



As clear as mud: defining vocational education and training

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About the research



As clear as mud: defining vocational education and training

Tom Karmel

In this short presentation Tom Karmel discusses what constitutes vocational education and training (VET) in Australia. He argues that a simple definition—that it is occupation-specific training—is not helpful in explaining vocational education and training. Qualification levels are also not helpful. Rather, vocational education and training is distinguished from higher education by different funding and regulatory arrangements, and different teaching and learning styles. What really confuses the issue is that many providers are delivering both higher education and vocational education and training.

As clear as mud¹

A naïve definition of vocational education and training (VET) might be that it is education and training that is designed for specific occupations. Thus one would label trade training as vocational because it is designed to train tradespersons. However, much training in universities is also of this nature; occupation-specific training is clearly the focus of higher education courses in medicine, engineering, accountancy and so on. In the same vein, much VET training at the certificate III/IV level is quite generic in nature, in the sense that graduates of these courses end up in all sorts of occupations (see Karmel, Mlotkowski & Awodeyi 2009); the match between course and occupation is quite low.

Thus this definition is of little use.

A possible modification to this definition would be to restrict such training to the sub-professional level. However, this merely invites argument over what is meant by sub-professional training, and definitions of what is professional and sub-professional largely revolve around qualification levels. And the entry-level qualification into many occupations is continually changing; for example, a two-year diploma was a standard entry-level qualification into primary school teaching in the 1960s, but now almost all new teachers are four-year-trained.

An alternative approach would be to define vocational education and training, and thus higher education, by qualification level. In fact the Australian Qualifications Framework, currently under revision, has done this, but this framework is defined along sectoral lines rather than qualification levels. Thus the higher education and vocational education and training streams are presented as separate streams, with some overlap by level. Diplomas, in particular, are qualifications that are offered in both streams.

This leads us to a position which distinguishes between higher education and vocational education and training on the basis of the providers. On one hand we have universities and other higher education providers and, on the other, institutes of technical and further education (TAFE) and other registered training providers. However, this distinction has largely broken down. The majority of universities are registered training providers and deliver VET certificates, not to mention the dual-sector universities such as RMIT University and Victoria University. We are also beginning to see some TAFE institutes awarding degrees (art, for example, and nursing).² So this approach also does not lead to a clear differentiation between higher education and VET.

However, I am not arguing that there is no difference between higher education and VET. Rather, it is the pedagogic tradition and funding arrangements that distinguish them. Higher education is delivered mainly by universities that accredit their own courses (plus a small number of providers who deliver courses which are individually accredited by state-based higher education authorities³). The funding for higher education provision is dominated by the Commonwealth Government. The arrangements for VET are rather different. First, the providers are registered under the Australian Qualifications Training Framework (AQTF), and hence known as registered training organisations,

¹ The presentation draws closely on Karmel (forthcoming).

² These degrees are accredited by state higher education authorities.

³ Typically, the states set up committees made up of academics from the universities.

to deliver certain qualifications. The qualifications are based on nationally determined training packages which set out the competencies to be achieved. The public funds for this delivery go through the state training authorities (although the Commonwealth has funded providers directly through the Productivity Places Program).

While the accreditation arrangements and funding arrangements differ between the sectors, there is another very large difference: the pedagogical tradition. The curriculum for higher education courses is based on notions of knowledge and understanding, while VET courses are based on the concept of competency. The interpretation of competencies is relatively narrow, being based on the tasks and skills required. The competencies are specified in training packages, which are developed by industry skills councils. This arrangement results in the characterisation of VET as being industry-led, quite different from higher education, in which the teaching institution determines what is taught. This is actually an exaggeration because the professional bodies have a considerable say in what is taught in courses such as medicine, engineering and accounting.

Consequently, we have two traditions with different pedagogical traditions and funding and accountability arrangements. These arrangements, however, are becoming blurred because they no longer line up simply with different types of providers. As the title says 'as clear as mud'.

References

- Karmel, T (forthcoming) 'The implication of skills deepening for vocational education and training in Australia', *International Journal of Training Research*.
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