Overcoming the democratic deficit in VET:  
why VET needs its own Bradley Review

Vocational education and training is changing rapidly, but there is no coherence to these changes or shared understandings about what VET should be like. The danger is that the current changes will lead to the development of a new tertiary education sector that includes the upper levels of VET, but leaves the remainder as a rump. VET needs its own review, similar to the 2008 *Review of Australian Higher Education* led by Denise Bradley. There needs to be a vision for VET and a shared public purpose and some explicit understanding about its relationship with schools and higher education.

## The democratic deficit in VET

The last public review of TAFE was in 1974 by the Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education led by Myer Kangan. The Kangan Committee established TAFE as a national tertiary education sector and developed a shared sense of purpose that still lingers. TAFE’s interdependent purposes were to prepare people for work, develop the individual, and provide second-chance education. There has been no public review of VET since then.

All subsequent changes to TAFE and VET have been made by government without broad public consultation. In the late 1980s, TAFE was subsumed into a broader VET system so that it was one provider in a competitive VET market, and its purpose was redefined as preparing people with the specific skills they needed to perform specific jobs. Henceforth, VET was subordinated to national economic imperatives and the Kangan vision was gone from policy. VET was to be ‘industry-led’ and produce the skills that industry needed. Competency-based training (CBT) was implemented so that learning outcomes were defined as industry-designated workplace tasks and roles, and VET qualifications were bundled up in ‘training packages’ and exclusively based on CBT.

Governments and policy makers were deeply suspicious of TAFE. Gillian Goozee explains in her history of TAFE that the prevailing view during the period of reform was that TAFE had a monopoly on VET, was unresponsive to industry and that more weight needed to be given to the ‘demand’ side. She explains that the demand side was invariably defined in terms of industry, which didn’t include students or trainees, or broader social objectives of public policy.

VET teachers were (and are) deeply distrustful of training packages because of their concerns over their narrowness and because they downplay the importance of underpinning knowledge. Teachers were excluded from their development and they felt that their professionalism was undermined. In 2004, Kaye Schofield and Rod McDonald led a high level review of training packages, and they addressed the high level of discontent in calling for a ‘new settlement’ to underpin training packages based on a new consensus about their purpose. They also argued for less emphasis on regulation and compliance and for more faith in the professionalism of VET practitioners.

Gavin Moodie contrasts what he calls the ‘democratic deficit’ in VET to the many reviews of higher education which have been in public and debated and discussed. Submissions to the reviews were made publicly available and most of the key changes to higher education have been as a result of recommendations from reviews. He argues that the public must have an opportunity to contribute to public debate about VET to improve policy outcomes, build the legitimacy of VET policy, and provide the basis for policy implementation.

## Why VET needs its own review

A review of VET is needed now because of the pace of change. Many in VET have adopted the Bradley Review of higher education as VET’s review, partly because there has been no review of VET, and partly because its recommendations have implications for VET. However, these implications are for *upper level* VET, and do not include lower level VET qualifications. The Bradley Review argued for a more integrated tertiary education system, and this included more consistent fees, funding and regulatory arrangements for upper level VET programs and higher education programs. In a joint statement TAFE Directors Australia and Universities Australia, the peak bodies of TAFE institutes and universities respectively, have defined tertiary education qualifications as “those at diploma level and above, including where these qualifications may embed pathways from the qualification level below”. At best, this may include certificates IV, but it is hard to see how it could include lower level certificates.

There are some very good reasons why we need much more consistent arrangements between VET and higher education. We need consistency in funding, governance, quality assurance, definitions and policies if we are to build a coherent tertiary education system, promote collaboration between institutions and support student pathways.

We also need more curricular consistency. Only about 30% of VET graduates end up in the jobs associated with their qualifications, degrees are increasingly becoming the entry level qualification in many occupations, and diploma graduates compete less favourably with degree graduates for the same jobs. It is hard to sustain arguments for curricular differentiation in qualifications with VET offering competency-based qualifications and higher education curriculum based qualifications, when the labour market outcomes are not so differentiated. If nothing else, this should challenge the basis of the sectoral divide and raise questions about the relationship between the sectors. The existing arrangements seem to particularly disadvantage VET students rather than higher education students.

The sectoral divide is under further pressure through growth of ‘mixed-sector’ provision. Apart from the five recognised dual-sector universities, many universities now offer VET in their own right, through companies they have established for this purpose, or in partnership with private providers. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research reports that 41% of all senior secondary school students participated in VET in schools in 2008.

TAFE institutes offer bachelor degrees in every state except Tasmania and in the Northern Territory where TAFE is part of the dual-sector university. Approximately 75 private providers offer both VET and higher education. This provision will grow, and we need public policy that will support this expansion, ensure it is high quality, and that students who attend these institutions have a similar ‘higher education experience’ to those attending universities, as well as similar opportunities and outcomes.

However, arguably bigger challenges for VET are the outcomes from lower level VET qualifications and VET in schools. Students from equity groups are over-represented in lower level VET qualifications such as Certificate I and II, and the further study outcomes and labour market outcomes from these qualifications are very poor. The outcomes for young people aged between 15 – 19 years are particularly worrying. Their employment outcomes declined by almost 3% from 2001 to 2008, and their further study outcomes declined by about 5%.

A focus only on upper level VET takes attention away from these outcomes and the policy challenges they pose. The key challenge for equity policy in Australia is to increase access by disadvantaged students in low level VET qualifications to diplomas. This is for two reasons. The first is because diploma graduates achieve better labour market outcomes compared to those from lower level VET qualifications. The second is because diplomas are the key qualifications used by VET students to access higher education. Consequently, the outcomes of low level VET qualifications are a key concern of tertiary education policy.

## What might a review of VET do?

A review of VET would need to recognise the reality of what VET actually does, and not the limited view of it in policy. It would need to recognise the multiple purposes VET meets, and the diversity of its students, learning contexts and environments, goals and purposes. VET teaches VET in schools, bachelor degrees, and qualifications ranging from certificate I to diplomas and advanced diplomas, and VET graduate certificates and diplomas. Its students include the most disengaged young people with low level language, literacy and numeracy skills, refugees, welfare recipients, school leavers, apprentices, those seeking to enter or re-enter the workforce and those wishing to upgrade their skills or develop new skills, university graduates, and highly skilled professionals.

A review would also need to recognise the challenges that VET has in meeting government policy objectives. VET is now required to incorporate ‘green skills’ in all qualifications, embed language, literacy, numeracy skills and employability skills, ensure students are technologically literate, and that they have the knowledge and skills they need to embark on educational pathways. It must play a role in supporting government targets for educational participation and attainment, not just for VET qualifications, but also for targets for school retention and higher education qualifications.

This requires reviewing the ‘official’ purpose of VET, which is to provide the specific skills that industry requires. It must do this, but much more besides. We need a vision for VET that goes beyond a narrow focus on training people for specific workplace roles and tasks, particularly when VET graduates don’t end up working in those jobs. If it is to serve multiple purposes and meet government policy requirements, we must also emphasise the educational purposes of VET, and not just its vocational outcomes. This may well mean a return to the Kangan vision which integrated educational and vocational purposes.

A review of VET would also need to consider the relationship between VET and schools and higher education. It would consider how VET can build a social ladder of opportunity for students from low level qualifications to higher level qualifications, including bachelor degrees. VET’s central importance in achieving government policy objectives for senior school certificates and higher education qualifications would be recognised and recommendations to support VET in these roles would need to be considered. Such a review would demonstrate that the schools and higher education sectors rely on VET to achieve their own objectives.

## References

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