**Conceiving higher VET: fault lines, potential and feminising the AQF.**

*David McLean*

*Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Australia.*

Conference theme: VET research and its relationship to policy formulation.

**Abstract**: Research in this paper explores how symbols, imagery and language are constructing the concept of a new *shared* space in Australian tertiary education. Tertiary education in Australia is mainly comprised of two large but different sectors responsible for developing the skills capability and knowledge competence of its workers, citizens and guests. Vocational education and training is one component of the tertiary sector that has a broad educational base delivering to individuals with little or no educational achievements through to existing workers seeking paraprofessional or graduate qualifications. Higher education is the second tertiary component that also covers a breadth of capability in developing conceptual and applied skills in individuals with existing educational achievements into Bachelor and post-graduate qualifications through to research centred doctoral degrees.

The influential Review of Australian Higher Education ([Commonwealth of Australia 2008](#_ENREF_8)), known as the Bradley Review, suggested significant changes to how the two components of the tertiary sector relate to each other. However discussions around maximising the potential in any new relationship between components of the tertiary sector mainly focus on how pathways for transiting students between the sectors are negotiated and managed.

The abutment of vocational education and training and higher education provides both the topology and opportunity to prise apart the two sectors and create new ground developed and occupied by educators from both vocational education and training and higher education. It is the potential new ground equally occupied by both that may be truly tertiary and offer something more than simply defining the mechanics of credit transfers. However discussion and conceptual development of what that space could be is quiet and, for the most part, unexplored.

It is quiet as disquiet that inspires the research in this paper, in that post Bradley, the reengineering of a tertiary space can offer much more than pathways for students to transit between sectoral components. A symbolically redesigned Australian Qualifications Framework suggests that the vocational education and training sector has not fully asserted its capability to develop the potential of a new tertiary space, but in Associate Degrees has the qualifications to do just that.

**Introduction**

Symbols, images and language communicate and coordinate cultural, ideological and political perspectives ([Kress and Leeuwen 2006](#_ENREF_12)). As such they articulate directly concepts of power control and coordination ([Smith 1990](#_ENREF_19)). The choice of words in any official document, shape colour and composition in a logo, framing and cropping of photographic images, audio synchronised to the moving image all influence, and at times challenge, official ways of knowing ([Kress 2010](#_ENREF_11)). It is in the analysis of how media artefacts are constructed and the messages they contain that a deeper comprehension of both power and identity can be realised. Current policy and funding changes in Australian education, whether engineered by state or federal government, provide significant language and imagery to analyse including policy itself, sectoral change, bureaucratic and managerial directions, implications for the educational workforce and, affects on teaching and learning. There are a range of tools available for textual and image analysis, some will be used in this paper; however the starting point for analysis is not an image but the word *tertiary.*

The word tertiary describes a third stage, and in the context of this paper, the third stage of education following primary and secondary. Australian tertiary education is comprised of two large components, vocational education and training and, higher education. Vocational education and training has a broad educational base delivering to individuals with little or no educational achievements through to existing workers seeking paraprofessional or graduate qualifications. Higher education is the second tertiary component, based mainly in Universities, that also covers a breadth of capability in developing conceptual and applied skills in individuals with existing educational achievements into Bachelor and post-graduate qualifications through to research centred doctoral degrees. Both sectors receive significant public funding but also generate their own income through a variety of fee for service activities ([Karmel 2009](#_ENREF_10); [Moodie, Wheelahan et al. 2009](#_ENREF_15)).

Recent government policy affecting the tertiary sector is mainly sourced from a review of higher education known as the Bradley Review (Commonwealth of Australia 2008). The review covered many criteria including funding, governance, national standards and the relationship between the two components of the tertiary sector. Recommendations in the paper encouraged a conceptual shift in that the tertiary education sector now needs to be conceived as a whole, with a seamless continuum of learning that allows participants to move between the two components of the sector with credit, competence and capability recognised; a significant challenge. Any new integration of a single tertiary sector in Australia is complicated by the fact that the two large institutional components operate in significantly different ways ([Matthews and Murphy 2010](#_ENREF_14)).

This paper will examine a range of texts and graphical images to suggest a location where vocational education and training and, higher education meet and overlap; a location that has the potential to develop something new. There may be real potential to bridge sectors by developing a deeper vocational pedagogy located specifically where the sectors meet, at the conceptual point along a scale of design attributes defined by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). The potential may be found in the development of higher-level qualifications that push the competence of Australian workers to new levels of capability by emulsifying a vocational way of knowing with an academic way of knowing.

**A mixed method**

The method for writing this paper comes from two different disciplines, media studies and institutional ethnography. They are used here due to my personal experience of having an undergraduate qualification in the more conceptual environment of media studies before moving into postgraduate studies to the more quantifiable realm of sociology. It has not been an easy move, media studies has a more open and abstract feel to it where poetics and rhythm make up much of its style. This of course is evidenced in the many attacks that cultural and media studies undergo as a true discipline; a way of knowing in desperate need of a rigorous methodology. This type of criticism “…was particularly the case during the ascendancy of poststructuralism” ([Pickering 2008, p17](#_ENREF_17)). Sociology feels far more rigid with very formal and contained ways of knowing and analysis backed by structural expectations in the ways of writing, a true discipline. However the sociology I have been attracted to is institutional ethnography. Still a relatively new, and at times maverick, method that challenges and interrogates its root discipline ([Smith 1999](#_ENREF_20)) as well as provides a methodology for research that starts with the experience of individuals, from the perspective of people that undertake their everyday work ([Smith 1987](#_ENREF_18); [2005](#_ENREF_21)). This feels comfortable from a cultural and media studies perspective that also has its roots in working class texts and popular culture. While the originator of institutional ethnography, Dorothy E. Smith ([Smith 1999](#_ENREF_20)), has also challenged cultural studies methods she has also encouraged those that enjoy working in institutional ethnography to push its boundaries and bring new materials and perspectives to the discipline ([Smith 2005](#_ENREF_21)). While it is beyond the capability of this paper to establish this fully it is an opportunity to write around the two academic passions I have experienced and enjoy engaging with, media studies and institutional ethnography.

**The Bradley Review**

The Bradley Review, the formal title is The Review of Australian Higher Education (Commonwealth of Australia 2008), is critical to any contemporary critique of the term tertiary in Australian education. The review “…was established to address the question of whether this critical sector of education is structured, organised and financed to position Australia to compete effectively in the new globalised economy” ([p xi](#_ENREF_8)). The review provided 46 recommendations to the federal government including an increase in participation targets, changes to funding arrangements, the development of new quality and reporting criteria and changes to the “…Australian Qualifications Framework with enhanced architecture and updated and more coherent descriptors of learning outcomes” ([p. xx](#_ENREF_8)). The most specific recommendations that affected vocational education and training were to do with the introduction of income contingent loans. However nested in Recommendation 2 is an aim to “Improve pathways from vocational education and training to higher education” ([p. 21](#_ENREF_8)). This aim was one of the reviews terms of reference to establish *“…* the place of higher education in the broader tertiary education sector, especially in building an integrated relationship with vocational education and training” ([p. 179](#_ENREF_8)). The review itself contains one complete chapter, 4.3, on how the relationship between higher education and vocational education and training should be considered. The broadening of a tertiary concept and the creation of stronger links between the two components would need to ensure that neither subsumed the other. Challenges to constructing a more efficient interface are mainly identified as differences in administration, funding and mission. The complexity of the vocational education and training sector is particularly acknowledged. The solution as occurs consistently within discussions is to improve pathways. Yet this remains chiefly an administrative issue of quantifying credit.

While pathways can be planned and administered with credit that provides them advanced standing into a second or third year of a higher education program, the real effect on students is their capability to transit from one sector successfully to another and partake in the method and measures of higher education ([Wheelahan 2008](#_ENREF_24); [Bandias, Fuller et al. 2011](#_ENREF_4)). That preparation requires the planning and collaboration of educators across the sectors. In the review there is little mention of any other potential in the relationship between vocational education and training and, higher education to develop something new that would smooth the transition between sectors, however this may be found in the outcomes of the recommendation to change the AQF.

**Standpoint and problematic**

Standpoint is an essential concept of institutional ethnography. The placement of the researcher in relationship to the research declares their understanding of the issues and why they have identified something as not *feeling* or *seeming* right. As a worker in the vocational education and training sector the task of setting up and ensuring the operations of pathways is something I contribute to. However while making that contribution I can’t help but wonder if there is more to tertiary than easing transitions between the tertiary components. My standpoint then is that of someone operationally enacting policy but is also as an educator that wants to engage with more than the mere process of enabling and wants to develop programs with depth, engagement and outcomes. Any opportunity to explore a new space brings with it a degree of excitement and a professional desire to contribute to its establishment. From my standpoint I ask the question: why does the language of enabling tertiary seem to start and end with pathways and is not overwhelmed with a creative surge in how new practice and product could be developed? The question is formed because things don’t feel right; this is identified as the problematic and could become the starting point of a fully structured institutional ethnography but instead will be explored here with analytical tools associated with media studies; language and graphics.

**Language, denotation and connotation**

Both media studies and institutional ethnography take a particular interest in texts. Institutional ethnography places greater emphasis on how texts are created to coordinate activity in the workplace, this is revealed using a method called text-action-sequence ([Smith 2006](#_ENREF_22)). Media studies is more content based using textual analysis as one of its tools. This is due to what could be defined as the classic set of media studies analysis tools based in the semiotic analysis of Roland Barthes ([1982](#_ENREF_5)), genre studies and narrative theory ([Fiske 1987](#_ENREF_9)). From Barthes the terms denotation and connotation define both what is explicit (denotation) and implicit (connotation) in the use of language and imagery. I will use the acronyms of the two institutional components of the tertiary sector as an example to explore connotation and denotation.

The acronym for vocational education and training is VET (pronounced *vet*). This is problematic for vocational education and training for two reasons. The first is that when verbalised as vet it connotes a dual meaning. Vet is more popularly the shorthand term for a veterinary surgeon and is therefore more commonly recognised and identified in Australian culture than the acronym VET. This is referred to as polysemic; any word that has two interpretations, especially one term that is more universally recognised in popular use. The second or lesser interpretation may struggle to form its own identity and conversely have aspects of its specific character hidden. With regards to occupational or professional identity, the second word in the acronym VET, *education*, is concealed within the shortened form. This is critical because education denotes a greater breadth of skill and knowledge than training. While some may argue that *vocational* is the key word with its relationship to work or career, I would argue otherwise. All education, even from the earliest age, develops and relies on the basic work place skills of communication, interaction, time management, production of material items, adherence to rules and structures (even unstructured education has a structure, the structure of no structure) and most specifically the need to accept an outcome based judgment. As these skills relate directly to the basic behavioural patterns of the workplace then it can be argued that all education is preparation for work ([Apple 2004](#_ENREF_1)) and therefore vocational, so it is how that education is enabled through design that becomes important.

Higher Education also has an acronym, HE. The HE acronym is applied in print only it differs from VET in that it is not pronounced as a proper word *he*. In spoken language the popular shortening of higher education is *Higher Ed*. While the word education is not fully articulated due to a shortening to *Ed*, the word *Higher* remains with its connotations of elevation and achievement. Therefore a basic semiotic analysis of the acronyms that represent the sectors could find that vocational education and training has an identity issue where as higher education is seen as the superior part of the tertiary environment. For the duration of this paper the word count will be sacrificed to use the full sector descriptor vocational education and training and, higher education. This also makes it plain that the thing both sectors have in common is *education* yet there are a unique separators as well that reflect a point of difference. Language then is important in framing conscious and subconscious connections and attitudes to an object or institution, especially through repetition and naturalisation ([Butler 1997](#_ENREF_7)). While language provides an opportunity to apply a semiotic analysis, graphics and images also provide significant opportunity for reading deeper into possibilities.

**Disquiet literature**

The approach to a literature review for this paper is that of an institutional ethnographer. That is not to explore the literature for what has been said but to pick it apart for what is missing and see if that in any way supports the feeling of disquiet that has led to a development of the problematic. The problematic in relation to this paper is a search for dialogue or direction in constructing or defining a tertiary way of knowing that is greater than credit generated pathways.

Wheelahan ([2008](#_ENREF_24)) compares aspects of the Australian tertiary space to that of Britain and the United States of America in developing her argument around pathway equity for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds transiting into higher education. She asserts that those transiting from vocational education and training to higher education are disadvantaged due to the mandating of competency based training and its product, Training Packages within vocational education and training. When students move from one tertiary component to the other they may struggle due to the sudden change in teaching and assessment methods and expectations. A reading can be taken from this about the possibilities for vocational educators to design collaborative teaching and learning structures that are more in sync with higher education. Wheelahan states that the challenges to this type of collaboration are both bureaucratic and institutional; bureaucratic in the differences to administer, fund and employ across two sectors; institutional in that assumptions about capability to collaborate are often undermined by organisational politics and self-interest. Wheelahan suggests that the vocational education and training sector should have the capability to design short-term higher education programs that are removed from competency based training and bridge the conceptual learning gap.

The differences in mission and student base between vocational education and training and higher education is discussed in Karmel ([2009](#_ENREF_10)) where vocational education and training’s engagement of “… those who have a poor educational background ” ([p. 3](#_ENREF_10)) is acknowledged. Karmel does suggest that the vocational education and training sector could be capable of delivering the early years of a degree (p. 17).

The focus on institutions and qualification placement largely continues with the paper Higher Education in TAFEs: An Issues Paper ([Moodie, Wheelahan et al. 2009](#_ENREF_15)). Arguments within the paper are based on literature supported by a quantitative analysis of students enrolled in specific qualification levels. A significant section of the paper discusses the history of qualification slippage with the movement of Diplomas from universities to the vocational education and training sector as well as quantifying the number of Diplomas, Advanced Diplomas, Associate Degrees and Bachelor qualifications that are delivered by vocational education and training institutes. While the growth of Associate Degrees is acknowledged, issues raised in the paper are focused on structure, policy and market placement. However it does contribute to the visual metaphor pursued within this paper of new ground being mapped that describes a decoupling of the sectors, an image that suggests separation and drift as the two components move apart, however the metaphor is not a decoupling of the sectors one-from-another but a decoupling from the borders and boundaries that define the sectors into a shared space.

Structural arguments continue in Bandias, Fuller et al ([2011](#_ENREF_4)) where the impediments to pathways and credit transfer are largely discussed. The difference in pedagogical practice between vocational education and training and higher education is highlighted, particularly around the capability of students transiting from vocational education and training to fit into the higher education paradigm of education (p. 586).

The possibility of the new is touched on in a discussion paper from two Victorian dual sector universities ([Matthews and Murphy 2010](#_ENREF_14)). Much of the paper uses the operational experience of Swinburne University of Technology and University of Ballarat to provide further evidence of the internal challenges to dual sector institutes. The challenges are mentioned as in the previous papers from industrial relations, funding, reporting and administration. However the paper does have a chapter that discusses pathways and educational collaboration. Some semi-integrated models, where specific content is delivered by educators in a dual qualification is covered but there is also a proposition for a deeper more complex collaboration where there is a possibility for the provision of

… much richer learning opportunities for students, both in terms of an expanded range of study options and in new combinations of knowledge and skills…by tapping into the wealth of expertise that exists within their TAFE sector. Many professions are increasingly demanding graduates possess both generic and specific skills in addition to discipline knowledge. ([Matthews and Murphy 2010, p. 12](#_ENREF_14))

While this statement shows much promise the authors also state that the challenge to institutes is in the administration and industrial agreements that those collaborating to develop cross-sectoral product will need to overcome.

Peter Noonan ([2010](#_ENREF_16)) one of the authors of the Bradley Review has commented further on where the reach of vocational education and training should be, and that is beyond the boundaries of competency based training into the territory of the paraprofessional.

If we begin to view vocational education and training as a continuum of offerings through distinctive forms of qualifications, requiring distinctive pedagogy and assessment, then a view about the future of VET, grounded in a contemporary definition and understanding of occupational and professional competence can emerge. This will create the potential for different forms of institutions and types of qualifications across providers in the broader tertiary education sector. ([2010, p. 19](#_ENREF_16))

Noonan structures an argument for the commencement of a new or enhanced pedagogy for vocational education and training practitioners, one that expands and deepens the arguably successful model that competency based training has provided and is located within the vocational strata of the paraprofessional.

The review of literature provides several critical points. Firstly, the concept of a seamless tertiary sector faces significant operational challenges at government and institute level. Included in that challenge is funding, employment, credit transfer, pathways, language and pedagogy; this is commented on across all the literature. Secondly, and more in relation to the feeling of disquiet, commentary does exist around the potential for a new higher level vocational method that is not vocational education and training teachers teaching into a *lower-education* model of the first two years of a Bachelor degree but would be active in developing a new method for a new type of qualification. Any depth on how that would be expressed, shaped, and implemented is not evident in the literature however there are clues elsewhere that may contribute to a method of conceiving higher vocational education and training. This will require background information on image analysis that ties in and applies media studies analysis tools.

**Image analysis and social semiotics**

Kress ([2010](#_ENREF_11)) argues that graphics are essentially multimodel, they contain images, text and colour. The combination at a glance can sometimes denote complex concepts quicker than large amounts of text.

Each mode does a specific thing: image *shows* what takes too long to *read*, and writing *names* what would be difficult to *show*. Colour is used to *highlight* specific aspects of the overall message. Without that division of semiotic labour, the sign, quite simply, would not work. Writing *names* and image *shows*, while colour *frames* and *highlights*; each to maximum effect and benefit. ( p. 1)

A multimodal graphic has the capability to connote more than the sum of its whole. By breaking an image down into its component parts for analysis much can be suggested through considering shape, choice of colour and text. Deconstructing the graphic and considering the relationship between components can also reveal underlying intentions in its design. The analysis can be pushed out further when aligned to theories of narrative structure. The study of narrative relies on an acceptance that repetitive structural patterns can be identified in stories and made visible through analysis. The most familiar and represented narrative in Australian society is the classic western narrative composed of three acts: a beginning, middle and end. The classic western narrative progresses with respect to the linearity of time, has a clearly structured start and end point that requires a single heroic character to overcomes challenges and change with movement towards a clear conclusion and resolution. This type of linear narrative progress has also been referred to as a dominant masculine narrative ([Fiske 1987](#_ENREF_9)). By analysing different types of narrative structures and their audiences it has been argued that there are also gendered and cultural narratives structured differently from the dominant masculine narrative. The feminine narrative for example is structured with continuity of multiple interconnected storylines, has many interrelated characters with no clear hero or heroine that face challenges they cannot always overcome. The classic example of a feminine narrative is found in soap operas ([Brown 1987](#_ENREF_6); [Kuhn 1987](#_ENREF_13)). Comprehending the meaning making capability of narrative provides a set of tools to both analyse and build a range of structures. These tools will now be applied to the AQF and two of its level 6 qualifications, the Advanced Diploma and the Associate Degree.

**The AQF**

The Australian Qualifications Framework defines a range of parameters for designing qualifications to considered criteria. Tertiary qualifications are described from a construction perspective in that the cognitive capabilities of graduates at a particular level are listed along with general terms on how a qualification should be considered. Each qualification has a level starting at Certificate I and progressing through to level 10, a Doctoral degree. While there is some overlap between the two components of the tertiary sector most publicly funded vocational education and training programs start at level 1 and terminate at Advanced Diploma level 6, however Vocational Graduate Certificates and Diplomas occupy level 8. Most higher education qualifications commence at Bachelor Degree level 7 and terminate at level 10, however many universities offer Diploma and Advanced Diploma qualifications.

As part of the Bradley review the AQF underwent some changes. Prior to the AQF revamp the popular way to represent qualifications in the previous framework was in a stepped or linear fashion that showed a hierarchical progression of qualifications from the secondary sector through Certificate I to a Doctoral Degree. The three components of two sectors were often separated with spaced out qualifications to show where each was placed. This type of mapping clearly defined sectors by the qualification they taught and as seen in figure 1.

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|  | Australian Qualifications Framework |
| Figure 1: AQF hierarchy([StudyOz 2009](#_ENREF_23)) | Figure 2: AQF wheel([Australian Qualifications Framework 2011](#_ENREF_2)) |

The latest representation of the AQF, figure 2, is different to a variety of earlier hierarchical interpretations usually represented by figure 1, in that it is circular with each different AQF qualification level represented by individual but equally sized wedges. Each wedge contains one or more qualification titles. While the wedges my seem to all point inwards at the Senior Secondary Certificate that is awarded for successful completion of year 12 studies in Australia, they are more like broadening vectors moving from that central point outwards. While the qualifications are clearly incremental, 1 through 10, they all start from the centre and move out suggesting that completion of anyone of these qualifications is not an end in itself but is aligned and touching other qualifications at its broadest point. The highest qualification, 10, sits alongside the lowest, 1, showing that while learning is at many levels there is equity in the act of learning. The graphic also suggests that, while some qualifications have higher numbers, education and learning are not always achieved via a linear path, individuals may move across qualifications as they change careers or underpin vocational knowledge with academic skill sets or visa versa. The Doctoral degree that has the highest AQF level is no longer visualised as being the ultimate attainment and more importantly the end of education, it is just another qualification in the mix available to Australians and their guests.

I will argue that my analysis of figure 2 as a multimodal image allows the graphic to be considered as a feminised image. The claim here is not that there is some phallic representation in the previous linear representation of the AQF or that the new circular graphic is yoni like in its representation. Instead the visual interpretation of the old sequential flow of the AQF is masculine in its design in that like a masculine narrative it has clearly defined start and finish points, a hierarchical structure and three acts, secondary, vocational and higher education. This represents all the predictability and constraint inherent in a dominant narrative. The new circular graphic has a recognised feminine structure identified through the narrative elements of inclusiveness, continuity and movement. This is not to suggest that the logical jumping off point from Doctoral degree is a Certificate I but that learning is open ended, the narrative of learning continues, as do feminine narratives, as does life. In addition the graphic is not representative of sectors, which have been the defining location of qualifications, there is no hierarchy of institutions to confuse a construction of linearity. All qualifications exist within the framework.

**AQF6**

It could be argued the figurative location where the two components of the tertiary sector meet is at AQF 6. The space occupied by two qualifications, Advanced Diploma and Associate Degree that have different design parameters but can comfortably be aligned to a particular sector. Although universities can create and accredit their own Advanced Diplomas the bulk of those that are delivered in Australia are found in the vocational education and training sector and emanate from Training Packages ([Moodie, Wheelahan et al. 2009](#_ENREF_15)). While Associate Degrees have existed in Australia for some time they are generally only accredited by universities which can access federal funding for their delivery that is not available to the vocational education and training sector. However this criteria differs from state to state.

The differences between the two qualifications are subtle and based on interpreting program descriptors. In the AQF handbook each qualification has its attributes listed in several short descriptive phrases categorised as Purpose, Knowledge, Skills, Application of Skills and Knowledge, and Volume of Learning. As the core part of this paper has been devoted to outlining an interpretive method it will be applied to the two AQF 6 qualifications to firstly understand the difference between the two qualifications and then to propose some design concepts for the Associate Degree. This will be done by identifying key descriptive words from each program descriptor ([Australian Qualifications Framework Council 2011, p. 16](#_ENREF_3)) then counting the instances that each word is used in describing the attributes of either an Advanced Diploma or Associate Degree. The words can then sorted to provide an insight into the attributes each program shares and also what is unique to each program.

The Advanced Diploma’s top four descriptive words are: *specialised, knowledge, technical* and *depth*. The Associate Degree’s top four descriptive words are: *knowledge, concept, technical* and *broad*. For the Advanced Diploma *specialised* and *depth* are unique. For the Associate Degree *concept* and *broad* are unique.

Words used in the Advanced Diploma but not used in the Associate Degree are: *change, integrated, synthesise, team, manage* and, *specialised*. Words used in the Associate Degree but not used in the Advanced Diploma are: *discipline, evaluate, interpret* and, *underpin*.

The top three words for each with the greatest differential, that is most used in one program subtracted by the amount it is used in the other programs. For the Advanced Diploma: *specialised*, *manage* and, *depth* and the top three differentiated for the Associate Degree: *discipline*, *concept* and, *adapt*.

When comparing the top twelve words in each program there were eight words shared and 4 words unique. The four unique words of the top twelve from the Advanced Diploma are *specialised*, *manage*, *change* and *creative*. The four unique words of the top twelve from the Associate Degree are *theoretical*, *discipline*, *adapt* and, *principles*.

By distilling the unique words for each AQF6 qualification into a descriptive statement it is possible to state that an Advanced Diploma is designed to *develop specialised knowledge with technical depth for managing change*. It is also possible to state that an Associate Degree requires *adapting broad conceptual and technical discipline knowledge for evaluation*. While *depth* and *breadth* work as spatial variants, *specialised* and *discipline* have temporal similarities. Specialised denotes capability through dedication but it also connotes a singular way of thinking. Discipline also denotes capability through dedication but in an academic sense it connotes allegiance to a way of knowing through faculties and research methodologies. However while each qualification has its unique words forming descriptors it should not be ignored that there were also eight words that are shared in the top twelve descriptors these are: *knowledge, technical, depth, skill, broad, analyse, concept* and, *complex*.

If could be argued then that the Associate Degree references higher education notions of a discipline in a way that requires an applied method of teaching and learning through adaptation to a specific problem. While applied learning exists in both components of the tertiary sector it is more prevalent in vocational education and training where demonstration through application is a core part of competency based training. The design, delivery and educational rationale for an Associate Degree would then be better optimised through a collaborative approach where the traditions of both tertiary components are applied to produce the qualifications structure, content and assessment method. Any collaboration would reference the foundational learning methods of both components and combine them into a new applied method for developing an immediacy of work ready skills and knowledge that moves past concepts of *why* or *how* things are done to one of knowing *what* is required. While not written in any context of comparing two tertiary sectors, Kress's following words resonate with this paper and a desire to establish an argument for designing the new (emphasis by Kress).

*Design* focuses on an individual’s *realzation* of their *interest* in their world… *Competence* leaves arrangements unchallenged. *Critique* is oriented backward and towards superior power, concerned with the *present* *effects* of the *past* *actions* of others. *Design* is prospective, looking forward (Kress 2010, p. 6).

That is to say that the sector focusing on competence, vocational education and training, has its way of knowing, as does the sector focusing on critique, higher education. The risk is that an Associate Degree fully designed by either may contain uniquely identifiable attributes of either. An Associate Degree designed within vocational education and training may drift too far towards an Advanced Diploma, conversely an Associate Degree solely designed in higher education may be too representative of the first two years of a Bachelor program. The new ground, the space between the two sectors and the potential in collaboration offers a chance to look forward, and an opportunity to design something new.

A shared partnership in a broader design of a new higher vocational pedagogy would provide a qualification that bridges the two tertiary components. This creates the potential for an interesting proposition to educators and institutes, but a better proposition for students intending to transit from vocational education and training to higher education. The mix of teaching and learning would also provide industry with a good range of employability skills aligned to broad conceptual thinking. While the volume of learning is arbitrary a two year qualification would allow for applied vocational education and training content to occur in the first year and applied multi-discipline content with a project to combine the two ways of knowing in a final year. Study skills to allow an easy transfer to a Bachelor or postgraduate qualification could also be embedded with incremental capabilities developed for introductory research skills. Caution would need to be exercised that AQF level creep did not occur with clear analysis from both components that curriculum design and content were new and AQF relevant.

**Models for the future**

The mixed modes within this paper have been applied firstly through a literature review undertaken with the approach of an institutional ethnographer, that is, to comprehend what is being unsaid. What has been identified is some discussion about the potential to build something new in the growing new ground existent between vocational education and training and higher education.

Secondly there is a graphical and textual analysis of the new AQF to try and articulate how that potential for something new can be realised. A pedagogy of applied work learning that pushes vocational education and training practice into new ground and the development of new ideas, preferably in cooperation with educators from higher education. It is hoped that this would create something new, something based in the analysis of the AQF where there is a different education structure based in paradigms of a feminine narrative: inclusive, multi-levelled, ongoing and continually developing but connected to other modes of learning. It is the attractiveness of the Associate Degree placed at the intersect of vocational education and training that provides great potential for educators, students and industry. As this paper claims to be conceived through mixed modes, an Associate Degree can also be conceived as a mixed method where the essence of vocational education and training is blended with higher education to develop a new product for work place-paraprofessional education.

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