



Let's reflect on VET

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This paper was a before-dinner address to the Management Team Retreat of NCVER in October 2007. It looks at how education and training has changed over the last 15 years, and discusses topics such as sustainable development, leadership and management, and literacy and numeracy.

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A little bit backward (the soup)

I appreciated the kind invitation to join you at your senior management team retreat this evening. I have a soft spot for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), having been a member of its Board in the early 1990s and saw the work of the ANTA¹ committee on research and development, which I then chaired, transferred to NCVER. Many years ago I actually worked for the Australian Council for Educational Research, so I have some understanding of the demands on researchers, particularly those who are outside the university sector and facing the time pressures of contract work.

It is now more than 15 years since the ‘training reform agenda’ was launched with some fanfare. As I understand it, we are now to have an ‘educational revolution’—at least if one of the parties is elected. The other is rediscovering ‘technical education’ through the re-establishment of technical colleges. I can still remember when they were closed in the 1970s, in the hope that a comprehensive high school would take over and serve all the educational needs of adolescents, irrespective of their work or education future.

I must say that, while we have much to learn from our educational history, ‘reforms’ come and go and we still have considerable difficulty in our secondary school system, dealing with all the possible work futures that both our society and individual workers require. One fresh approach in the United Kingdom I was impressed with on a recent visit was the establishment of schools that related to a particular industry jointly with the local employers in that industry. They are specialist schools, not elite schools, and there is some evidence that young people perform better in them than they do in the traditional school environment.

A recent report from the Working Group on 14–19 Reform in the United Kingdom proposed (and was mostly accepted) the introduction of new specialised diplomas as an alternative to the GCSE² A levels. These diplomas will include academic and vocational material covering each occupational sector of the economy. They will be available at three levels (don’t they in the United Kingdom fancy themselves as discriminators!): Level 1, Foundation; Level 2, GCSE; and Level 3 (advanced), comparable in scope to three of the old A levels. The diplomas will be available in 14 ‘lines of learning’, each based on an employment sector, with employers having a significant role in their development. This all leads me to state something we have known for a long time: educational divisions are simplistic, causing more trouble than they are worth. Furthermore, they do not get close to representing the real needs of the world of work. Educational institutions become what they can get money for—from governments, from their clients, the young people and their families, and their potential employers. What a change in the landscape there would be if we removed category definitions and allowed educational institutions to chart their own course.

It would seem we are still struggling to position our education systems to meet our technological needs, and struggling even more now these needs have expanded, diversified, and deepened in rigour. We will need tomorrow’s workforce to be not only literate and numerate, but ‘technate’ as well, and NCVER has a role in what this third requirement might mean for Australia.

Following an invitation to be present for a recent NCVER twenty-fifth birthday seminar, which I could not attend, I sent with my note of regret some points about the system I had left about ten years earlier:

¹ Australian National Training Authority; this was abolished in 2005 and its functions taken over by the former Department of Education, Science and Training.

² General Certificate of Secondary Education

- A tremendous opportunity for a cohesive national system was lost when the states rejected the Australian Government's offer to take over vocational education; the Australian National Training Authority subsequently proved a poor way to run a national system.
- There is little evidence that the change from curriculum-driven to competence-driven was worth it and this was a classic example of change being ideologically driven rather than evidence-driven.
- The national focus was appropriate, but the way chosen was extremely difficult to implement: there are other ways to achieve this, and governments are beginning to grapple with some of these now.
- Traineeships were established with good intentions, but they are a mixed bag, and no matter how hard everyone tried, they allowed governments to fund training that should have been funded by employers.
- A training market was sound in principle, but meant that a lot of good things were subordinated to the ideological demands of a market.

After which I said in my note: 'Despite all this, one shining light has been NCVET. Your organisation has changed with the times and is providing an important national service.'

It is interesting to compare the defined territories of universities, schools, and vocational education and training (VET) in the 1990s with the situation now. In one sense each sector has become more tightly defined and, in another, cuckoos have been flourishing everywhere, with the fledglings of one sector in the nests of another. For example, more universities are developing schools and expanding into VET; more schools are ingesting VET and even Years 13 and 14 are being established. VET has always been able to focus on 'what's left', as well as increasing its offerings of higher education. VET has been slow to enter (prevented from entering?) the schools area, as the recent establishment of Australian Technical Colleges attests, yet this was the one expansion that would have made a great deal of sense for both pedagogical and economic reasons.

This movement underlines the point I made earlier: that educational institutions should do what they can obtain funds to do, from whatever source, as long as there are effective systems to reassure the general public and potential clients that quality is being achieved and all the effort is devoted to having students lead fulfilling, purposeful and productive lives.

We categorise education to death and it is at the intersections of the category definitions that the most interesting developments occur. As far as education is concerned, there is no hope of keeping the definitional genie in the bottle! Those institutions of perceived higher status or those that have some natural edge in attracting students will strive hard to retain a definitional advantage. Definitional boundaries will not be sustained unless forced to by the most targeted of funding approaches. Without the heavy-handed coercion of definitional differences, we will soon see educational institutions becoming what they are funded to do, not what some external body may define them as providing. Fences can never be high enough to keep entrepreneurial enterprises out of patches, as the experiment with colleges of advanced education (CAEs) demonstrates. We are lost if we ever say: 'Hey, get out of my patch?'. Defining a patch rather than providing quality and relevance will always lose. And by the way, who is sneaking into NCVET's patch? The main difference between sectors or even institutions that will survive is their governance and financing, not their definition.

A little bit forward (the entrée)

I am not a futurist, not at least in terms of predicting the future and what will happen. I am much more interested in developing scenarios for a future we might want and determining plans and processes for this to happen. For example, if the future for education were to be based on

governance and funding differences rather than definitions (dare I mention vouchers!) and we think this would deliver a better educational system, how would we work towards bringing it about? If it is inevitable, as I might be suggesting, would it be smart to give a little planning help?

The current election build-up must have us all thinking about the kind of future we want for ourselves and our children, and particularly what kind of education system. The major parties know this and have put considerable effort into policy development in education. What we do now determines our future—whether for ourselves and families, for our workplaces like NCVER, or for our country—as people decide who to vote for in the coming election. Too often we spend our time discussing matters on which our efforts can have little impact, and not enough on those areas where we can bring about change. I think this is one of the most significant management and leadership issues to be faced.

Mark McCrindle of McCrindle Research Pty Ltd (is he in the NCVER patch yet?) in an address at a recent Association of Heads of Independent Schools in Australia conference I attended discussed important changes in the way we do things and, as I listened, I wondered where VET would position itself on the continuum he outlined. I took down his categories, but added the comments:

<i>Tradition:</i> This is how we've always done it.	<i>Innovation:</i> Here's a better way of doing things.
<i>Experts:</i> We know how to do it, trust us: leave the problem to us.	<i>Peer groups:</i> We'll find out together what is going on from the best sources. Since the outcome will impact on me, I want to know what's going on.
<i>Participation:</i> Someone else owns it but we like being part of it.	<i>Ownership:</i> we want the keys to the vault and deserve our share.
<i>Analytical:</i> Let's think this through and decide what to do	<i>Experiential:</i> Let's 'suck it and see'. What are the similarities/differences with other things we have done?
<i>Technical:</i> What are the specs? Have I got the tools?	<i>Relational:</i> Who can we find to do this? Who will come with me to discuss the issue?
<i>Hierarchy:</i> We do what the boss says and that's what goes.	<i>Empowerment:</i> It is not who the boss is, but how they work with us, that are important.
<i>Content:</i> The outcome is all: results/bottom line is the evidence for success.	<i>Process:</i> This is the best way to do it for those doing it, for sustainability and for the outcome.
<i>Regional:</i> Our market is local and we know everyone involved here.	<i>Global:</i> We know our part of the business and the world is our oyster.

From (Builders/boomers)

To (X, Y, Z generations)

If we want a story to exemplify the difference between generation Z (my son) and the builder generation (me), one goes like this: Father brought home the new toaster and the six-year-old wanted to make some toast from one of those lovely tall loaves that contain everything but what loaves of bread used to contain when I was a boy. Turn on, no trouble. Pop up, no trouble. He looked doubtfully at the bread and said: 'Dad, portrait or landscape?'

A few words about VET (the main course)

We have now had the soup and the entree: what then is dinner? I will now explain why I have given a perhaps unusual structure to my address. It is rare that I achieve a 'first' at this time in my life, but this is the first time I have been invited to give a 'before dinner but after drinks speech'. I had to think about the rules of engagement for such a challenge. Or perhaps we'll work them out as we go along. Please feel free to raise issues as we go.

We all know about ‘after dinner speeches’, where the job of the chair is to get it in before too much alcohol has been consumed, giving the speaker the task of telling some stories that might retain audience interest over the clatter, while eyes stray to the full bottles of red at other tables, where only white wine and water have been drunk. A difficulty especially arises if the speaker is sober and the audience is ‘half-cut’, or, if the speaker is ‘half-cut’ and the audience is sober. I presume it was these possibilities that led to tonight’s arrangements.

In the first case there is no way the speaker *cannot* go on too long, unless they just say ‘hello’ and sit down immediately. A sub-set of this occurs when the time taken to introduce the speaker is longer than the length time they actually speak. I saw this once when an eminent judge introduced an equally eminent Governor. Perhaps the pithiest speech I have ever heard was on TV at the Oscars’ dinner last year. Brad Bird, director and writer of the cartoon film, *The Incredibles*, got up after a too-long introduction and said: ‘Animation is about creating the illusion of life and you can’t create it if you don’t have one’. And sat down. Obviously, you are not this lucky tonight.

To give you further clues on where we as a Western society might be headed, today’s *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the top five words, as in put into Google, are Nazi, terrorism, Tom Cruise, Botox and marijuana. I am not sure where training and education come, but if this is a sample of the most common, I would expect a long way down the list!

The worst case of an after-dinner speech is where the ‘half-cut’ speaker takes the increasing noise from the audience as a sign of close interest in what is being said, and they go on, and on, and on—eventually with the chair literally pulling the speaker down to his seat. (It would not be a woman!) I will let you fill in the names for this example.

I have entitled the address ‘Let’s reflect on VET’, having given it a working title of ‘Let’s get VET’, based on the fact that VET seems always to be the country cousin when funding across sectors is determined. The highly detailed riding instructions I received from your Director amounted to his asking me to ‘reflect on VET currently’—and anything else I may wish to say. With instructions like that my canvas can be very broad!

A caveat perhaps: I left TAFENSW in 1995 and have not had anything to do with VET in Australia since, although I have done quite a bit of international work. I really have lost touch here, and probably I see things too clearly—or not at all. I did not find that being an acolyte of the training reform agenda came easily, so it was probably better for the system if I faded from the scene.

Indeed, it was only when I returned to Adelaide three or so years ago that I was reminded of the ubiquity of VET when I started seeing blue VET signs all over town, including one at the end of my street. ‘Wow, VET really has become local, that’s good, I thought’, until I realised that these were veterinarians advertising their wares by stealing the VET symbol. It had nothing to do with the VET I knew! How long before we see TAFE (technical and further education) all over the place to mean ‘Teach A Friend Enterprise’?

Which leads me to a ‘few words on words’; or, perhaps, ‘some acrimony on acronyms’. Acronyms first: when preparing this speech, I quickly discovered that my acronym knowledge was out of date. I found something called ESD—Education for Sustainable Development, apparently a subset of SD. I then found CCAR (Coordinating Committee for Automotive Repair) and DEMI (Design for the Environment Multimedia Implementation). It dragged me back to my first weeks in TAFENSW when I had to have people advise me what the TAFE acronyms were and meant, and some of the VET words as well. VET does have a language of its own.

I was to discover that the acronym formed from the words very quickly came to mean something different from the words themselves. VET or is it TVET³ or is it tvet (not in capitals) or is 'Tech' much more than vocational education and training. Because of use, a whole cache of meaning is lost when you say vocational education and training rather than VET. I am reminded that the CWA is trying to morph into Chicks With Attitude as a classic example of the acronym trying to mean more than the words.

In Teaching Australia we have banned using the acronym, TA, for two reasons: it will come to mean something different from the words; and second, 'TA' is very easy to use it in a way that diminishes the status of its original concept, for example, when funding is being considered. It is quite another matter to talk ill of something that has both Australia and teaching in its title, and both these are used in full in a sentence. In any event, to someone as old as I am, TA means 'travel allowance' and subliminally that would be very easy to cut!

If we ask the general public what VET means, if they don't say someone who looks after the cat, they might say it is the course they do in TAFE. A good example of what I mean is to put VET next to 'university'. In a competition for funds to do ostensibly the same task, for example, which will win? If the desire is a 'cheapie' to do the job, VET is on a winner. If the aim is quality and a rise in status, then the university will receive the funds.

'TAFE' is another acronym that seems to have lost power over the last decade. After Kangan and the sector's establishment, TAFE gradually strengthened, taking on each state's requirement for post-school education and training that lay outside universities. TAFE came to mean much more than 'technical and further education'.

Then came the training reform agenda with its market-driven training and competitive funding imperatives. Unfortunately over the years, the new agenda (or an old agenda in new clothes) caused the more generalised term 'VET' to be strengthened, while the power of TAFE as a word and an idea became diminished. Vocational education seemed to be a zero sum game, rather than a 'both and' game. For VET to gain, TAFE had to lose, rather than both being strengthened.

The language we have inherited in VET is a mix of academic, bureaucratic, employer, and union lingo, larded with considerable 'common parlance'. We have also inherited ways of expression that keep VET/TAFE in its place below school and university education. This has occurred for many reasons of which I will mention two: first, because VET/TAFE is at the bottom of some educational hierarchy, our language has come to be associated with a low-status educational activity. And, second, people have used low-status language to keep VET/TAFE in its place. For example, the words 'competency-based' so at the heart of VET have little if any positive impact (much negative) in schools and universities and is used to denigrate TAFE/VET programs.

It is amazing where acronyms crop up: NCVER says much more than its individual words do, which is strength and a weakness. NCVER has become strong and respected through the success of what it has been doing. The world expects this to go on (a strength), while to continue to move in the direction implied by the words 'National Centre for Vocational Education Research', may diminish its effectiveness. 'Make over' does not only apply to fallen film stars and footballers, it refers to enterprises as well. In this twenty-first century, no enterprise, particularly a research one, can rely solely on its core business if it is to survive. It is the opportunities the core business creates to do other things that are important to its future. Vocational research must lead to a definition and assessment of technacy, a technical curriculum and its pedagogy, at very least.

I want to move to the meat of the main course by giving some perspectives on various words we use in VET and other places. They change their meaning. A word that is perfectly good for a while loses power and may well come to mean something else. Those of you who read *The*

³ Technical and vocational education and training

Advertiser will know Michael Atchison's rather arcane cartoon 'Word for Word'. Today's word was custard, which once meant the pie itself, coming from 'crustade'. Now it means the yellow stuff that messes people when you throw it at them. Probably one of the most rapid devaluations of a word is 'awesome'. Just yesterday a courier came to our door to leave a parcel which required a signature. I duly obliged, and instead of thank you, yes, you've guessed it, I got 'awesome'!

Education and training

This pair of words has been in tension since the 1970s. We tend to use both together to make sure no one is offended! Each on their own can be derogatory: education, because it is associated with soft academic approaches, 'left wing pinkos' in our universities, and teachers who see their role as educating by 'helping young people learn', rather than teaching them. While the power of 'education' as a word is losing ground, training, on the other hand, is gaining ground, not so much because of the rise of VET, but because universities have suddenly discovered that they are preparing professionals who need to be 'trained'. We train doctors, engineers, lawyers, but educate teachers! Indeed in VET we have to put the two words together to put our message across!

The way the boundaries between so-called sectors are being blurred may be shown by two political announcements: Labor's \$2.5 billion for trades training centres in schools and the Prime Minister's announcement of the need for 'closer links between universities and TAFE' as a way to bolster student numbers in country universities and, as Minister Robb said, 'to make TAFE more responsive to market needs'. The old rhetoric is back! Don't bet on his being right, but Vice Chancellor Young of Swinburne University (of Technology) said 'it would be foolish to create another layer of education for the purpose'. Note how Queensland University of Technology, Victorian University of Technology, Swinburne University of Technology and Curtin University of Technology all had to modify the word 'university' with its devaluing word 'technology' before state legislatures could come at naming them 'universities', and how some of these institutions write 'of technology' in letters so small that we do not notice they are there. So much for the possibility of the equivalence of academic and technical education!

Core business

Yes, we have all heard it: stick to the knitting and focus on our core business. That was fine in the days when we had not stated clearly what our core business was, but these days, instead of the 'core business' label identifying a fence, it identifies the region of strength from which the enterprise can move as the market and trends move, or allows it to set a trend. These days, companies that studiously focus on their core business as it had originally been defined are setting themselves up for extinction, because change in most fields is so rapid. Look at the famous businesses that we thought were here for ever, and have now become extinct. Adelaide Steamship is now almost lost to memory, despite its more than a century of service to South Australia.

Sustainable development

We all know and applaud recycling, walking to work, and using 'green' energy, but what does it mean to a research organisation devoted to gathering evidence, analysing policy, and playing with or selling ideas. Of course VET has a substantial role to play in having training programs that focus on making their students understand industry's expectations for sustainability (that is, teaching for a future occupation) and also allowing students to experience how their knowledge fits the wider community demands for sustainability. I note that UNEVOC is to have a virtual conference on TVET for a sustainable future. I can feel already the shift or weakening in the power of these two words, hastened I expect by Al Gore's Nobel Peace Prize.

The point I really wanted to make is that sustainable development, if we take it seriously, acts against the focus on the core business syndrome. Everything you do must have the widest possible application; this is best summarised by selling not so much evidence or research, as in your case, although this is important, but selling *solutions*. Too often solutions looking for a problem are sold; the plethora of gadgets available is tribute to this approach. A real solution makes something a bit more sustainable.

Leadership and management

These two are a little like education and training. Unless they are taken together, an important component of one is lost if we only talk about the other. I am not a great user of words with ‘ship’ at the end. ‘Ship’ words create distance between the person fulfilling the function and the function being fulfilled. The leader or manager has to do the management or leadership; that is, the ‘who’. Leading and managing are about what and how, the process to be undertaken—also important. Leadership and management is the abstract result of these two, which distances us from the tasker and the task.

To paraphrase the old saying about teachers for managers, ‘those who can, do, those who cannot do, manage, and those who can’t manage become leaders of an enterprise, taking it down a dark path to goodness knows where, and certainly not understood by us at the “doing” end!’ This kind of parody does great harm, when we all know that successful enterprises are well led and well managed. This is particularly true of VET institutions, and I am sure of NCVET as well, as the management team takes it forward. Another parody is that managers always say ‘no’ to any suggestion for change because it will give more work, while leaders clutch onto the next bandwagon idea and expect the managers to make it happen.

Teaching Australia has a practical program for principals of schools across sectors and states on school principal leadership. We try to get them to understand that leadership and management go hand in hand. As the old song goes: ‘You can’t have one without the other’. There is no future in the idea that the principal sits back and leads while others do the managing—the mundane stuff. Leadership must be sharpened by the harsh realities of budgeting, managing those budgets, doing paperwork that matters, looking after the interests of staff, so that the leader is close to the enterprise and understands issues facing staff and how to solve them. The leader also needs to determine direction. To me the signs of a good leader–manager (I have to use the two words together to suggest an integrated whole) that I check whenever I can, are:

- The desk is fairly untidy, but the person knows where everything is.
- The emails and paperwork are done promptly.
- They are available immediately or very soon on the telephone to anybody with a legitimate need; or, the person ringing in knows when they will be available to take a call.
- Their executive assistant knows what is important and if the leader–manager is not available, what they would do. (This principle applies quite widely.)
- They know which medium of communication to use, in order: face-to-face, telephone, email, letter. A letter of request is never sent unless the writer knows the answer.
- They enjoy playing with ideas, come up with a surprise response, so that others in the team think ‘why didn’t I think of that’. They extract good ideas from others, but don’t steal them. In fact, it is better if others feel they can claim good ideas as their own, irrespective of the stimulus for them.
- They don’t have slaves and there are no hierarchies unless the chips are down.
- Above all, they know their organisation well and are never ‘out of their depth’, no matter what the job to be done or the conversation.

Evidence-based

I know people committed to stopping conversations always ask ‘what is the evidence?’ And they used to catch me out from time to time: after all, wasn’t what I said either obvious or common knowledge. It can be the first response to a ‘do nothing’ approach to an issue. Often the problem arises faster than hard evidence can be gathered, and waiting around is not an option. On the other hand, and NCVER must see it too often, there is evidence available that would help policy development or counter a prejudice, which is not used. NCVER has a particular responsibility in this respect, and the idea of providing solutions rather than evidence or research reports is important.

We in policy development often say to researchers: ‘Stick to your knitting, don’t give us recommendations because we will be unable to handle them’. Such an approach will be less and less useful in the decades ahead and, increasingly, researchers must be skilled at advising the policy implications of a particular piece of research in a way that policy-makers and governments can handle. Refer back to the right-hand side of the table I gave earlier, which in effect gives the attributes of a modern researcher, and take seriously what the idea of sustainability might mean to research design. The researcher would know what the evidence might inform and what problems it may help solve. In other words, the researcher’s training would prepare them for the wider brief.

I try not to use ‘evidence-based’ but rather ‘evidence-informed’, so that the discussion does not necessarily stop when evidence is called for. It would be great if we could *base* all our decisions on evidence, but we can’t for a number of reasons: the evidence is almost certainly not a direct response to the problem for which a solution is required; the evidence is often shonky, and the more evidence there is, the more likely it is that some of it is shonky; and evidence is often gathered by those with some kind of stake in the result and so they slant it to a purpose. Yet we can be *informed* by evidence and it helps to *illuminate* the problem at hand.

Literacy, numeracy and technacy

There is plenty of evidence about the first two, even though it is rare for tertiary institutions (universities and TAFE institutes alike) to focus on these deliberately within most courses. I could expand on this, but will not. Rather, I think organisations with ‘technical’ in their title have a responsibility to develop tests for technacy or technical understanding. I am not talking just about computer or information technology skills, although my teenager who is quite computer-savvy has not been taught touch keyboard skills either in primary or secondary school. No, I am talking about the skills you need to function effectively in our ever-expanding technological world. The day will come when technacy is taught and tested and, if we think it a good idea, perhaps we can influence when it might become part-and-parcel of all the teaching in our educational institutions. I have almost come to the view that the development of technacy through specific curriculum attention may be more satisfying to young people and be more effective in preparing for most work than say chemistry and physics and even have a greater and more relevant effect on their personal development.

Academic, vocational/technical

Too often these two words are put as opposites in a learning paradigm: schools and universities are academic and teach the academic subjects, while technical colleges and TAFE teach vocational subjects and skills. Dare I say what the brain causes to be spoken or written is given greater standing than what the brain causes to be made. Some would say that a general education can come through almost any curriculum, academic or technical, if personal development is the aim. On the other hand, very specific knowledge and skills are needed for the workplace. The dichotomy that these two words create for educators is false and the educational dilemmas for institutions and systems difficult to manage. This is why the United Kingdom solution of the 14

lines of learning for the senior school seems to have the seeds of a very good idea. These can be expanded into new vocational areas—or contracted when the particular knowledge area is no longer relevant. What we need is not elitist or highly selective schools, although there will always be some demand for these, but specialist schools that tie their whole curriculum and its teaching and assessment to the needs of particular enterprise areas. For one thing, they will make students address something called the real world of work at a level appropriate to them.

Coming to an end (the dessert!)

I had a much longer list of words and phrases that didn't make the cut today. Ethics and risks; competencies and skills; evaluation, assessment and testing; processes, pedagogies and outcomes; localisation and globalisation; competition and cooperation; unifying and polarising; teams and groups, resources and time; and add some!

Rather than address more of these, I will leave you with what have been described as the four R's of the twenty-first century. Is it, or are we:

- real?
- relevant?
- responsive?
- relational?

These provide the checks we will have to apply in education/training in the new world of face books, virtual cities, instant global responses, and huge circles of people in unfettered communication with each other. This new world has many positives, but it also has the negatives of stress, polarisation, anxiety, and lack of meaning to life. And I think dealing with the four R's is something VET and NCVET could take as their guide to navigate the decades ahead. Maybe they could even underpin an 'educational revolution', or be at the core of what the proposed technical colleges might achieve.