

RESEARCH REPORT NO 8

Reflections on the future of VET and TAFE: Saigon, Dunkirk or the Alamo?

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In terms of student numbers, the vocational education and training (VET) sector is the second largest of the four education sectors (the others being early childhood, schooling and higher education). Together with the early childhood sector, it has always been more precariously situated and vulnerable than the schooling or higher education sectors. It was the first education sector to feel harsh winds of neo-liberal reform; and it has been by far the hardest hit by these reforms. Despite this, what has happened and continues to happen in VET receives comparatively little critical attention compared to what is happening in schooling and higher education.

This paper will consider a myriad of developments in the VET sector since the late 1980s, including the reforms to VET curriculum, the deprofessionalisation of VET practitioners and their banishment from VET policy forums, the ever-narrowing conception of the nature of VET, the shift to market models of delivery, privatisation of delivery, ongoing reductions in government funding, and the introduction of an 'entitlement model' of access to VET.

This overview calls into question the very future of vocational education in Australia. John Buchanan (2014) from the University of Sydney has recently argued that the collapse of public VET is inevitable and that the choice is between 'Dunkirk' (i.e. a strategic withdrawal and regrouping) or 'Saigon' (i.e. a shambolic and humiliating rout). A TAFE colleague suggested that Buchanan should also have included 'the Alamo' as a possibility, where we get wiped out completely.

The identity and nature of VET

Was there ever a 'golden age' of vocational education and training in Australia? Well, no; it has always been a 'Cinderella' education sector. Nevertheless, the release of the Kangan Report in

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1974 can be seen as marking a high water mark. That report, which notably takes 'TAFE' not 'VET' as its subject², was described by the then Minister for Education, Kim Beazley Sr, in the following terms:

The report envisages a major shift of emphasis. It abandons the narrow and rigid concept that technical colleges exist simply to meet the manpower needs of industry, and adopts a broader concept that they exist to meet the needs of people as individuals . . . The report takes a long step in the direction of lifelong education and of opportunities for re-entry to education. It recommends unrestricted access for adults to vocationally oriented education. (quoted in Forward, 2013, p.5)

This quotation reminds us how impoverished our view of vocational education and training has become. Today, as discussed below, the role of VET is seen almost exclusively about preparing people for specific workplace roles. It should also be noted that, in era following the Kangan Report, with some exceptions the minimum requirement for a VET/TAFE teacher was a diploma or graduate diploma level education qualification and that VET/TAFE was entirely publicly funded.

The developments that led to the current state of VET can be traced to a series of reports, policy decisions and institutional arrangements set in train in the late 1980s (originally by Labor governments at federal and state levels). There is not space here to detail this history but chapter 3 of the 2011 Productivity Commission report on the VET workforce provides a useful overview.³ Significantly, as noted by the Productivity Commission, the genesis of the changes to VET lay in the perceived need for 'microeconomic reform' (p.10).

VET pedagogy⁴ and curriculum

Since the early 1990s VET curriculum has been built around a competency-based model of training, using what are called 'training packages'. In order to deliver a nationally recognised qualification, providers must use these approved packages and be a registered training organisation (RTO). There are some advantages to such an approach. In particular, if it is done well, it provides a consistency of training across providers that allows employers to have confidence that employees with the same qualification have the same level of skills and it allows greater portability for employees seeking work across different employers and/or different localities. As initially conceived, competency-based training (CBT) was also seen as providing opportunities for workers to link remuneration to skills acquisition in a way that was transparent and reliable.

However, there are a number of serious problems, some of which arise from the nature of CBT itself, some from the way it has been implemented, and some from the way that it interacts with a market-based approach to VET delivery.

² Bannikoff (2013) and Wilkinson (2014) specifically address the transition in the policy framing of training from TAFE to VET.

³ See also Wilkinson (2014).

⁴ 'Pedagogy' is the 'art and science of teaching'. It is noted that many writers prefer to simply use 'teaching', but pedagogy captures the idea that there are underlying principles, knowledges and practices. It is also noted that some prefer the term 'andragogy' in relation to VET as it references adults (andra) rather than children (peda), but the term pedagogy has been widely used to apply to all sectors of education.

Henneken (2014) identifies five major problems with CBT:

- Units of competence describe the knowledge and skills needed to perform an activity and the evidence needed to prove that a person is competent. Because units of competency describe the outcomes of learning separate from the process of learning, 'this process of specification encourages reductive processes of learning that tick off outcomes, rather than holistic learning' (Wheelahan and Moody, p.16), that is, VET in Australia lacks a 'coherent and theoretical knowledge base' (Henneken, p.5).
- The outcomes of learning are tied to descriptions of work as it currently exists, with no capacity to develop innovation and change.
- Knowledge is tied to specific functions and activities in the workplace. CBT does not provide access to underpinning knowledge, able to explain and be used in a range of contexts. This restricts autonomy and judgement and reinforces a narrow view of jobs.
- Competency-based training is based on the simplistic, behaviourist notion that processes of learning are identical with the skills to be learnt.
- Even though competency-based training certifies that particular outcomes have been achieved, it does not necessarily instil credibility in a broader sense.

In relation to the penultimate point, the assumption that instructional strategies and curriculum flow more or less automatically from specification of learning outcomes has resulted in the marginalisation of VET teachers. From the introduction of the national training system, educators have been excluded from VET policy decision making forums. In particular, the role played by certain blue-collar unions in the ACTU in promoting this agenda at the expense of their education union colleagues (and ultimately of VET) has yet to be acknowledged and detailed sufficiently. Needless to say it was an agenda that was also enthusiastically embraced by governments (both Labor and conservative) and employers. A case in point, the 2012 Queensland Skills Taskforce had no representatives from VET educators and no representatives from public VET providers, although the private provider peak group was represented.

The lack of interest in pedagogy and curriculum is reflected in the establishment of the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment as the standard VET teaching qualification. This qualification, which can be achieved in some cases with fewer than 20 hours of training (Clayton et al, 2010, p. 15), was meant to provide minimum or base educational qualification for VET teachers, but combined with funding cutbacks and the relentless pursuit of cost-cutting typical of the training market it quickly established itself as the minimum **and** maximum qualification for most RTOs.

Regarding the lack of credibility associated with certain VET qualifications, this can be related to:

- The failure to connect competencies to underlying an underlying knowledge base;
- The inadequacy of quality control;
- The effects of the market.

I will return to issues relating to quality later. But one aspect of the interaction between CBT and the training market is worth noting here. The atomistic approach to training typical of CBT provides a rationale for training based on 'just in time' delivery of specific 'skills sets' (as opposed to delivery

of full qualifications). This approach dovetails neatly with an agenda of cost-cutting and casualisation of labour – both within the VET workforce and the workforce generally.

Finally, it should be noted that the efficacy of a competency-based approach to training rests on the assumption that the training provided closely matches the employment outcomes for those being trained. A recent study by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (Karmel, 2012) shows that, while this premise holds for some occupational areas, it does not hold for the majority of training provided. This lends credence to calls from researchers such as Buchanan et al (2009) for a shift in emphasis from ‘training for jobs’ to ‘training for vocations’.

Funding of VET

As noted above, the VET sector has never enjoyed a ‘golden age’ and has always struggled for recognition as an education sector of equal importance to schooling and higher education. Despite its lowly status, it is worth reminding ourselves that the VET sector actually enrolls more students than the higher education sector. And in terms of serving the disadvantaged, it does far more heavy lifting.

Since the early 1990s, the amount of government funding for VET has declined. Michael Long (2011) of the Monash Centre for the Economics of Education and Training has calculated that between 1997 and 2009, across Australia, government recurrent expenditure on VET declined by 26 per cent. Data produced by the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (AWPA, 2013) shows that in 2011, funding per full-time student in the primary schooling sector was 31 per cent higher than in 1999; funding per full-time student in the secondary schooling sector was 20 per cent higher than in 1999; funding per full-time student in the higher education sector was 3 per cent higher than in 1999; but funding per full-time student in the VET sector was 25 per cent **lower** than in 1999.

For TAFE, the public VET provider⁵, the problem of reducing overall funding for VET has been greatly exacerbated by the dramatically increasing share of the funding going to private providers. According to the National Report on Government Services (Productivity Commission 2014), in 1997, non-TAFE providers received \$171m (1997 dollars) or 4 per cent of government recurrent funding for VET, by 2012 non-TAFE providers were in receipt of \$1.4b (2012 dollars) or 23 per cent of government recurrent funding for VET.

In Queensland, as the Chart A and Table 1 below show, this has resulted in a dramatic decrease in the size of the public sector VET workforce.⁶

⁵ There are two other public providers of VET: universities and state schools.

⁶ Data to Dec 2013 provided by Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment; data for 2014 provided by TAFE Queensland.

CHART A

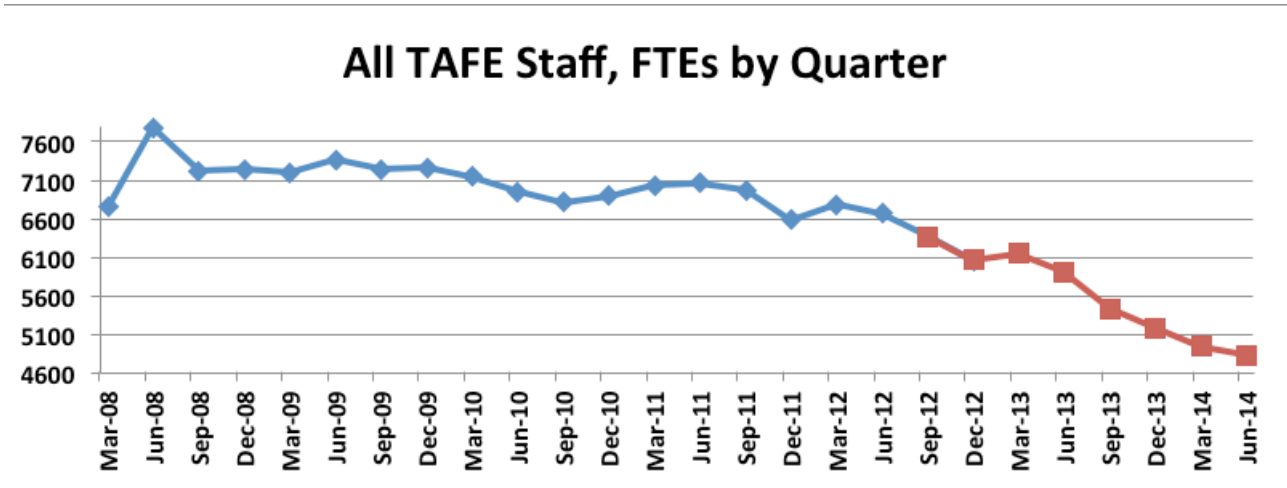


TABLE 1

All TAFE staff FTE				
Mar-08	6759	Mar-12	6785	
Jun-08	7788	Jun-12	6676	
Sep-08	7227	Sep-12	6367	6369
Dec-08	7240	Dec-12	6058	6066
Mar-09	7201	Mar-13		6150
Jun-09	7366	Jun-13		5908
Sep-09	7240	Sep-13		5436
Dec-09	7268	Dec-13		5175
Mar-10	7146	Mar-14		4945
Jun-10	6956	Jun-14		4835
Sep-10	6822			
Dec-10	6901			
Mar-11	7038			
Jun-11	7068			
Sep-11	6970			
Dec-11	6587			

The retrenchments will continue. As of July this year, the Queensland Government has made all VET funding 'fully contestable', that is, TAFE has no guaranteed funding but must compete with private providers for funds. It is expected that, as a result, there will be a further significant reduction in the market share of TAFE. Additionally, TAFE must now tender for use of the facilities that used to be TAFE buildings and equipment. TAFE is now virtually an itinerant VET provider. TAFE Institutes are already contracting their geographical footprint by vacating facilities that are not deemed commercially viable.

The Training Market

- **An Overview and Critique of the VET Market⁷**

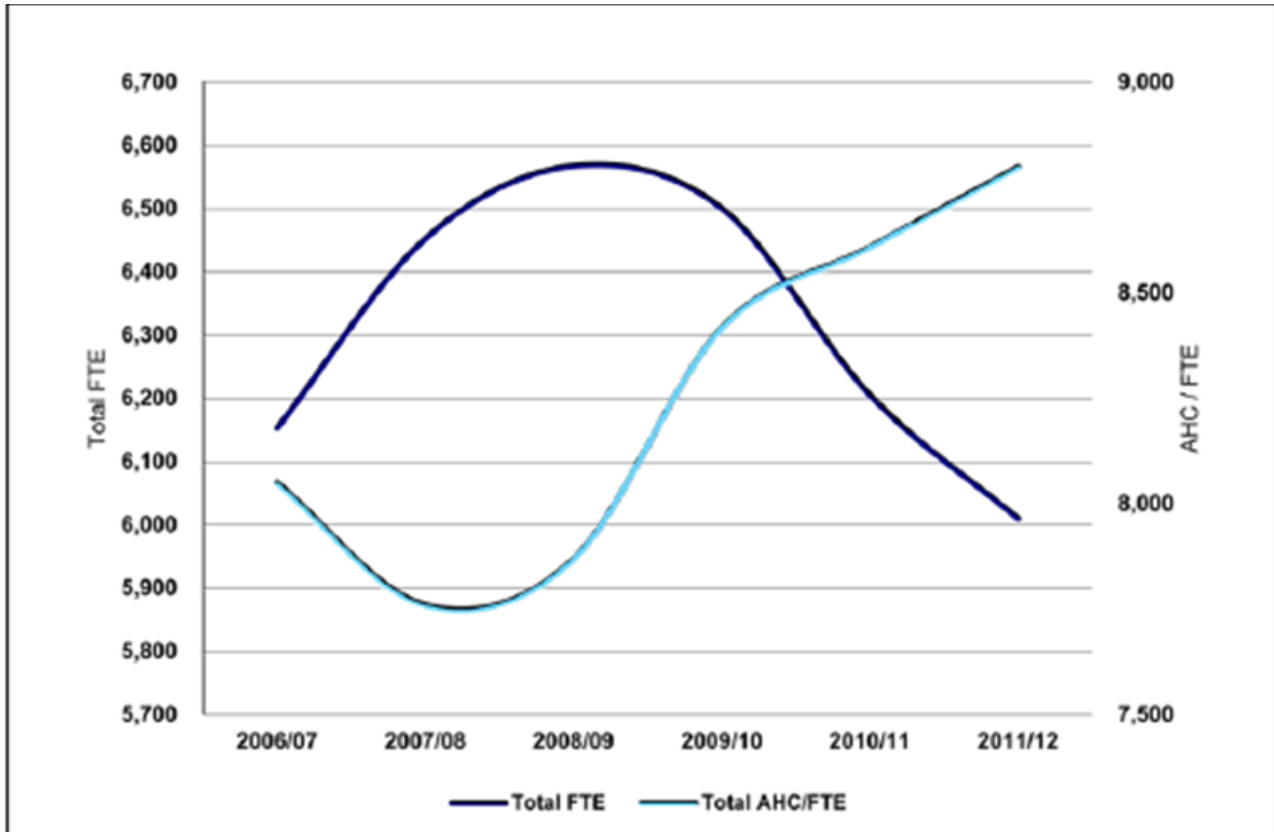
A fundamental characteristic of vocational education in Australia over the last twenty-five years has been the ever-increasing use of market mechanisms, which allow a range of training providers to compete for students and government funding. This is true of all states and territories, but the journey down the track of marketisation has varied. Until recently, Victoria was the jurisdiction farthest advanced. But as of 1 July this year, Queensland arguably outpaced them when, as noted above, it moved to a fully contestable market model of VET, with the public provider reconstituted as a commercially-driven, independent statutory authority, with no guaranteed government funding (not even for 'community service obligations').

The creation of a training market has been accompanied by a dramatic growth in the number of private RTOs, the number of students enrolled in course through private RTOs and the amount of government funding going to private RTOs. Wheelahan (2014, p.4) notes that between 2009 and 2013, private providers 'more than doubled their share of student load or public funding'.

As in the schooling and higher education sectors, the public VET (TAFE) workforce is relatively highly unionised. In Queensland at least, the majority have been employed as permanent employees. The private VET sector workforce, on the other hand is largely non-union and casual. It is also much less well remunerated. The relatively higher pay and conditions enjoyed by TAFE teachers have been 'exhibit A' in the case put by marketeers that TAFE is an inherently bloated and inefficient VET provider. The evidence, on the other hand, shows that, measured in pure economic terms, TAFE has responded to the challenge of reduced funding and market competition with remarkable increases in productivity. The Final Report of the Queensland Skills and Training Taskforce (2012) contains a chart (see Chart B below) showing a remarkable increase in the number of annual hours curriculum (AHC) delivered by decreasing staff full time equivalent (FTE) over the period 2008-09 to 2011-12. There would be few, if any, private corporations that could match the increased levels of productivity illustrated in the chart.

⁷ Much of this section of is adapted from the Australian Education Union (2013) submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into the role of the TAFE.

CHART B
TAFE Queensland Productivity⁸



Generally, market advocates pay lip service to the role of the public provider, acknowledging in some cases its role in providing services to ‘thin markets’ and meeting community service obligations, though not its place as the quality benchmark for VET provision or its capacity to address, as private providers cannot, the broader and longer-term aims of VET. Nor, of course, do the advocates contemplate the inherent differences between an educational provider operating on a for-profit basis and one that operates on a not-for-profit basis. Typical is the approach taken in the Final Report of the Queensland Skills Taskforce (2012) which states that ‘ensuring the viability, including financial viability, of Queensland’s public provider of VET is at the core of [the Taskforce’s] considerations’ (p.58), and then in the course of setting out how its market-based recommendations will revitalise TAFE, expresses doubt that there is any inherent necessity for a public training provider and urges the government to continue to monitor whether it should have a role in the future (see pp.52-74).

The ‘market design approach’ is a poor approach to VET policy formation. Through its application to the organisation of the TAFE and VET system in Australia, market design has had damaging consequences for the TAFE system and for VET generally in Australia.

⁸ Source: Queensland Skills and Training Taskforce (2012) Final Report, p.55.

Phillip Toner (2014), from the University of Sydney in a recent paper questions the underpinning rationale behind the application of market design, and the contracting out of vocational education through the mechanism of a competitive training market. He commences his critique by making the point that the overwhelming weight of public evidence demonstrates that the risk of poor quality delivery and corruption resides with private, for-profit RTOs. The public evidence includes:

- three NSW Independent Commission against Corruption inquiries into private RTOs over the past 10 years;
- hundreds of suspensions and cancellations of private VET providers by state regulatory authorities and the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA);
- the foreign student debacle, including the payment by governments of refunds to overseas students and associated costs to compensate for provider failure and to protect the reputation of Australia as a reliable provider of quality education and training services;
- publicly expressed concerns by major employer groups such as AIG and ACCI about declining quality, the integrity of qualifications being issued, and reputational damage to the system; and
- regular exposés by the media of poor quality provision and of robbing of the public purse.

Toner traces the history of contracting out of vocational education and makes the point that none of the reports advocating a competitive training market in vocational education (including from ANTA, COAG, Boston Consulting Group, Ernst and Young, Skills Australia and the Productivity Commission) ever justified their case with specific examples or rigorous evaluations showing poor provision by public providers or, conversely, excellence in private provision. Toner says that the proponents of increased competition argue from a simple economic assumption, asserting, but never providing evidence that it will achieve flexibility, responsiveness and efficiency in vocational education provision.

Toner identifies a range of general and specific aspects of vocational education that make it unsuited to contracting out either through competitive tendering or student voucher, entitlement type models. These include:

- the importance of the good or service being contracted out, i.e. publicly funded vocational education and training;
- the economic and social cost of delivery failure on individuals, society and the economy;
- the potential for low quality providers to undercut high quality providers as they are not incurring the expense of delivering a quality service – under these conditions, competition is not a guarantee of either effective pricing or quality;
- effectively, the imposition of a contingent liability for Government to make provision for the financial failure of VET providers if training is not delivered;

- ‘important and infrequent transactions’, i.e. the onus is on individuals who bear the risk of their choice of training provider, and the investment that goes with it, for what is often a once in a lifetime decision. Individuals therefore have little opportunity to learn from their direct experience and improve their outcome from such transactions, as occurs when market exchanges are frequent;
- the low barriers to entry and exit for training providers in many VET courses e.g. low mandated formal entry qualifications for teachers and minimal amount of physical infrastructure and assets required to teach, reduces the fear or cost of adverse action by regulators and shortens their investment horizon; and
- the considerable latitude available to training providers in terms of training delivery and actual training hours that allows providers, if choosing to act in bad faith and exploit short-term economic gains, to supply a low quality service.

Toner makes the point that by their very nature, private for-profit providers are motivated to improve the financial performance of the firm by increasing revenue and minimising costs. These goals may not always be compatible with the provision of quality VET. By contrast, TAFE was established to overcome market failure and promote social equity, subject to externally imposed budget constraints.

Toner also identifies the risks and costs arising from contracting out that negate and exceed any anticipated benefits from outsourcing, including:

- the costs of specifying and defining the performance indicators for VET provision;
- the cost of Government having to intervene in the case of provider failure, in the form of refunds for students and other associated costs; and
- the increasing requirement for both public and private VET providers to use taxpayers’ dollars to fund an increase in their advertising and marketing budgets and the proportion of non-teaching staff, in order to attract students.

The impact of competition and market reform on the TAFE system has been well documented. Damon Anderson’s (2005) study of the impact of market reform on VET found that training market reform:

- did not produce efficiency;
- did not result in a decline in training delivery costs;
- resulted in high transaction costs, greater complexity and uncertainty in quasi-markets which cancelled out any savings in streamlining internal administrative and planning systems; and
- increased the reliance of a large proportion of private providers on government funding which resulted in unnecessary duplication between private and public, and between public providers.

Anderson's study also showed that market reform had been accompanied by reductions in expenditure on direct delivery, infrastructure maintenance, curriculum development and maintenance, and student services. Anderson argues that in the absence of compensatory action, in rural and regional areas in particular, marketisation through competition compromises efficiency, quality, flexibility and access and equity. Anderson also found that quality was compromised as a result of market reform because RTOs:

- were less inclined to share information and resources;
- diverted resources from training delivery to administration and marketing; and
- gave higher priority to cost-reduction than quality improvement.

The National Skills Standards Council (2012) has proposed more stringent VET provider registration requirements to address the mounting evidence of shoddy practices by some RTOs in the competitive training market. Wheelahan (2013) notes:

As the VET system has expanded with the entry of new providers attracted by access to public funding, it has become clear there are substantial weaknesses in the regulatory framework. There have been college failures, which have particularly impacted the international sector, predatory pricing practices and, associated with such practices, sub-standard delivery, raising serious concerns about the validity of many qualifications. These have been most clearly evident in Victoria, with its virtually open market, and have been centred on the private provider side of the VET sector, not in the public TAFE sector.

Unfortunately, as writers such as John Mitchell (2014) have identified, the VET regulatory regime is inherently incapable of policing rogue operators, let alone ensuring high quality. Bannikoff (2013, p.4) quotes one VET regulator as stating, 'At this point we don't know what quality training is, what it looks like, how to describe it or how to measure it'. Furthermore, the Abbott Government has recently announced that it intends to cut, rather than enhance, what it sees as regulatory 'red tape' in the VET sector (Ross, 2014).

While many critiques of market-based VET, focus on the proliferation of shonky, fly-by-night providers, less attention has been paid to the introduction of multi-national providers such as:

- NAVITAS is an ASX200 listed company, with a capitalisation value of \$2.3b. It operates training colleges in 28 countries enrolling more than 55,000 students each year. Approximately 70 per cent of its teaching staff are employed casually.
- SEEK is an ASX listed corporation. It began as an online employment agency, but has branched out into education and training, which is now its most profitable area of activity. It provides courses on its own and in conjunction with other providers (including TAFE NSW, Swinburne and Deakin Universities and private providers).

- KAPLAN is the training subsidiary of the Washington Post corporation. It is a large provider of financial and real estate planning, but also offers higher education courses through KAPLAN University.⁹

- **Student Access**

Putting aside for the moment the question of the impact of the market on VET quality, it is worth considering its impact on student opportunities and costs. The notion of a 'student entitlement' has been introduced, which is a variation of student vouchers. The idea of a student 'entitlement' as an enhancement in opportunities for students is misleading and disingenuous. Despite increasing student costs in recent years, for the most part Australians have had access to a government funded place at their local TAFE institute. These included students from disadvantaged backgrounds, those needing a second chance, those wishing to go on to further education, those requiring initial vocational education for entry to work, and those who have suffered unemployment or 'structural adjustment' in their industry. All have had access to publicly funded VET at a relatively modest cost. The introduction of a *once only* 'entitlement' actually reduces access, with no guarantee of quality or an employment outcome. Those who use up this entitlement vocational qualification at a dodgy RTO will be particularly disadvantaged, as will those who need to undertake training in a new area due to limited labour market opportunities in the area they initially trained in.

Mitchell (2012) has identified a number of problems with an entitlement model, including:

- Student entitlement systems assume that students are well informed consumers, able to make sound decisions. All available evidence shows that there is a paucity of reliable information directly from providers, and specifically in relation to the usefulness of particular qualifications in the labour market. Even if this information was readily available and in an accessible form, the particular characteristics of students in vocational education show that a significant number of them are not well placed to make informed choices about their futures, particularly in an environment where incentives to enrol in many private RTOs are accompanied by inducements to enrol such as iPads or holidays.
- A student entitlement system assumes that all training providers can be trusted to provide clear information about their services and the courses they offer. Recent scandals across the country, particularly in Victoria, show that this is simply not the case.
- Student entitlement systems assume that students and rogue providers will not collude to pervert quality requirements.

Course costs for students who do not have an entitlement (i.e. those who already hold a Certificate III or higher qualification) have risen exponentially. For example, the Certificate II in Electrotechnology offered at SkillsTech Brisbane (a TAFE provider) cost \$816 in 2012, in 2013 it cost \$1664 for students with an entitlement and \$5,200 for non-entitlement students.

The level of government subsidy provided for Certificate III qualifications varies according to the 'priority' accorded to the qualification. This means that valuable courses that contribute to the quality of life in Queensland but are not seen as related to the 'pillars' of the economy are

⁹ The information in these dot points is drawn from the NSWTF (2014) report, The Corporate Image and Business Model of 'Big' Private Providers.

threatened. Courses in the arts, for example, may disappear from the VET sector. Careers in music or the visual arts will now only be accessible to the middle classes that can afford a university education.

VET Fee-Help arrangements (income contingent loans) have been introduced for higher level (Certificate IV and Diploma) courses and parallel (somewhat) arrangements in the university sector. However in the university sector while students make a contribution, there is still a significant government contribution. This will not be the case for non-subsidised VET courses. Furthermore, VET loans are indexed at a higher rate than higher education loans. It is of concern that governments have abdicated any responsibility in relation to the provision of higher level VET qualifications and VET as a pathway to higher education. The cost of these must now be met entirely by students.

By detaching public funding for vocational education from TAFE and expanding the use of income contingent loans, the 2012 National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development has significantly shifted the costs of funding VET from governments to individuals. Given the clear evidence of failure in the regulation of private training providers in a competitive training market, the effect will be to lock many young people into debt for qualifications of dubious value to them or to industry.

- **The (Not so Hidden) Agendas**

As noted by commentators such as Wheelahan (2013) and the AWPA (2013), in addition to problems inherent in the market-based approach to VET itself, there is the real possibility that the promotion of 'market reform' and 'competitive neutrality' in VET have far more to do with cost cutting and government budget savings than with the creation of a higher quality or more efficient VET system. Certainly, the ease with which the recommendations of the Skills and Training Taskforce align with the recommendations of the Costello Commission of Audit gives at least some credence to this proposition.

My personal view is that, while there are advocates of market-based VET who sincerely believe that markets will deliver a better performing VET system, there are a number of advocates of VET markets who don't give a toss about VET quality, their agenda is public sector cost-cutting, downsizing and privatisation, de-unionising and casualising the VET workforce, and the creation of lucrative new markets for private VET industry.

Where to From Here?

As the title of this paper indicates, the outlook for TAFE and VET in general is bleak. The public TAFE system, as we have known it, may well disappear within the next decade. The return of Labor Governments at state and/or federal levels could provide an opportunity to restore some features of public VET. For example, a Labor Government could, and should, immediately:

- Increase overall government funding for VET;
- Restore TAFE-specific government funding (at least for community service obligations);

- Make some adjustments to the entitlement model and student loans schemes to make them less inequitable;
- Strengthen accountability and quality assurance processes for VET;
- Restore ownership of TAFE facilities to TAFE.

However, a key challenge for Labor will be to recognise its own complicity in the VET reform agenda that has put us in the state we are currently in. Labor will need to wean itself from its commitment to:

- An impoverished notion of VET's purposes, curriculum and pedagogy;
- A market model of VET.

In addressing the first of these, a useful first step would be to bring VET educators back into policy decision making – not as the sole determiners of what VET should be or how it should operate, but as active and valued participants. In addressing the second, a serious re-assessment of the effects of marketisation and the implications of the loss of a viable public provider is called for.

Bannikoff (2013, p.3) notes that: 'the VET sector, and TAFE along with it, is no longer an education system in the sense that schools and universities are'. To rebuild public VET in Australia will require a deep and careful examination of questions of first principles for VET. Unfortunately, by the time governments come to this realisation, there may well be very little to rebuild upon.

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