

Introduction

Membership of the Australian College of Educators is drawn from both the public and private sectors of schooling and across all sectors of education. ACE has long been an advocate of reform in the VET system directed to delivering improved equity outcomes and we are under no illusions as to the complexity of this undertaking.

Our overall response is that this draft report underestimates the complexity of the challenges facing VET in terms of

- changing demands of work on the VET sector
- The impacts of the reforms in the Higher education sector and their potential knock-on effects on the VET sector
- emerging cross- sector transformations
- equity challenges facing VET
- The workforce continuity challenges over the next decade and beyond.

We also note the excellent response submitted by the Melbourne Graduate School, of Education (MGSE) and rather than repeat the arguments made in that report we would like for you to note our strong support for the arguments made by MGSE about the key issues listed above.

It is our view that the equity issues facing VET should be seen as one of the main drivers of policy responses to the sector. Of all education sectors the VET sector delivers education and training to the highest proportion of students who experience the most significant and multiple layers of disadvantage, with very little in the way of core funded systemic resources to recognise this reality. There is no logic in setting up elaborate equity targets in the University sector and in schools without addressing the current significant barriers to delivering on equity outcomes in VET. Universities and schools will fail in their own equity goals without VET on board and able to deliver.

Key Issues

1. The characterisation of all education effort with VET in terms of training and assessment is highly problematic.

The report consistently refers to teachers in the VET system as trainers and assessors. While it may be true that, historically, the post compulsory sector has been understood in terms of an unhelpful dualism between: applied and intellectual endeavour; knowledge versus skills:

mental and manual labour: and education versus training, this is no longer helpful or reflective of reality.

Doctors, accountants, engineers, lawyers all require very specific sets of technical or clinical skills as well as mastery of a body of knowledge and personal qualities, attributes or orientations. Likewise, jobs/ careers more traditionally associated with VET, more and more require far more than technical skills. Likewise staff who involved in the delivery of VET units are rarely able to limit their scope of activity to that of training and assessment.

2. The claims made about the lack of relationship between education qualifications and student outcomes is not sustainable

The draft report makes the point that “data that would support rigorous assessment of the link between teacher characteristics, and student satisfaction and outcomes at different qualification levels have not been located.” It also claims that there is “indirect evidence ...from research on school teachers, suggesting that teacher qualifications explain little of the variance in teacher effectiveness (gauged via measurable student outcomes)”

This is not substantiated in the draft report, nor is it supported by the available research.

John Hattie’s research (Visible learning 2009) is a very useful overview of the kinds of classroom practices that make a difference in terms of student learning progress. We are aware that some observers (e.g. Andrew Leigh) have interpreted this sort of research as implying that having a graduate degree in education is no longer important. Rather what is important is being able to apply in situ the pedagogical practices that have most value add and having the right personal qualities.

This is a complete misunderstanding of Hattie’s important work for two reasons. Firstly, all the teaching practice analysed in the Hattie study were undertaken by fully qualified practicing teachers and secondly, while a teacher education course may not guarantee that a graduate can know and do everything that is assessed as having this highest learning impact, not doing the course will almost certainly guarantee a lower level of quality value add pedagogy.

The most recent writings of Linda Darling-Hammond underscore that teacher qualifications matter

“Teachers can have large effects on student achievement... a recent large scale study in North Carolina ... found that the differences in achievement gains for students who had the most qualified teachers versus those who had the least qualified were greater than the influences of race and parent education combined. These very large differences were associated with teachers initial preparation for teaching, licensing in the field taught, strength of academic background, level of experience and demonstration of skills

through national board certification” (Linda Darling-Hammond, “Evaluating teacher Effectiveness”, Centre for American Progress Report p.2)

That the Productivity Commission has come to a different conclusion is of great concern given that your next reviews will cover the other education sectors.

The draft report also implies that most contributors to the review are supportive of the current qualifications regime. However the extensive research project on the quality of teaching in VET managed by ACE, funded by DEEWR and undertaken by the LH Martin Institute comes to a very different conclusion. The final paper of this research concluded that

There is a broad consensus (with some exceptions) that teachers and trainers need both high level teaching and training skills and high level industry knowledge with the capacity to ensure both remain current. ([The quality of teaching in VET: final report and recommendations](#)).

3. The draft report does not consider adequately the study’s term of reference on cross sectoral and integrated service delivery.

This is particularly important for vocational education which is engaged extensively in cross sector teaching both in schools and with higher education.

The different requirements for teaching in each of these sectors will come into sharp focus as the pace of convergence picks up. As a future focused report it is disappointing to see that this has not been noted.

This comment refers not just to the teaching qualifications of VET teachers but to their industry qualifications as well. The current situation that allows teachers to teach students who are only marginally behind them in knowledge and skills means that students in VET face situations where the broader context of the area of learning may not be known adequately by the teacher.

4. The report underestimates the growing demands on VET from workplace changes

The Draft Report notes that VET will grow and increase in complexity in response to the needs of the economy and to support social inclusion, but does not consider how this might impact on the capabilities that will be needed in the VET workforce.

As noted in the Quality of Teaching in VET Report (referred to above)

“The importance of VET teaching and hence VET teaching qualifications and CPD programs has become visible once again because the scope and nature of VET is expanding as work changes, society becomes more complex, and VET is called upon to

deliver government objectives. VET is now required to incorporate 'green skills' in all its qualifications, to embed literacy and numeracy and employability skills, to address the skill needs of emerging industries, to ensure that the Australian workforce has high skill levels in technology, and that students have the knowledge and skills they need to embark on educational pathways. All of this when employers reported high skill shortages prior to the Global Financial Crisis, a problem which is reemerging as the economy recovers"

5. It is disappointing that the report does not support a national VET workforce development plan or professional standards of any sort

The arguments in the report against undertaking such an initiative are not compelling especially in view of its own findings that the sector is highly casualised, aging and that more professional development is needed.

The report also does not appear to endorse even voluntary mechanisms for registration and the introductions of standards on the same basis. This is shortsighted for a report that is ostensibly future focused. The trend internationally is towards greater professionalisation of VET teachers and the draft report offers no justification for not taking this route.

Schofield make a convincing case for taking steps to enhance the professionalism of the VET sector, because the alternative can only be ever more increasing and invasive regulation. The draft report notes that the current regulatory arrangements do not deliver high levels of compliance with even the most basic standards.

As the submission from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education argues,

"Unless VET teachers are encouraged to develop as a profession and to take responsibility for the outcomes in VET, the only alternative is increasing regulation. There is considerable research that shows that there needs to be more emphasis on the professionalism of teachers and less on regulation (see particularly Schofield and McDonald 2004). The Draft Report does not offer any suggestion on how the professional identities of VET teachers can be supported and how the profession can be encouraged to take a greater role in its development.

There is considerable support for a VET professional body and this idea is being seriously considered by various peak bodies. For example, Skills Australia (2010: 60) says that: "The role of a professional body to support the development of professional VET practice might also be a consideration for the future." While such a body would require government support in its establishment s, this would be an investment in the development of the VET profession".

6. Silence on the paucity of student completion data

The draft report makes a number of recommendations designed to address the lack of research/ data about particular matters. It is notable that in making the case about the adequacy of VET capability in responding to the needs of disadvantaged students the report relies on student feedback to make the case. The evidence that could assist in understanding this issue would be evidence of adequate completion rates for disadvantaged students and data about post training pathways for this group. Research on this issue should be of the highest priority. We should not rely on student feedback as the only evidence of VET capability in meeting the need of disadvantaged students