



AVETRA Submission to the Inquiry into the role of the technical and further education (TAFE) system and its operation

The Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA), welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into the role of the technical and further education (TAFE) system and its operation. AVETRA members have completed many significant research studies into the quality of VET, the VET workforce and TAFE generally. AVETRA includes a large number of VET practitioners and managers, as well as a large proportion of academics who are responsible for developing VET teachers and facilitators. The AVETRA workforce therefore includes considerable expertise in the training and development of the VET workforce, made up largely of TAFE teachers, and in understanding the issues associated with their daily practice and management.

In setting Terms of Reference that seek to investigate the role of TAFE, it would appear that the Inquiry is seeking to clarify what role TAFE will have in a competitive training market. AVETRA is aware that COAG has required states and territories to clarify a role for TAFE, and the NSW Government has recently undertaken through the TAFE Commission Board a wide ranging review entitled 'Let's Talk about TAFE'. AVETRA is concerned that recent VET reforms have resulted in a diminished role for TAFE, with a drop in percentage market share, and that this has had considerable impact on the provision of courses for students and the employment of well qualified TAFE teachers.

The NSW TAFE Commission Act 1990 sets out the following vision and role for TAFE in NSW, and this would echo similar Acts in other states and territories:

(1) *In exercising its functions, the [TAFE Commission](#) must:*

(a) *ensure that it provides [technical and further education](#) services to meet the needs of individuals and the skill needs of the workforce and, in particular, ensure that it provides basic and pre-vocational education as well as vocational education and training, and*

(b) *provide adults and young persons with a range of [technical and further education](#) services that recognise the changing nature of the working environment and the need for new skills and re-training, and*

(c) *provide, through formal arrangements and after consultation, [technical and further education](#) services that are relevant to the needs of industry, business, students and other client groups, and*

(d) *provide students with the maximum opportunity for progression by the linking or other articulation of courses and programs provided by the [TAFE Commission](#) and between those courses and programs and those provided by other education and training providers, and*

(e) *provide educationally or vocationally disadvantaged groups (such as women, Aborigines, persons of non-English speaking background, persons with disabilities and persons in rural areas) with access to [technical and further education](#) services, including a range of appropriate specialised services, and*

(f) *consult with relevant agencies to promote the effective and efficient use of resources and co-operation between [TAFE establishments](#) and other educational institutions.*

Such statements seek to demonstrate the expected role of TAFE with the breadth of its work and the diversity of its students, and the role of TAFE in providing for vocationally and educationally disadvantaged groups is emphasised.

TAFE is technical and further education and was envisaged by Kangan as providing for both of these areas. Unfortunately governments over a number of years now have focused too narrowly on the technical part of the role and undervalued and underfunded the further education role. For the diversity of the 1.9 million

students studying in the publicly funded VET sector, it is important that both of these roles continue to be valued and TAFE funded to undertake them.

AVETRA supports the Australian Government's intent to clarify the role of TAFE, urging that the diversity of its role be highlighted.

The development of skills in the Australian economy

NCVER data shows that over half the publicly funded students studying in VET are studying programs unrelated to their current employment, and that only about 21% of VET students are engaged in an apprenticeship or traineeship. 29.7% VET graduates in 2010 reported they were working in the occupation directly associated with their VET qualification. (NCVER 2010: Table 13)

It would appear that most students come to TAFE to increase their skills levels and educational knowledge and understanding, to assist in gaining a job or better job, but not necessarily tied to one particular industry. If on top of this, one acknowledges the number of jobs in different industry areas that a person might hold in their lives, then a sector defined by narrow industry requirements, is not a true description of the VET sector.

Wheelahan and Moodie (2011) in their paper for the NSW Board of Vocational Education and Training "Rethinking Skills in Vocational Education and Training: From Competencies to Capabilities" make the argument that VET must prepare students for a broad occupation within loosely defined vocational streams rather than workplace tasks and roles associated with particular jobs. They go on to say that whilst training and assessment in workplaces should be the recognised, it should not be considered to be the main focus of VET, rather vocational education should be primarily supported and funded by governments. "The importance of this distinction is being played out at the moment, including the move by some sectors to establish polytechnics, offer degrees and set up new structures for the delivery of VET. The establishment by governments of trade schools seeks to bring together general education through schools and specific training in the trades. This recognition should not stop at the end of post compulsory schooling. The teaching of trades in TAFE colleges currently recognises the need for underpinning skills and knowledge, and also for foundation skills." (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2011)

They see that TAFE has a special role in this regard with the breadth and depth of its offerings. They explain that "whereas an occupation is commonly defined by a career structure, a job has none. Training for a job is limited to the requirements of the job, whereas education or training for an occupation is premised on the notion of development and progression so that educational and occupational progression are linked."

Their work supports a focus on "what people need to be able to do to exercise complex judgements at work and what they need to be able to do in the future, rather than on workplace tasks and roles that have been defined for them or based on existing or past practice. This approach recognises the diffuse study and employment destinations of VET graduates, while also recognising that we need to enrich vocational qualifications by recognising the depth and complexity of vocational knowledge, as this is a core component of capability. This is recognised in UNESCO's 2004 Hangzhou Declaration which called for greater scholarship on vocational disciplines (UNEVOC 2004). Access to theoretical knowledge is a fundamental component of capability. It is essential to support the development of vocational identities and practitioners who draw from and contribute to the knowledge that underpins their practice." (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2011)

AVETRA supports a broad definition of vocational education and training, and again urges the Federal Government to recognise the important role of TAFE in ensuring this educational and capability focused delivery for VET students.

The development of opportunities for Australians to improve themselves and increase their life and employment prospects

As a result of the Kangan Inquiry, TAFE's early role was focused on the individual, with education discussed rather than narrow based training. "The Kangan report not only promoted a major funding infusion to state institutions, it proposed the title technical and further education (TAFE) and, importantly, introduced a new underpinning value system: lifelong education..." (Ryan 2011) The following years however put pressure on TAFE from a range of areas, but generally represented by those who favoured an approach related to vocationalism. This further led to VET policy being linked with economic imperatives resulting in the National Training Reform Agenda. This policy direction has continued on to the present time. Skills Australia in its role of advising Government, stated in its report *Foundations for the future* (Skills Australia 2009, pp 12-13)



that there was a need to “restore the central role and authority for industry in guiding the strategic development and operation of the National Training System”.

Stephen Billett from Griffith University expressed concerns with this narrow interpretation of VET and TAFE’s role in his article (2004) “From your business to our business: industry and vocational education in Australia”. He concludes by stating that vocational education needs to address the requirements of the workplace, but that:

“...few, if any interests are being served by vocational education being a supplicant to the voice of business and industry, and in ways that permit these interests to be exercised without close and critical scrutiny by other interests. The evidence suggests that at an important point in the development of the vocational education system, despite its legitimisation and authorisation by government, the confidence of business in its capacity is not matched by its competence in decision-making. Unlike counterparts in other countries who have sought more mature and balanced relations, the voice of Australian business has become increasingly shrill and directed. In its attempts to render vocational education responsive to merely one set of needs, while being oblivious to the complexity of this task or the existence of other interests, and an understanding of the very processes that it seeks to control, the voice of business is failing an important educational sector.”

For many this focus on an ‘industry led system’ has gone too far, and the dominant voice of industry has led governments to ignore the other interested parties, including community, students and the educationalists. It has largely been an industry and economic voice, rather than an educational one, that has supported a competitive training market with demand based funding. This Inquiry has an opportunity to restore the balance, and to ensure that both vocational education and training and TAFE’s role in it once again focuses on the dual roles of Australians increasing their life and employment prospects.

The operation of a competitive training market

In his report for NCVET in 2011, ‘How VET responds: a historical perspective’, Robin Ryan describes the series of employer satisfaction surveys that NCVET developed from 1995, and notes that these have generally shown high levels of employer satisfaction, around 70-80% mark. (pp. 20-21) From this he concludes: “While it is always desirable to strive to increase satisfaction (and student satisfaction is consistently somewhat higher), given that non-customised training cannot hope to please all potential end users equally, the supposed non-responsiveness of the VET system seems to be largely a mantra called upon whenever some significant public sector policy change is proposed.”

In its 2012 blueprint “Skills for all Australians”, the Australian Government continues with its message that there needs to be reforms to the VET system including TAFE, and that TAFE needs to be more flexible and responsive. This message has been used by State governments to introduce sweeping changes that have undermined the TAFE system and led a number of Institutes to financial crisis. Funding has been taken from the TAFE system and made contestable. The situation has become so dire, that former Federal Minister for Tertiary Education, Senator Chris Evans said in an interview in *Campus Review* at the end of 2011, “What the states are trying to do, and we support, is (inject) some competition and flexibility into the provision of their services, but I don’t want to do that at the expense of destroying TAFEs or reducing their capacity.” Later on in the same interview, he adds: “People have to remember (that) TAFEs provide access to training for people in rural and regional areas, people from low socio-economic groups, from migrants and indigenous people. They’re a great source of access for training so we have to make sure we don’t provide a competitive training model that actually gives us a worse result than we had previously.”

The introduction of a competitive training market for VET, with the COAG demands around entitlement based funding, have generally been premised on the basis of the need to reform VET. The reasons given for the reform of VET often have little basis on matters over which VET Institutions, including TAFE, have control. These include the need to build and diversify the Australian economy, to build greater productivity, the areas of skills shortages or perhaps skills mismatches in the labour market, and continuing concerning levels of

unemployment and under-employment. These issues are a result of economic and labour market issues generally, not a failure of the VET system. Yet often the way they are brought together in Government policy eg. Skills for All Australians, and government agencies eg. AWPA's scenario bases for skills development and therefore VET responses, suggests otherwise. There is also no evidence that a competitive market approach to VET will solve any of these problems. In fact, given the debacle of the introduction of the market based approaches in Victoria, and the pouring of funding into training areas that are not skills shortage areas, the opposite could well be the case.

If there are problems with the current VET system, and particularly with TAFE, then any evidence has been patchy and based on views of some industry groups. There has been little consideration of possible answers to perceived problems, nor proper research, and the National TAFE Inquiry could well be too late in the day. Rather assumptions have been made about a market response. There are other ways in which government funding could and can be distributed, including the consideration of place based funding models to support equity groups and the needs of local communities. Too little has been investigated around possible alternatives to funding of the VET system.

Why has there been no evaluation of a competitive training market? Damon Anderson in Trading Places (2005) says: "Despite the significance and potential implications of market reform in VET, there has been no comprehensive evaluation of its impact and outcomes to date. User choice was evaluated nationally, but at an early stage of implementation (KPMG consulting 1999). Several reviews of state government VET policies identified problems in VET markets, especially in relation to quality. The Senate Inquiry into the quality of VET (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee 2000) proposed that an independent national evaluation of competition and market reform in VET be conducted. No such evaluation has subsequently been undertaken." (NCVER, p.9)

He goes on to say that "the weight of available evidence suggests that, at the time of the study (Trading Places), negative rather than positive outcomes predominate... The research raises questions about the impact of market reform on public interest objectives (including community service obligations and public accountability), thin markets, and the financial viability of providers, particularly TAFE Institutes and small registered training organisations." (P. 10)

Whilst this report was carried out for NCVER in 2005, the same issues remain. There has been no evaluation of the impact of the training market, many students have been severely impacted upon as they have used entitlements for qualifications that have not given them the skills they need, and TAFE institutes have experienced significant financial difficulties. The costs have been enormous to implement a marketised system, without any proof that it will deliver better services for students, industry or the community.

Some peak industry bodies that have been seeking significant reform of the VET sector over the last decade, are now expressing concerns at the way the competitive training market is being implemented in Victoria in particular. The impact on TAFE Institutes with loss of qualified teachers and possible closure of regional campuses has led some of these peak bodies to speak out. Jenny Lambert, the director of employment, education and training for the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) said in an interview with John Mitchell in Campus Review in September 2012:

"We recognise that the way Victoria has rolled out its reforms has significantly inhibited TAFE. There are systematic issues within the way that TAFE has to conduct its business that makes TAFE more expensive, whether it be their enterprise agreements or other things. So the previous differential in the funds that they (TAFE) received needs to be maintained.

We believe that TAFE's role in the market is very important, particularly in regional areas and areas where there is no ability for the private system to go in effectively. The role of TAFE is critically important."

Those jurisdictions in which State Governments have announced funding decisions which may impact on their operation and viability

AVETRA wishes to comment on one particular aspect of State and Territory funding in relation to the marginalisation of the VET workforce, and the need to build the professionalisation of this workforce currently positioned between two degree based professions. If governments can accept the complexity of the role of the VET professional, outlined by the Wheelahan and Guthrie proposals, and by AVETRA in its submission to the Productivity Commission in 2012, then they should also financially support the movement towards a more professionalised workforce. In its submission to the Productivity Commission, AVETRA stated:



“While our community benefits greatly from a pool of committed reflective practitioners, it remains a small percentage of the total workforce. A restricted knowledge base must place the development of the VET workforce system at risk. Developing the structure of the VET workforce must include developing individuals. The aspiration of a degree-based profession should be a target for the next decade, as a basic step in underpinning any movement for the development of quality and AQF agendas. A professional status would also serve to attract and retain the workforce. If skill development is critical to national economic development, it should follow that those charged with such development, the VET workforce, should be encouraged to attain higher educational standards and be appropriately supported in achieving those standards, and for continuing employment within the workforce.”

Conclusion

In another of his series of interviews for Campus Review, John Mitchell interviewed Innes Wilcox, Chief Executive of Ai Group in 2012, who like many of his other industry peak body counterparts, expressed concerns at the lack of balance in the skills reform models (particularly in Victoria), and said: “TAFEs aren’t perfect, never will be, but there is ample evidence that when TAFE delivers programs well, it delivers them really well, and the outcomes are overwhelmingly positive, both in terms of what students are taught and how they learn it, and then how they’re able to apply it.”

AVETRA also reiterates its support for TAFE, with its important role as the public provider. TAFE has many diverse roles in education and training, and we support government restoring funding to TAFE and valuing its teachers and its educational workforce.

**Please contact Michele Simons, President of AVETRA, at
for further information**

References

AVETRA 2012, *Submission to the Productivity Commission: Vocational Education and Training Workforce*.

Billett, S. 2004, *From your business to our business: industry and vocational education in Australia*, Oxford Review of Education, vol. 30, no. 1, pp 11-33

National Centre for Vocational Education Research (2010), *Australian vocational education and training statistics: Student outcomes 2010*, NCVET, Adelaide. www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2315.html viewed 19 April 2013

Mitchell, J. 2011 *TAFE is central to skilling Australia, says Evans*, Inside VET Column for Campus Review, Sydney.

Mitchell, J. 2012 *Industry and TAFE harmed by VET reforms*, Inside VET Column for Campus Review, Sydney.

Mitchell, J. 2012, *Industry seeks to restore confidence*, Inside VET Column for Campus Review, Sydney.

Ryan, R J 2011, *How VET responds: a historical policy perspective*, NCVET Adelaide.

Skills Australia 2009, *Foundations for the future*, Canberra.

[www.skillsaustralia.gov.au/Publications and Resources/Skills Australia public papers.htm](http://www.skillsaustralia.gov.au/Publications_and_Resources/Skills_Australia_public_papers.htm) viewed 22 April 2013

Wheelahan, L. and Moodie, G. (2011) *Rethinking Skills in Vocational Education and Training: From Competencies to Capabilities*, Sydney. www.bvet.nsw.gov.au/pdf/rethinking_skills viewed 19 April, 2013