergraduate degree I spent six years with a large public company. This was followed by four years of part time secondary teaching and then fifteen years at Caulfield Institute of Technology as a lecturer/ senior lecturer in Economics and Industrial Relations.

I returned to industry in the mid-1980s, spending 10 years working with an industry association, the Metal Trades Industry Association (MTIA), now the Australian Industry Group (AIG). My Training Manager role encompassed delivery, development and implementation of training programs which were suitable for first line managers and supervisors in manufacturing and (to a lesser extent) in the service sector. While working in the industry association, both award restructuring and enterprise bargaining were among the changes occurring in the industrial relations scene. Thus I experienced at first hand the development of policy within the association on award restructuring together with the member companies' and union's responses to this policy development. During this time I had the opportunity to apply innovative approaches to training and to collaborate with unions in the training of consultative committees. This was just as competency based training (CBT) and the national training reform agenda (NTRA) were gaining momentum, in the in the early nineties.

While working at Caulfield Institute of Technology, I became senior lecturer in Economics and Industrial Relations. During this time, I monitored part of the Tertiary Orientation Program being delivered on Caulfield Institute's behalf by Moorabbin TAFE and developed a distance education subject for the TAFE division of another Institute of Technology. I also completed a Master of Commerce by research, the topic being whether technology could be shown to be a significant determinant of industrial relations in the pulp and paper industry. In the mid-1980s a team of researchers, including myself, investigated the training needs for middle managers and

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supervisors (Gleeson, McPhee et al. 1987). We interviewed a random sample of Victorian members of the MTIA.

During the 10 years with the industry association, representation on bodies such as the Metals and Engineering Industry Development Committee, Business Industry Skills Training Board and the Vocational Education and Training Accreditation Board (VETAB)[2], provided an opportunity for me to learn about, and participate in, the early development of the training market in Victoria. This required a detailed knowledge of the early policies of VETAB as my role involved ensuring that the National Framework for the Recognition of Training (NFROT) principles operated effectively in Victoria.

An accredited course, entitled the Certificate of Supervision, was developed and designed for the Association and initially this was the only course on MTIA's scope of registration. At a later date, a Workers' Compensation Certificate was designed, developed and accredited by the State Training Authority for delivery to member employees in both the MTIA and the Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce & Industry (VECCI). Both these projects were made possible by funding support from the Victorian Education Foundation (VEF)[3].

On retirement from the industry association, I established my own consultancy. During this period I worked on a number of government projects including a benchmarking project with three VET institutions[4]. I carried out an investigation of industry's position on the extension of the

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[2] VETAB was established in 1991 to provide advice to the State Training Board (STB) on accreditation policies & procedure, accredit courses where no Industry Training Advisory Board (ITAB) existed, coordinate & develop linkages with courses offered by other sectors of education and industry and monitor & maintain accreditation standards.
[3] The VEF was established in 1987 to help fund projects in education and training in Victoria. It was funded through a voluntary diversion of 0.1 percent of state payroll taxes paid by Victorian companies and government authorities.
[4] Texskills, RMIT Faculty of Education and Training and Western Metropolitan College of TAFE were the three VET institutions involved in the project.

Modern Australian Apprenticeship System into schools (McPhee and Shearer 1997) McPhee & Shearer, 1997 on behalf of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI).

In 1999, I took up an opportunity to become one of the Training Recognition Consultants (TRC), delegated by the Victorian State Training Authority (STA), now referred to as OTTE, to assist organisations which wished to become RTOs. OTTE provides regular and ongoing professional development for this group of consultants to ensure they remain aware of changes to policy and regulations. All TRCs, including myself, were required to successfully complete a quality-auditing program to ensure competency for the implementation of the new AQTF in 2001/02.

Over the seven-year period of being a TRC, I advised and assisted in excess of 100 organisations to become RTOs or to extend their existing Scope of Registration. The TRC role also includes supporting RTOs with internal audits, verifying their compliance with standards following audit or auditing them for re-registration. The experience and knowledge gained as a TRC ensures a very close familiarity with the training system. I needed to have knowledge of the changes that occurred in the system. RTOs regard TRCs as people with an intimate knowledge and experience about the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) Standards and expect them to provide advice on these and other matters.