

Skills Australia Amendment (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency) Bill 2012

It is pleasing to learn that vocational education again is warranting national attention and to have a national agency that has a direct focus on workplace productivity through vocational education. Such an agency identifies and privileges vocational education as being an important educational sector that warrants distinct policies and practices, as that it is central to securing national social and economic goals. As someone who has long industry experience, worked as vocational educator, policy office and researcher in this field, I welcome such a development, particularly with the prospect that this new agency may learn from past mistakes, inappropriate policies and practices and squandered opportunities, of those that might be described as its predecessors. Indeed, such an agency may well be the last effort to guide a national vocational education systems that is worthy of its students, teachers, those who employ and the enterprises, industries and communities that the system serves.

Given the above, it is imperative that this new agency does not repeat its predecessors' mistakes. In particular, it will need to go beyond what they advocated and enacted, and the means by which they did so, which has been so unsuccessful in the past. Failure to do so, will likely see this agency doing little to elevate the standing and attractiveness of vocational education in the Australian community, increase retention rates, enhance levels of material commitments by Australian employers to vocational education provisions, failed to secure the development of skills that individuals want for their employability and enterprises want learnt to sustain and extend their business activities.

Accordingly, proposed here is that the substance of the new act will shape an agency that:

- has a more open and inclusive conception of industry leadership and consequent membership and advisory procedures than its predecessors;
- is mature in its operation and invitational towards and inclusive of contributions for policy and practice formulations;
- offers the Australian community, students, teachers, workplaces and enterprises a form of vocational education that is commensurate with its complexity and the scope of contemporary work, worthy of the kind of work which is undertaken and supports the productive identity of those who engage in those occupations;
- implements regulatory arrangements for vocational education focusing as much on the process of education and learning as the specific outcomes which are their current focus;
- is as much concerned with ongoing learning (continuing education and training) for Australians as much as their initial occupational preparation; and
- works to enhance and promote the standing of vocational education and the occupations that it serves.

Need to re-visit what constitutes industry-leadership

The practice of industry leadership of vocational education is now two decades old in Australia. The justification for its inception was premised on educators not understanding the requirements of business. However, given the chronic problems with the vocational education system (continuing low status, lack of attractiveness to students, high attrition rates, failure to engender the support and sponsorship of Australian enterprises etc, that have occurred in the last two decades, it might be concluded that industry does not fully understand the complexities of education. These failing were illustrated earlier (Billett 2004) and persist today. Therefore, after 20 years of industry leadership of the vocational education system, surely it is now timely to embrace a more mature and inclusive approach that can more fully understand and respond to the significant education challenges faced by the nation's vocational education system, as long requested (Butler 2000).

It follows, therefore, that it is important that changes in the legislation directly make this body responsive and needing to engage with the range of stakeholders who contribute to, invest in and are subject to the outputs of the vocational education system. That is, advice and membership should go beyond the spokesperson for those whom employ to effect a system that is more responsive to a range of stakeholder needs, including those who practice and learn. In particular, those who practice occupations and teach in vocational education institutions have the capacities to make informed contributions to national policies and practices (Billett & Hayes 2000). The former stand to provide advice about the kinds of purposes

(educational intents) that shape the intended curriculum (e.g. training packages), whilst the later need to be positioned more than mere implementers of what others propose, and granted a legitimate role in shaping the kinds of experiences that meet students' needs, assist them learn the kinds of knowledge required to be learnt for their occupation and also to tailor those experiences to meet local (i.e. employer) needs. It is through such inclusions that what is taught and learnt will more likely meet national and local expectations, and also by addressing students' needs more directly assist increasing retention and success in programs. Similarly, it is important that the voices of those who participate in vocational education as students be granted a means through which their perspectives, needs and aspirations can be accommodated in policy and practice (Anderson 1998). We need to be reminded that it is students who engage in VET and learn from their participation, and that that their learning is not simply a product of what is stated in training packages and taught by teachers (Billett 2009, Chan 2009). It is these students' satisfaction or otherwise that largely determines whether the huge public, governmental, personal and community investment in vocation is realised or squandered (e.g. Billett & Ovens, 2007). Then, Australian communities needs for vocational education associated with stabilising population drift, preparing local young people and the continuing education provisions for older worker-learners. It is simply not sufficient to believe that representatives of those who employ can account for all of these perspectives, or be informed spokespersons for them (Billett 2000).

So, these is a need to include the voices other than those that have informed the Agency's predecessors and redress the shortcomings of two decades of narrow industry leadership. Indeed, it is ironical that the very group that have reduced their commitment to and investment in vocational education are privileged as stakeholders, whilst those who make commitments and personal investments are excluded.

- Hence, amendments to the Act need to reconceptualise 'industry leadership' and actively engage the voices, perspectives and aspirations of those: those who work; teach in vocational education, participate in it as students and those whose communities have particular needs from it.

Be inclusive, engaged and invitational in policy and practice formulations

Unlike, its predecessors, it is important for this new agency to become a body that is mature enough to include, engage and draw on the contributions of others, not just those that concur with its initial formulations. Immature systems are those that are top-down, deny other voices and views that do not wholly accord with what is being mandated (Anderson 1998, Billett 2000). Particularly for educational systems, because those that teach and learn are beyond simple mandation, denying the concerns, interests and engagement of these agents is to court failure. Industry representatives bring particular qualities to the leadership of the nation's vocational education system. However, their expertise as educational leaders is questionable. Hence, whereas its predecessors have been antagonist to those who hold legitimate, but views that differ from policy orthodoxies, this agency needs to be mature enough to productively accommodate diverse views and changing perspectives can assist the quality of VET provisions. In particular, the almost exclusion of scientific views of vocational education seems a particular lapse, particularly given the work that has been done within the scientific community which often directly engages those who learn, teach and others who have particular demands of the vocational education system (workplaces, communities, vocational colleges). It is not clear why predecessor organisations seem so guarded in their engagement and dismissive of other views, but such actions deny the inclusion of a range of legitimate perspectives and advice. After two decades of industry leadership of vocational education, surely now it is timely that such an agency adopted the more mature approaches that have been adopted in countries with advanced vocational education systems such as in northern Europe (Germany, Austria and Switzerland) and Scandinavia.

- Hence, amendments to the act need to ensure that this new agency is mature in its operation and invitational towards and inclusive of a range of contributions for policy and practice formulations, even those which challenge its orthodoxies.

Offer a form of vocational education commensurate with the complexity and scope of skills to be learnt

The requirements for occupational practice are often far more complex and demanding than current prescriptions suggest and simple hierarchies such as those represented in the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF). The demands for work performance and, therefore, productivity are not just given within a particular occupational classification, but dependent upon the circumstances in which the work is

undertaken. Moreover, much of what is required for effective work performance and workplace productivity sits outside of the kind of observable and measurable behaviours that are emphasised within current accounts of competency measures that are utilised within training packages and assessment guidelines (Billett 2006). Consequently, there is a need to go beyond observable outcomes (as in behavioural responses) and include how educational intents and processes can be identified and enacted that secure the kinds of dispositions, procedures and conceptual knowledge required for effective practice at work, including the adaptability required for responding to new workplace challenges. It seems that workers of all kinds and at all levels within the AQF will need to engage in non-routine activities, problem-solving and continually responding to change. All of these require higher-order cognitive thinking, domain specific knowledge and critical faculties. These qualities are not the sole preserve of those whose work is described as the top levels of the AQF. It follows, that this agency needs to develop educational intents (e.g. aims, goals and objectives) that capture both occupational requirements as national benchmarks and also the kinds of variations which are required in particular circumstances of practice (Billett 2001, 2011). Hence, there needs to be processes organised through this agency that identifies occupational qualities at a national level and also permits the negotiation of educational intents at the local level. This provides a mechanism to meet the needs of particular communities and enterprises (Billett & Hayes 200, Billett 2000), thereby reflecting what occur in mature and effective vocational education systems elsewhere.

- Hence, amendments to the act need to ensure that this new agency offers the Australian community, students, teachers, workplaces and enterprises a form of vocational education that is commensurate with its complexity and the scope of contemporary work, worthy of the kind of work which is undertaken and supports the productive identity of those who engage in those occupations.

Certification, regulation and compliance need to reflect learning processes not just measurable outcomes

Moreover, beyond having informed sets of educational intents and content, it is important that the kinds of experiences provided to realise these goals are indeed of the kind which learners in Australian vocational education have access. It becomes imperative that students, however described, have access to experiences that are generative of both the canonical occupational knowledge required for national certification and also the variations of that which constitute particular workplace performance (Billett 2006, 2010). Develop and enact accreditation arrangements that do much more than attempt to align narrow outcomes with course provisions. Instead, it is necessary to have processes in place that demand students be provided with experiences that secure the kinds of knowledge they need for effective practice. For instance, accreditation processes might well stipulate that providers of VET stipulate what kinds of experiences they will provide for students in order for them to secure the knowledge they need to learn, including the capacities for adaptability. For instance, instead of requiring accreditation processes associated with meeting the stipulated outcomes, such processes might also extend to demanding a kind of experiences that need to be provided for students. A greater engagement with the wider range of learning experiences than neatly fit into the VET national framework – those in the workplace, those arising from professional engagements and discussion and those are product of ongoing engagement in the circumstances of work.

Without these, the very qualities which students need to learn, employers want and industry needs may not be effectively learnt.

- Consequently, amendments to the Act need to ensure that this new agency implements regulatory arrangements for vocational education focusing as much on the process of education and learning as the specific outcomes which are their current focus

Going beyond a consideration of entry-level training and consider more fully

A greater consideration of continuing education and training (CET) is now required by this new national agency. So, much of the premises for and bases of VET programs are focussed on initial occupational preparation. However, while this is an important consideration, alone it is insufficient, as Australian workers and workplaces need VET provisions that can assist employability across lengthening working lives, and in circumstances of work which are constantly changing and can quickly render initial occupational preparation redundant (Billett et al 2012). So, although key policy imperatives associated with youth unemployment, initial skill development and assisting young people secure an occupational identity, there

is a growing need for a similar level of focus within policy and practice upon continuing education and training. These provisions need to be informed about the ways in which CET might best progress and potentially in different ways than entry-level vocational education. For instance, the national provision of VET needs to extend to one that can accommodate the learning and recognition of work-related knowledge that occurs outside of accredited programs, and by mature age or older workers whose preferences for engaging in learning experiences are likely to be very distinct from those who are seeking transition from school into working life. Repeatedly, studies have indicated that workplace-based arrangements that are supported by educational specialist or more experienced co-workers are of the kind that are likely to be generative of the ongoing development of workers skills in and through the network (Dymock,). However, these approaches do not always conform to the kinds of templates, both programmatic and administrative, used to organise vocational education they may well need to be reconsidered, reconceptualised and new practices and policies enacted.

- It follows therefore that amendments to the Act needs to be as much concerned with ongoing learning (continuing education and training) for Australians as much as their initial occupational preparation.

Work to change to the societal sentiment about vocational education

A fundamental problem for Australian vocational education is its relatively low status and standing. This causes problems of engagement, sponsorship: legitimacy and attractiveness to Australians both young and old, how employers of view the demands of the work and worth of vocational education. There is little doubt that the educational sector that is most in need of bolstering its standing is vocational education (Billett 2011). Yet, so much of what has been implemented by predecessors to the proposed agency have added to rather than redressed this standing (e.g. narrow competency standards, prescriptive certification and regulatory arrangements focussing on narrow standards; pass/fail assessment, shortening of course durations and absence of educational sentiment). In countries which have a more esteemed consideration of occupations and vocational education that seems to be less need to mandate, regulate and demand compliance, because the societal sentiment is supportive of the work that is being undertaken and its preparation. National leadership of the kind that is possible through such an agency is required to elevate the standing of occupations and the vocational education provisions that support them. Elevating the status and standing of these occupations and educational provision may well lead to a very different kind and standard of engagement than currently occurs. Such a scheme is not fanciful as this has been generated in other countries and is evident within some occupations within Australia. Individuals, communities, workplaces and industry sectors do not need to be convinced of about the worth of elite occupations and then need for an adequate preparation. Issues of engagement, pride of work, productivity and high levels of performance are likely to be far easier to secure when the work people do is valued, esteemed and seen as being worthwhile (Billett 2011). Hence, there is a need for a national movement which seeks to replicate the societal sentiment which values work and vocational education in other countries.

- Finally, amendments to the Act need to establish an agency that works to enhance and promote the standing of vocational education and the occupations that it serves.

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