

'Do you want VET with that?'

Some implications for lifelong and lifewide learning in an era of universal VET

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Introduction

- Drawing on our previous work, we use the catch cry 'Do you want VET with that?' to explore the question and its presuppositions about the value of 'added VET'.
- There are links between learning and a range of non-vocational outcomes, such as health and wellbeing.

Transformations since the 1970s

- Education and training sectors in Australia in the four decades between 1970s and 1980s and today have been fundamentally transformed.
- VET is now more broad.
- We want to open up the question around how some aspects of demographic change have increased the need for other forms of lifelong and lifewide learning.

Cognition, wellbeing and prolonged life beyond work

- The main demographic change in Australia and other nations is the significant increase in longevity.
- Children born in 2011 will only half of their adult lives engaged in paid work.
- Increasing interest in investigating the factors and contexts that enhance wellbeing and cognition.

Tendencies

- Developed nations are becoming more aware of the critical relationship between factors such as age, sex, family background and initial schooling, and life outcomes.
- On the other hand, there is a tendency to reduce the options of lifelong and lifewide learning other than through market and industry-based mechanisms.

Research evidence

- On two matters the recent international research (Cooper, 2010) is unequivocal.
 - Learning through life has a critical role in unlocking a range of benefits, both for individual and society.
 - Labour market outcomes do not depend only on qualifications and on educational attainment. (Feinstein, Vorhaus & Sabates, 2010)
- There are benefits from a wide range of attributes, variously called 'non-cognitive skills', social and emotional skills, soft skills, personal development and wider skills.

Australian VET today

- Despite fundamental changes in VET availability, VET in Australia in 2011 is poorly recognised and poorly understood beyond VET practitioners, researchers & policy makers.
- Most Australians still talk about education as comprising school, university or TAFE.
- For ACE, the situation is even worse being poorly known, and in some states ACE is effectively missing altogether.

Adding competencies

- Over the past decade there has been a tendency to progressively add specific competencies to most other forms of education because of its presumed universal and transferable value for people, communities, governments and the economy.

Our concern

- ... is that the use of various economic agendas to legitimate universal vocational knowledge, in the absence of other forms of learning, can get in the way of individual constructions of meaning to ...
 - Cope with situations
 - Learners perspective/s
 - Situate learning
 - Understandings of interrelationships
 - Share meanings
 - ...And so on.

Europe

- 'Europe seems to have become the scene of a tacit battle between vocational education and job skills on the one side, and the wider holistic non-vocational education and life skills on the other.'

(Skekelly, 2010)

We agree ...

- ... with Schuller & Watson (2009), writing in the UK as part of a comprehensive *Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning* in the UK, that initial education does not serve as a secure foundation for lifelong learning.
- that '... a system which achieves its immediate objectives of raising young people's qualifications, yet leaves them without an appetite to carry on learning, has failed. Too much schooling is focused on heaving students over hurdles and into the next phase of education' (ibid, p.49).

Global population ageing

- ... is one of the greatest social challenges of the 21st century.
- In Australia, older adults (50+) are living much longer and risk becoming further isolated through not being educated/or not working through the ICT revolution of the past two decades.

New research evidence

- While knowledge of the relationship between learning and wellbeing in Australia remains poorly known, international evidence is now available from the UK government - *Foresight* research published in 2010.
 - Useful, comparable research points to the wider role learning plays, particularly beyond paid work.

Adult Education

- While Adult learning beyond VET and higher education remains poorly known or researched outside of Australia, ACE is known from UK research (Field, 2009) to be effective in enhancing the wellbeing of vulnerable citizens.

Marginalised Australia

- While Australia prides itself on being democratic and culturally diverse, we agree with Holmes (2008), when referring to adult community education, that within this broad characterisation of Australia lies a marginalised Australia that comprises...
 - '... citizens that are poorly educated, disconnected from the labour market, alienated from broader community and denied opportunity... It is timely to refocus on the question of how to implement lifelong learning' (p. 2).

Conclusion

- We suggest that it is time for the Australian government to recognise the value of lifelong learning, and to develop policies that recognise the fundamental role of ACE and VET, by including, in the post-compulsory education mix, a broader scope of VET that is inclusive of a wider set of non-cognitive skills that has an important contribution in delivering economic benefits around health, wellbeing, community and social benefits.