

The role of VET in workforce development: a story of conflicting expectations

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RESEARCH REPORT

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About the research

The role of VET in workforce development: a story of conflicting expectations

Tanya Bretherton, Workplace Research Centre

This is the final report from a three-year program of research investigating the role of vocational education and training (VET) in workforce development. The research focuses on meat processing and child care, both of which are characterised by low-skill entry points to the labour market. The author pulls together the key themes emerging from the research and puts the focus firmly on the ability of VET to respond to the workforce development challenges within those industries.

The researchers have developed a four-domain model, which they use to understand the skills development of workers in each sector. The four domains are: the product or service (for example, child care or meat processing); the industrial organisation structure (for example, the role of internal labour markets); labour supply; and VET.

The VET system faces conflicting expectations and it is often criticised by industry for not being responsive to industry needs. However, rapidly changing conditions in the relevant industry and variation in the demands of individual employers make this a difficult task. Providing high-quality training is also made difficult by the high degree of casualisation in the workforce of those sectors and the lack of reward for upgrading qualifications. In the child-care sector, there is little in the form of increased pay for upgraded qualifications. In meat processing, training is typically focused on single tasks and the status of qualifications remains low – investing in high-level training is not worthwhile when labour turnover is high.

Thus, in both industries, we have an equilibrium characterised by low pay and relatively low levels of training. Bretherton argues that the way to move away from low levels of training is to improve the status of VET qualifications in these industries by creating the notion of ‘vocation’ based on the idea of groups of skills, thus playing down skill development alone as a means for upward mobility.

This is a provocative suggestion and emerges from the idea that we can compensate for low status and low wages by promoting child care and meat processing as ‘noble callings’. A more conventional economic view would be that the only way of moving away from a low-skills equilibrium would be to provide greater rewards for higher skill levels. However, this will not happen in the child-care industry unless governments or parents are prepared to pay a lot more for child care and, in the meat-processing industry, consumers a lot more for their meat. This is unlikely to occur for the simple reason that both industries, while complaining about the extent of labour turnover, have not had any real difficulty in recruiting workers prepared to work at current wage levels. Some low-skill and low-paid jobs are inevitable and individuals typically undertake education and training to move on from them.

Irrespective of whether we agree with Bretherton’s viewpoint, she and her colleagues have made us think about the complex relationships between industry structure and levels of training.

Readers are directed to the NCVET website for the previous reports from this program of research.

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Executive summary

A ‘productivity agenda’ underpins economic and social policy in Australia (Australian Government 2008). This agenda argues that economic prosperity, and an associated high standard of living, can only be maintained through high levels of workforce participation, and development of this workforce through education and skill enhancement. Investment in learning, in particular, is identified as a core priority for both public infrastructure and the private sector, and indeed for individuals themselves (affirmed in the form of the lifelong learning principle). Historically, the productivity agenda has clearly defined the significance of school education (retention rates) and tertiary education (high rates of completion) as important foundations for maintaining economic growth and for meeting the needs for a flexible economy. More recently, the key role that early childhood learning can have in establishing the foundation for high levels of workforce participation has also been identified (Swan 2010). The role of VET, however, has remained defined by somewhat contradictory expectations.

The key question guiding this research program is: how can VET contribute to enhancing productivity and increasing workforce participation? The research has sought to explore this question from both supply and demand standpoints. On one hand, the research program asks how might VET initiatives contribute to workforce development and enterprise performance in the current environment? On the other hand, the project explores the issues surrounding the development of underutilised labour pools and asks: are VET initiatives, job networks and labour market intermediaries responsive to the intensifying labour supply constraints on economic growth?

The insights from this paper have emerged from three years of research exploring these questions. In order to test the validity of the findings of this program, a national roundtable of VET experts was held in Sydney in October 2010. This paper represents the culmination of the analysis, identifies some key themes and outcomes to arise from the program overall and goes further to note the strategic importance of these findings in the context of VET policy. The deliberations from the roundtable have also been incorporated into this paper.

This paper first identifies that workforce development studies are enhanced by broader, comparative modes of analysis. In the early stages of the research program, four domains were identified as critical to the form and trajectory of workforce development at the sectoral level. These four domains are: product or service of interest; deployment; labour supply; and VET. These domains have been explored in two case study sectors of interest: meat processing and child care. The four-domain approach is important because it broadens the focus and purview of workforce development analysis beyond qualification and skill alone.

A number of key points of interest arise from the application of the four-domain model to the analysis. The paper identifies that a comparative analysis of VET can be insightful, even across sectors or industries of seemingly dissimilar focus or activity. The paper draws on the observations of meat-processing and child-care sector participants to distil the core strategic challenges of workforce development for each sector. Interestingly, both sectors define these challenges in similar ways. Both make a distinction between internal (actual) and external (potential) labour market challenges. Perhaps the most powerful comparison that might be drawn between meat processing and child care is that ‘reputation’ directly shapes the difficulties faced in sourcing and maintaining good labour flows for both of the sectors. In terms of the VET response, both sectors face some common training and development challenges, despite their radically different fields of activity. In addition, VET also appears to be an

‘instrumental’ force in both sectors, in the sense that VET activity can play a role in either reducing or reinforcing the poor reputation of a sector, particularly amongst prospective employees.

Secondly, this paper identifies that possible VET responses to common workforce development challenges are constrained by conflicting expectations. This paper argues that tensions in the VET response arise from two distinct labour challenges at the sectoral level – challenges to retain and develop labour already within the sector (termed ‘internal’ labour for the purposes of this paper) and challenges to attract and develop potential labour (labelled ‘external’ labour). Both meat processing and child care indicate a need for a bedrock or stable pool of labour which requires sector-relevant and appropriate skill development. On the other hand, both sectors have historically been unwilling to establish systems (sector-wide permanency) which might facilitate continuity of training and therefore a more streamlined approach to the skill development needs of labour. The role of VET in both sectors is also conflicted. On one hand, VET appears to offer workers the opportunity to develop (through career development and longer-term engagement with a sector); on the other hand, the low status typically associated with VET activity in both meat processing and child care serves to reinforce the low status of both sectors in labour market terms. The paper notes that perceptions of skill can play a critical role in changing perceptions of work itself.

Both sectors also recognise a deep contradiction associated with the VET sector itself, for slightly different reasons. The VET sector is chartered with the responsibility to upskill, in line with a broad policy agenda to reshape the composition of the labour market; however, this broad policy agenda is not consistent with the immediate needs of either of the case study sectors. In meat processing, this is because the need for entry-level labour is essential for ongoing efficiency. In child care, the role of VET is uncertain; the sector argues that VET has generally performed poorly in delivering sufficiently skilled labour.

The paper concludes with a discussion of alternative ways whereby skill development and conceptual frameworks for understanding skill might be utilised by both of the sectors in this study. In particular, the notion of a vocation, with a supporting ‘continuum of skill’, is raised as a possible alternative structure. A ‘vocation’ houses or nestles groups of skills in a way that offers the opportunity to develop offshoots of specialisation, but it does not promote skill development as a means for upward mobility in the conventional sense. This notion of a vocation may present both meat processing and child care with a more viable framework on which to structure and understand skill development. Adopting new paradigms of skill development, however, would require significant collective change at the societal, workplace and systemic level, and most certainly at the level of individual.

Introduction

The key question that guided the three-year research program was: how can VET contribute to enhancing productivity and increasing workforce participation? The research has sought to explore this question from both supply and demand standpoints. On one hand, the research investigated how VET initiatives might contribute to workforce development and enterprise performance. On the other, the project explores the issues surrounding the development of underutilised labour pools and asks whether VET initiatives, job networks and labour market intermediaries are responsive to the intensifying labour supply constraints on economic growth. The insights of this paper have emerged from the three years of research exploring these questions.

The analysis is premised on a four-domain model, developed in the early stages of the research program.¹ This model was used to identify and understand the key domains of activity which influence the development of labour within a sector. These domains are: the product or service of interest; decision-making frameworks underpinning deployment; labour supply issues; and VET. This paper reflects on the usefulness of this model in understanding the role of VET and so draws upon a range of findings identified throughout the research. In order to extend the relevance of these discussions, we also draw upon new insights provided by a roundtable event, convened in Sydney in October 2010. This roundtable included 20 key VET stakeholders (VET providers, VET policy specialists and key VET commentators) drawn from across Australia and from both sectors of interest to this project.² The insights provided during the course of this roundtable will be used to contextualise the findings of the overall research program and, ultimately, to identify the relevance and longer-term significance of the key findings for the VET sector.

¹ A more detailed explanation of the model is available in the first paper in this series *Understanding VET, productivity and workforce participation: an issues paper* by J Evesson et al. (NCVER, Adelaide, 2009).

² More than 50 participants were invited to attend, representing a mix of characteristics, including geographic location (rural and metropolitan), public and private (TAFE and private registered training organisations) and workplace-based and non-workplace-based training agencies.

What is workforce development?

Before the findings of the research program and associated roundtable can be discussed, it is important to describe the conceptual starting point for our work in this field. When undertaking an analysis examining the relationship between workforce development and VET, the researcher immediately confronts the difficulty of definition. The term ‘workforce development’ is often applied as if there is a widely accepted understanding of the term. In reality, ‘workforce development’ operates more as a catch-all term and reflects a wide variety and shifting range of issues, all of which could potentially fall within the purview of this analysis. Haralson (2010) and Jacobs (2002) note that organisational, individual and community perspectives on economic security, growth and productivity may all be present in the concept. In addition, the concept of workforce development is factored into other institutions and structures, including income support structures (Skills Australia 2010), human resource management concerns (Reilly et al. 2007), career planning (National Council of Social Services 2007), education systems and outcomes (Jacobs 2002), wider logistical infrastructure (Skills Australia 2010), social systems and cultural and social mores (White 2010). Consequently, the ‘end points’ of workforce development analyses remain opaque, because a definition of a positive workforce development outcome remains difficult to identify and is far from agreed.

In contrast, there appears to be a high degree of consensus over what represents an appropriate ‘starting point’ for discussions on workforce development. Training, skill and learning form the basis of debate, discussion and strategic planning on workforce development (OECD 2008; Jacobs & Hawley 2009). At the local workplace level too, it is argued that workforce development must be understood in ‘skill’ terms. As a recent report from the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal (2006) states: ‘Firms’ productivity, competitiveness and profitability are largely shaped by their ability to develop and effectively deploy a skilled workforce’.

While there is some general acceptance that workforce development deals with the momentum and direction of skill development, the research next confronts the problem of methodological approach. A typical starting point for a workforce development analysis is a consideration of the issue through the prism of occupational and/or sectoral experience alone. This assumption is used to justify the use of classifications emerging directly from the VET system (for example, qualification, participation, completion) to generate analytical categories that will illuminate the skill trajectory of a workforce. Historically, sectoral projections based on occupational matrices have formed the basis of much of the understanding relating to workforce development challenges. These, it is argued, will map skill needs (Australian Apprenticeships Taskforce 2009). Occupation in particular often forms a proxy for understanding the ‘levels’ of skill held within an industry (Richardson & Tan 2008).

Keep (2005), among others (Cram & Watson 2008), notes some particular weaknesses in this approach. Keep notes that occupational focus alone cannot provide the complexities required to understand the depth of workforce development challenge. Richardson and Tan (2008) and Forward (2007) claim that the use of occupation as a skill proxy carries with it all of the flaws that exist within current occupational frameworks. Lowry, Molloy and McGlennen note that ‘traditional measures such as qualification and earnings have inherent weaknesses as proxies for skill’ (2008, p.193). In other words, to rely on a sectoral or occupational analysis alone is to reproduce the flaws inherent in current understandings and conceptions of skill, and this is certain to result in a misleading account of workforce development needs. In addition to this, a qualitative analysis of the employer decision-

making frameworks underpinning deployment and skill development offers critical insights that can provide a better informed picture of the workforce development and skill issues facing a sector.

The contribution of a four-domain model – reflections on a conceptual framework

This research program has proposed a four-domain model as a way to consider the analytical challenge of workforce development. This model has emerged from the growing recognition that learning and skill development must consider structures and factors not only within the workplace but also external to the workplace. Felstead et al. (2009) term these ‘interconnecting factors’, while Jacobs and Hawley (2009) describe them as the policies, programs, conceptual boundaries and limitations surrounding all that can be considered ‘learning for work’.

The roundtable event held to conclude this research program offered an opportunity not only to assess the relevance of the four domains to VET experience, but also to reflect on the extent to which cross-industry comparisons are useful in the context of workforce development analyses. Participants at the roundtable concurred that the four-domain model represents a useful way to consider the concept of workforce development, because it allows for *well-rounded discussions of VET* to take place. These discussions are also important because they permit connections between influential factors such as employment regulation, workplace culture, staff morale and attitude to work and training to also be taken into account. As one roundtable participant from the child-care sector noted, *it offers the opportunity to generate ideas around the concept of workforce development that aren't so bogged down in the nuts and bolts of a sector's politics*. Or, as another participant from the meat-processing sector described the four-domain model, *the framework provides a way to think about how these different factors connect to create the conditions in a sector*. Table 1 represents a comprehensive analysis of the core ‘skill’ challenges within each sector, set against identified workforce development challenges and using the four domains of activity to highlight the interconnectedness of issues relevant to VET contribution and performance.

Looking beyond a single-sector focus

The potential benefit of comparative studies to the field of vocational education and training research and policy analysis is well established, particularly system analyses which compare at the national level (Keating et al. 2002). While the role of comparative research has been explored at the national and system levels of VET, its use at the sectoral or industry level remains limited. Where VET behaviour and experience is shared, it tends to occur within sector or within the industry skills council purview (Skills Australia 2010) or, indeed, between sectors considered to possess similar characteristics. Implicit within these approaches is the assumption that one domain of activity – product or service of interest – is paramount in defining the nature of the workforce development challenge faced. More recent studies (Dymock & Billett 2009) speculate that value may be derived from sharing both systemic and experiential VET wisdom, beyond the boundaries of industry-based organisations or industry skills councils. Table 1 represents a distilled account of research findings, along with the post-research reflections of workforce development and VET experience, from these two very different sectors. Looking beyond the focus on product or service of interest alone, it is possible to identify some surprising commonalities between the two sectors, in terms of skill and workforce development challenge.

Table 1 Workforce development commonalities: meat-processing and child-care sectors comparison

Convention within industry	Workforce development implications	Skill commonalities
INTERNAL LABOUR CONCERNS		
Product or service of interest: defining features		
Act of work inherently labour-intensive (historically, and has remained so)	Both industries defined by tight/narrow profit margins	Little money available for 'speculative' or 'expansive' training represents poor investment
Key features of deployment		
Strong custom of 'floor to management' progression	Creation of internal labour markets important and preferred	On-the-job skills – custom, practice, experience – all considered critical elements of 'learning' the job. Both sectors rely on skill adaptation (cut and preparation of meat for new markets and changing mores in care and socialisation in child care)
Labour supply: key challenges		
Historical acceptance of high turnover	Institutionalised norms around temporary engagement of workers ('casual permanent' in child care, high casualisation in meat)	Perceived little benefit in 'expansive' training or higher-level training, as staff may leave
Place of VET		
Strong imperative to train (worker safety and food safety in meat, and duty of care in child care)	Gatekeeper qualifications important (certificate III critical for key entry roles)	Little opportunities for expansive learning, as skill development mobilises around regulatory minimum
Sector position in labour market terms	Workforce development implications for the sector	Skill commonalities
EXTERNAL LABOUR CONCERNS		
Product or service of interest		
Delivery of functional tasks emphasised, delivered in a uniform way	Tick-the-box approach to quality control and regulation, structured around very set threshold criteria (e.g. safety food standards testing in meat processing versus accreditation standards of centres in child care)	'Limits' of skill development well defined, possibilities for future skill development less well defined unless exploring opportunities to develop niche markets
Key features of deployment		
Execution of tasks and procedural elements of work emphasised	Limited options for career development	Difficult to cultivate wider commitment to train and learn, as 'entry level' skills represent bulk of sector activity
Primary labour supply concerns		
Enduring reputation as low-status, low-pay work	Threat of staff flight to competitor sectors (e.g. mining and aged care). Pay incentives to draw or maintain labour to the sector not available	Generic skill labels associated with work activity ('care' versus 'process' work)
Characterised by high gender segmentation	Limits access to external labour supply (halves potential labour pool for both sectors)	Reinforces gendering of skill: process versus care work
Place of VET		
Historical reputation as 'entry point' sectors	Contributes to high turnover problem, as workers see sectors as 'default' option, not a 'vocation of choice'	Employees reluctant to train or commit to the sector in the long-term, as not 'vocation of choice'. Career 'traction' hard to establish

As the work activity occurring within the meat-processing and child-care sectors is so radically different, it might superficially appear that the sectors would have very little common in their experience of workforce development challenges. Table 1 however identifies the immense commonality between the

two sectors, once the four-domain model is applied for consideration of the range of issues with the potential to impact on skill development. As table 1 shows, while the ‘act’ and ‘task’ focus of work is important in defining the skills required, the wider settings of deployment and labour supply challenges (the relationship between other industries and sectors) are also highly important.

Both sectors are defined by quite rigid, competency-focused forms of skill regulation and have encountered a degree of career ‘stasis’, as the bulk of work in each can be performed with completion of entry-level qualifications alone. In addition, both sectors face similar ‘threats’ with regard to maintaining good labour flows to and within the sector, and both experience the threat of high ‘flight risk’ by their employees, as workers are tempted by competitor sectors, which can offer better pay and better-status work for a similar level of training. Both sectors encounter challenges in initially drawing labour into the sector, despite the fact that the qualifications standards for entry to the sector can be completed in a relatively short period of time and are not predicated on any prior qualification or onerous skill prerequisites.

Defining core workforce development challenges

Closer analysis of the roundtable discussions reveals a further and significant ‘shared’ perspective across the two sectors. Both sectors define their core challenges in workforce development in similar ways: both draw a distinction between ‘internal’ labour challenges and ‘external’ labour challenges (see table 1). We have grouped these concerns under the umbrella term, ‘internal labour challenges’, as they deal with the skill challenges associated with ‘existing’ labour or labour already working within the sector. In the case of meat processing, workforce development decisions about internal labour pertain to how local workforces are managed. This might include whether an investment in training for current workers is worthwhile and this may lead to expansion to other consumer markets (Norton & Rafferty 2010). In the case of child care, internal labour decisions deal with the maintenance of ratios and the skill mix across a shift, and whether further training will offer employers greater flexibility in the deployment of limited resources (Bretherton 2010). Internal labour decisions also focus on the ability of individual early childhood centres to lever a better market position by ‘branding’ themselves as high-quality child-care centres of choice – by offering lower child-to-staff ratios and more qualified staff.

By contrast, decisions regarding ‘external labour’ are premised on very different notions of efficiencies. External labour challenges may pertain to the relationships with the wider labour market, other industries, and perhaps even workers currently outside the labour market. External labour concerns are focused on drawing sustainable inflows of labour supply into the sector; in other words, what might be described as ‘potential’ labour for the sector, or people not currently working within the sector. The issue of ‘potential’ labour or ‘external’ labour is also a critical one for both sectors. For example, the lack of labour has created an incentive for many meat processors to solicit labour directly from overseas labour markets, in order to maintain a reliable, appropriately skilled and steady labour supply. In the case of child care, the possibility of flight from the sector is very real, as the sector competes directly with the education sector for staff. Child care, in relative terms, remains in a disadvantaged position as it can offer neither better pay nor better status work in order to attract teachers into the sector (Bretherton 2010).

Internal labour demands: some conflicting expectations for VET?

Responding to and understanding diverse demand for training

In critiquing workforce development strategies, previous research has been thorough in emphasising the deficiencies in VET response. Commentators have argued that if VET providers could be more

flexible (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry 2008), more responsive to commercial needs (National Industry Skills Council 2008) or more effectively networked with local employers (Stanwick 2009), then this would lead to improved workforce development outcomes. However, the findings of this research program and commentaries provided by roundtable participants suggest that understanding and interpreting the needs of the market is no small feat. Firstly, the great diversity of employer demand for essential and required skills to maintain efficiency and market advantage can be difficult to interpret in a coordinated way. The policy rhetoric surrounding the ‘training market’ in child care suggests that a large number of registered training organisations will offer greater choice to consumers of training and will therefore meet a more diverse range of both employer and employee needs. The criticism of this training market, however, is that much of the training remains of variable quality. As one commentator noted, *in our industry, the ‘fly by nighters’ stick around for ages*. In the context of meat-processing sector diverse export markets influence the existing and emerging skill sets required to maintain market advantage. Changing consumer tastes (whether meat is boned or sold in larger cuts) and a strategic decision to target specific and specialty consumer markets (for example, how stock is killed and the size and style of cut) can also change the profile of skill within a sector quite rapidly (within 18 months to two years). In both of these quite different sectoral scenarios, VET is faced with a difficult and confusing set of options in relation to developing a response that will notionally ‘meet industry need’.

Secondly, employers themselves acknowledge that they do not always fully understand their own skill needs and do not necessarily have processes in place to identify skill gaps, nor anticipate new areas of activity for which skill development may be required. ‘TAFE institutes engage with employers and industry bodies to better understand training demand, but employers do not always speak with one voice’ (Misko & Halliday-Wynes 2009). To begin with, the difference between employer perceptions of skill need can vary greatly, even within a niche pocket of sectoral activity (for example, long day care versus school-aged care in child care; or halal meat production versus cuts and processing to satisfy Korean consumer markets in meat). As Smith, Oczkowski and Hill note: ‘how employers make decisions about training remains something of an unknown’ (2009, p.7). As one child-care industry representative noted, *the sector is facing some important questions in terms of how to address quality improvements, but there is no answer as to how this is going to be managed by each workplace*. This leaves VET providers to respond and anticipate skills that employers cannot necessarily either identify or articulate. Further to this, there is a gap or inconsistency between the role and responsibility that individual employers assert they should play, and the role that wider advocacy groups indicate employers should play. As Cornford notes, ‘employers seem to not see any role for themselves in the process of shaping the workforces that employer representative groups like ACCI and BCA indicate they desire’ (2006, p.4).

The training market was also identified by commentators and contributors to this report to be both a misleading and problematic notion and one which had proved to be ineffective in meeting the diversity of employer demand. Much discussion has focused on what Karmel, Beddie and Dawe (2009) describe as the ‘the issue of market design’ – what represents ‘optimal’ performance in VET terms and the degrees of regulation or freedom over behaviour. While this wider debate about the efficacies of a training market is important, from a sectoral perspective *the debate misses the mark*, as one commentator at the roundtable noted. In child care, for example, 15 years of policy has facilitated and encouraged the emergence of multiple training providers, with a belief this will meet more diverse worker and employer needs. The problem from the point of view of both users and consumers is that an expansion in the range of training ‘offerings’ has only made the environment less transparent.

In child care, people typically train to enter the industry. Rather than expand the range of appropriately trained people available to the sector, employers use ‘training college attended’ as an invisible (unstated) selection criteria, because confidence in training quality is so low (Bretherton 2010). In the current environment, child-care centres will be required to ‘upskill’ current staff in order to meet the new federal government’s quality agenda in child-care. However, there is little confidence in the system to deliver on this training. As a child care commentator noted at the roundtable, *the drivers are funding ... there are portions of the sector where new arrangements are putting pressure on them. The national quality agenda is driving the need to lift qualification levels, but to do this well, this costs money.* In terms of meat processing, the training market seems to have little relevance. The sector is characterised by a small number of consolidated large processing facilities, which are owned and operated by a small number of conglomerates. Most of these operators embed training in the production line and have taken the additional step of becoming a registered training organisation in order to manage training processes internally. It is worth noting a further point of distinction between both meat processing and child care on this issue. It could be argued that, while the field of early childhood education and care is defined by a well-developed literature and policy apparatus, at the level of VET activity it is more fragmented. This contrasts with meat processing, which appears to have a high degree of cohesion and coherence in terms of VET activity, and because this activity is deeply embedded in workplace processes, the link between skill development and workplace outcome is more transparent.

Imperative to train, but not retain

Both sectors at the centre of this study have maintained a somewhat contradictory position with regard to managing and developing internal labour supply. On one hand, employers in both sectors maintain a strong commitment to the development of internal labour markets. Firstly, both sectors have a strong imperative to train – because of the food safety and workplace safety regulations in meat processing and the duty of care and child safety regulations in child care. As one child-care sector representative noted, *training is absolutely essential, we can’t have staff engaging with children without sufficient skills, knowledge, experience and training.* And as a representative from meat processing commented, *high bacterial counts can shut down a whole production line, that’s millions of dollars ... and that all comes down to training.* Indeed, it can be said that workers in both industries cannot legally step foot on the workplace floor without receiving training which conforms to industry competency standards.

This sectoral need for trained workers is buttressed by a wider training policy agenda, which relies on individuals being ‘self motivated and self funded learners’ (Watson 2003). Secondly, both sectors assert the desire for what might be described as a ‘bedrock’ of labour. In the case of meat processing this means access to a large stable pool of labour that is ready and able to undertake physically demanding work, potentially willing to accommodate seasonal vagaries, and capable of adapting to demands for new products, which will be levered off existing key groups of skill activity (for example, boning and slicing). In the case of child care, this ‘bedrock’ takes the form of enforced entry-level standards, which have allowed the industry to source new workers quickly in the event of an ongoing employment relationship being terminated or severed. A substantial stable pool of labour is also required, it is argued, because of the very labour-intensive nature of the work undertaken. In both cases, high turnover amounts to high labour costs, and this can prove to be very costly for a business if it remains an ongoing problem.

A stable pool of labour is also necessary, claim both sectors, because a strong ‘internal’ labour market is required, one which will allow workers to build a body of specialised knowledge about the sector and therefore fill management roles down the track. In the case of both sectors, employers indicate a preference for staff ‘off the floor’ to fill supervisory roles. For child care, ‘the floor’ refers to staff

engaged in direct care roles; for meat processing, ‘the floor’ refers to the production floor (processing line). A strong theme common to both sector discussions is that supervisory roles require highly specialised and specific sectoral knowledge in order to manage well and to ensure that high-quality standards and procedures are preserved; furthermore, much of this knowledge is acquired ‘on the job’. Maintenance of these quality standards is also absolutely critical to both sectors, as failure to adhere to quality standards in child care or meat processing can lead to centre closure and business closure, respectively. As one roundtable participant from the meat sector noted, *we wish all decisions could be made based on just internal labour markets, but it’s just not possible in this environment*. As a child-care participant observed at the same event, *what is happening in other sectors directly affects our ability to retain labour ... long day care in particular experiences some of the most intense challenges in keeping labour, getting labour to stay*.

Despite the employer assertion that a bedrock of labour is needed for the sector, both sectors are also characterised by a high degree of acceptance of casual work. Employer behaviour in both has been characterised by an unwillingness to enact permanent and long-term contracts of employment because of fears about economic uncertainty (Bretherton 2010; Norton & Rafferty 2010) and, it is argued, because flexibility in the deployment of labour is highly important. In meat processing, fears about the costs associated with mass redundancies, in the event of financial instability in the sector, or indeed bankruptcy, have also contributed to the preference for casual work (Rolfe & Reynolds 1999). In both sectors, the stated need for a bedrock of labour, while maintaining a preference for casual and temporary forms of engagement, is anomalous. Employees working within the sector are being asked to ‘train as if they will be retained’ but with no supporting promise of retention. To some extent this creates a ‘deadlock’ in the pursuit of a sustainable workforce development strategy, because it extinguishes employee incentive to train beyond the most basic mandatory standards.

VET-based skill acquisition offers few material nor symbolic rewards

Both sectors identify problems associated with the ‘status’ of VET and the way in which VET qualifications can serve to reinforce the low status of the two sectors. The overarching framework of skills policy is geared towards higher skill development and the belief that this development will yield rewards for individual workers, as well as for the wider economy. As the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations notes: ‘Participation in education and training is increasing, and economic rewards are flowing to people with higher skills’ (2010, p.1). The current policy rhetoric surrounding broad-based ‘upskilling’ of the labour market has proved to be unhelpful to both sectors, for slightly different reasons.

In meat processing, one commentator noted *the entire focus of VET activity is about upskilling, and lifting qualification levels ... we would argue in meat that those roles considered to have lower skill levels are every bit as important to the industry as the jobs with higher qualification levels*. In child care, commentators identified that the ‘need to upskill’ did not in fact address the devaluation of labour that continued to affect the sector. As one child-care commentator noted, *upskilling is part of it, but until there is a different way of seeing caring work, people will jump ship to work in the retail sector, or to become hairdressers*. This is an insightful observation, in the context of a discussion about status and the way in which employees weigh the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards arising from work. Retail is noted for its poor working conditions and is identified as the lowest paid sector in Australia, regardless of the wage-setting method in place (Lynch et al. 2009). Yet, based on the reports from the child-care sector, the sector continues to lose staff to the retail sector. This suggests that more than pay and conditions plays a role in the decision of staff to stay within a sector. While the need to lift the qualification levels across the sector had been identified as important because of the new quality arrangements (which mandated that more teachers would have to be

employed in child-care centres), the broader lack of recognition attached to child-care work appears to represent a much more significant issue for the sector as a whole.

In both sectors, the roundtable participants noted the poor rewards associated with upgrading qualifications and agreed that this remained a disincentive to 'upskill'. In child care, interviewees noted that upskilling could deliver benefits to the sector, in the form of better informed and better skilled workers, particularly to fill group leader and director roles. However, the sector continued to devalue higher skill formation by offering little in the form of pay increases once qualifications had been upgraded. In the context of the early childhood sector, if workers sought to progress to the highest forms of training (for example, an early childhood teaching degree), they could be lured to the education sector, since this sector has the capacity to offer significantly higher pay. In the case of meat processing, the training typically undertaken in the sector is characterised by a focus on single tasks, rather than a comprehensive trade-based approach. This approach has allowed components of skill to be acquired quickly, and on the job, but it may also have contributed to staff flight from the sector, as the status of the qualifications once achieved remains very low (Norton & Rafferty 2010).

The issue of extrinsic versus intrinsic rewards is clearly not just significant at the sectoral level. As the Productivity Commission noted in a recent report on disability support services, some sectors require significant investment because of their 'social' significance. The commission notes that underfunding, fragmentation and inequality can all undermine the ability of a sector to function efficiently and that national investment is sometimes required (ABC Lateline 2011). When this sector is a provider of critical care or education services to the community, the significance of these inefficiencies is profound. While intrinsic rewards are no doubt important to the retention of workers in a sector, this raises the question of whether it is reasonable to commit these workers to socioeconomic marginalisation because of extrinsic market arrangements.

Developing 'external' or potential workers: further conflicts for VET?

Both sectors are concerned about their ability to tap 'new' labour. This includes the ability to draw in and retain labour from other sectors, or draw labour from outside the labour market. Both sectors acknowledge that they face rival industries capable of offering more attractive work across a suite of employment features (pay, status and conditions). In the case of meat processing, labour has been lost to mining because, although the work is no less demanding or physical, it is less confronting and offers better pay. In the case of child care, education represents a main rival because that sector can offer better conditions including pay, status, working hours and conditions. Both sectors also face the broader labour supply challenge associated with an aging workforce (Spoehr & Barnett 2008).

The low status of VET qualifications have intensified the poor profile of the sector

Both the meat-processing and child-care sectors have encountered difficulties sourcing labour from outside the sector, because of the 'low status' label ascribed to much of the work of both sectors. How skills are assessed, understood and valued by both employers and employees can influence the ability to source and ultimately maintain a relationship with labour. Within these understandings, qualifications have become the 'currency of skill' against which employers and employees can measure the value of skills acquired.

For VET, however, the issue of qualification is a vexed one. Current conceptions of qualifications imply echelons of skill. As Mehaut 2010 states, there is 'a hierarchy of learning', or as Bowman (2009) describes it: a 'skills ladder'. There is an assumption that skill development is inherently hierarchical, linear not lateral, and that higher-order skills can only be acquired once basic skills on the lower rungs have been mastered. Also implied is the notion that greater levels of skill acquisition will lead

to not only ‘ascension’ of the skill ladder but also ascension of the career ladder, which will bring accompanying rewards in the form of either pay or more prestige. While this may not appear a problematic paradigm in principle, both meat processing and child care have been affected by the assumptions surrounding VET qualifications within this assumed hierarchy of skill. On the skill hierarchy, or ladder, VET qualifications rest firmly at the bottom, with higher education qualifications attracting more status, regardless of their content or focus (Buchanan & Yu 2010). This research program has identified that both sectors in question observe, and in many senses contribute to, a devaluation of VET activity (both the actual learning processes of VET and the concomitant VET qualifications). It could be argued that this serves to both fuel staff flight from the sectors and undermine the status of each as an employment sector of interest to prospective employees.

VET learning generally is devalued, but is particularly devalued in the two industries in question. Those in the early childhood and care sector would argue that care work, particularly child-care work, has fallen victim to this stigma of VET learning. As one child-care commentator noted, *the fact that care entails more than task-based activities is not anything radical, that’s not new to us. We know the sector undertakes far more complex work than it is given credit for.* Or, as another child-care sector representative noted, *a lot of training places great emphasis on procedures ... a tick the box type approach to working with children.* In the case of meat processing, VET training is fragmented into multiple certificate II (essentially labourers) and certificate III streams of training, which represent a highly specific-task focus, for example, rendering, slaughtering or boning. The heavy emphasis on a ‘task’ obscures the reality that good job performance in both sectors requires a mix of higher-order and lower-order skills. As one meat commentator noted, *those in the meat industry would take serious issue with the contention, and will never accept the contention, that meat processing work is low-skilled work.* This is consistent with wider literature, which has highlighted the ‘meaning’ (or value ascribed) to VET activities as significant in the status and profile associated with VET qualifications. Academics posit that, where skill acquisition is founded on work settings and where the ‘on the job’ components of learning are most valued, these activities are least likely to achieve recognition in skill terms. As Felstead et al. (2009, p.205) note, ‘all work involves and generates learning, but this is not always harnessed and recognized’.

This poses a problem for both the meat-processing and child-care sectors, as devaluation is manifested in two distinct ways. Firstly, VET qualifications are criticised for their failure to expand or embrace higher-order skills development within their learning frameworks. This observation emerged in the interviews with child-care providers particularly, and to a lesser extent the training institutions themselves. Commentators note that there is a genuine lack of confidence in much VET training in child care, because of its focus on procedural detail. In particular, the ‘task-based competency’ interpretation of child-care work means that VET learning does not emphasise the need to make discretionary judgments, which may require a wider understanding of the broader behavioural theories that underpin action and reaction.

The best-practice employers, and indeed employees interviewed during the course of this research program, note that current VET approaches are out of step with the workplace, as higher-order discretionary judgments form a critical part of day-to-day care and education work, whether this is actually acknowledged by the workplace or not. Secondly, because of the lesser value associated with VET learning, when higher-order skill acquisition does occur, it is generally not recognised or labelled as such because it remains labelled a ‘VET’ activity. As Hanrahan (2000a) explains, this negative perception emerges from cultural perceptions and understandings about the link between the context for learning, the content of learning, and the practices and activity surrounding learning. Therefore, it is difficult to make any objective assessment as to the ‘content’ of a VET course, or any course, as

high- or low-skill content, because it is so highly contextual. Watson notes the strong connection between those jobs categorised as low-skill and the location in which these skills are acquired. Low-skilled jobs, overwhelmingly, are trained on the job or in house (Watson 2003). As Hanrahan claims, 'it is not that the skills acquired in a VET context are less sophisticated, but rather they are not immersed and do not reflect a wider culture of learning practice' (2000a, p.2). As the experiences of workers engaged in meat processing and child care illustrate, where the practice of work remains narrow in focus, this is unlikely to cultivate a strong commitment to a field of work, or 'craft'. In this sense, it could be argued that VET itself can directly reinforce the poor commitment of workers to the sector.

The poor status of the two industries and the high levels of labour market churn also impact on the type of training that might potentially be provided in the sector. In overall terms, the incidence of training may appear to be at high levels because it forms part of mandated employment standards. The notion of a ladder assumes that 'climbing' the ladder will realise greater rewards (in the form of pay) and greater recognition (the status that comes with achievement). In both meat and child care, neither of these rewards has been forthcoming. This is consistent with the work of Watson on low-paid work more generally, which identifies that, while investment in training may yield returns for those engaged in higher-skilled roles in the labour market, 'people investing in qualifications at the diploma level or below are less likely to be rewarded with higher wages' (Watson 2003, p.33). Historically, in both child care and meat processing the scope to deliver higher wages is limited because the sectors are labour-intensive, so cannot offer pay rises (because profit margins are so tight). In addition, it is often assumed that skill acquisition will engender a greater level of commitment by workers to a sector. In both meat processing and child care, encouraging a long-term commitment to the sector has been difficult.

While the devaluation of VET skills may reinforce the poor profile of the two sectors, clearly the wider working environments also reinforce the poor reputation of the two sectors in the broader labour market. The poor working conditions, long hours, poor pay and poor levels of autonomy associated with work in the two sectors all contribute to this low status. As one meat-processing commentator noted, *I don't really understand what the big revelation is about all this, and everyone seems to be side stepping the most obvious thing. If you want people to work in your sector, you have to actually pay them decently ... it's not really that hard.* However, both meat-processing and child-care employers claim that the tight profit margins and the high level of labour intensity associated with the work means that lifting pay rates across the sectors would deem the industries non-viable. In this context, the position of child care, in continuing to attract external labour to the sector, maintains some stability, since the industry uses the drawcard of a 'noble', 'worthwhile', 'emotionally rewarding' and pivotal social and educational industry, because the care of children and, indeed, the future generation is involved in this work. In the case of meat processing, the notion of 'nobility of endeavour' seems an inherently more difficult idea to promote to prospective employees.

Lack of clarity over generic skill holdings

A major finding of this research program has been that labour market intermediaries and employers agree that 'employability' skills, as currently defined, may be problematic. If skill acquisition can be characterised as a ladder, then what have been coined 'employability' skills might be conceived as the bottom rung of this ladder. The insights provided by interviewees during the course of this research program, however, point to a skills gap that appears to precede employability skills. The ability of both sectors to fill entry-level roles, which represent the bulk of core roles across both sectors, is impeded because many prospective employees lack general or 'generic' skills. These skills were described in various ways by interviewees, including 'general social skills', 'living skills', 'awareness of other people skills', 'life skills', general 'coping skills' and skills needed to 'function and get by' in general society. Interviewees noted that, while employability skills were important to understanding and gauging

labour market readiness, these additional ‘life skills’ represented an essential (and different) precursor step to the acquisition of employability skills. This raised a highly contentious question for the VET sector; that is, who should be ultimately responsible for filling this skill gap.

In the main, VET has been identified as pivotal in filling a perceived gap in generic skills in order to maintain growth in the supply of labour overall. Although higher education is also being asked to engage more directly in workforce development concerns and needs (Voorhees & Harvey 2005), it is VET which is continually identified as the frontline response to workforce development crises as they emerge (Council of Australian Governments 2008), and is identified as being strategically best placed to anticipate or avert workforce development challenges before they reach crisis point (Business Council of Australia 2006). Further to this, it is VET which has sought to most directly service perceived gaps in workforce development approach and strategy. The role of VET as a provider of ‘second chance education’ (Grummell 2007), employability training (Employability Skills Forum 2004) and refresher and re-entrant education is well noted (Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal 2006).

While the expectation of VET having a role in generic skill acquisition is clear, how VET should achieve this goal is not clear. While a gap in generic skills is noted widely in the literature (Cushnahan 2009) and is confirmed in the previous papers associated with this program (Bretherton 2010), the source of this gap is difficult to ascertain. Cornford notes that ‘there is little evidence that policy makers have any real understanding of what generic skills involve and their link to transfer of learning’ (2006, p.1). Further to this, the definitional link between ‘generic’ skills and ‘technical’ skills also remains poorly defined (Clayton et al. 2003), despite extensive work over the last 20 years to both define and proscribe VET procedures for embedding generic skills in vocational and occupational skill structures.

While the observation, that many workers and potential workers lack ‘generic’ skills, is highlighted by social welfare researchers (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2009), it is worth noting that sectors such as meat processing and child care may be disproportionately affected by this generic skill gap. Both meat processing and child care rely primarily on entry-level positions to meet production and service needs. For this reason, any gaps in generic skills are likely to be felt most profoundly by these sectors. While a small number of employers in meat processing (Norton & Rafferty 201) and child care (Bretherton 2010) had adopted strategies to give extra support to workers after hiring to help to improve perceived gaps in generic skills, many employers resolved the problem by discontinuing the relationship, with labour deemed ‘too difficult’ to manage (either by dismissing workers, or in the case of casual workers, by simply not offering any more shifts).

The issue of a generic skills gap adds a third dimension to the complex set of challenges facing VET in relation to workforce development strategies. As the discussion surrounding ‘internal labour’ notes, VET is first and foremost expected to meet training needs focused on the accomplishment of tasks and procedures. However, the discussion on ‘external labour’ notes that a simultaneous (and conflicting) expectation of VET exists. It is argued that VET has a potential role in the theoretical and pedagogical development of workers as well, in order to give greater meaning to work endeavour. Thirdly, interviewees also noted during the course of this program that VET is best placed, although not necessarily resourced, to help fill the gap in generic skills among existing and potential workers.

Key issues for VET: alternative frameworks for understanding skills

Some commentators argue that, even in those sectors which are characterised by challenging (Watson 2008), stressful or ‘dirty’ work (Newman 2008), lifting the status of the work can help to solve issues of poor internal labour retention and increase the appeal of the sector to external (potential) labour. It is important to note upfront that much of the responsibility for raising the profile of a sector rests outside the scope of VET activity. The other domains of activity identified by this research program are pivotal in shaping profile. The circumstances of labour deployment (for example, pay, rostering, working conditions, and degree of autonomy associated with work) and the product or service of interest (for example, how the acts of work are defined) set the parameters for satisfying, engaging and rewarding work within a sector. Vocational education and training remains important in shaping the forces surrounding retention of internal labour and attraction of external labour. This is because, as the following discussion will show, perceptions of skill can play a critical role in changing perceptions of work itself.

Fostering vocation instead of competency

A ‘vocation’ houses or nestles groups of skills in a way which offers the opportunity to develop offshoots of specialisation but does not promulgate skill development as a means for upward mobility alone. This may present both meat processing and child care with a more viable framework on which to structure and understand skill development. As Bowman (1990, p.283) notes, vocations are ‘distinguished by specialised clusters of skills’. In the context of meat processing and child care, the poor social status associated with VET qualifications and the lack of recognition of the more sophisticated skill components of the work mean that maintaining the internal supply and attracting an external supply of labour have been compromised. Historically, the work has remained and been categorised with a heavy emphasis on ‘task’, ‘function’ and procedural focus.

The notion of a vocation could potentially be used to draw labour to the sector and ensure that it is retained and VET would have a critical role in lifting the profile of the sector and the work conducted within it. As it stands, both sectors rely on internal labour markets because the knowledge and experience of those ‘coming through the ranks’ provide better candidates for management and supervisory roles. This ultimately means that, of those who undergo further training and make a commitment to the sector, only few will reap any real rewards from this effort. In other words, if commitment to a sector is predicated on the provision of a career path, as many academics assert it is (Beck 1997), then neither child care nor meat processing can offer an expansive notion of a career path using the current configurations of skill. Both sectors are ‘bottom’ heavy and rely on broad bases of entry-level staff, supported by a small number of pivotal management roles, which are critical for schedule and roster work and exercise more ‘professional’ judgments.

Is building a sense of ‘vocation’ an alternative?

It is argued that the notion of a vocation has the potential to cultivate interest and commitment and to develop a sense of ‘identity’ among workers. While a ‘quality’ working experience (good working and employment conditions) is critical to decisions to stay or leave a particular employment position (Pocock 2008), the notion of ‘vocation’ in particular can impact on these decisions to stay with a job

role, or sector (Seddon 2008). The notion of a vocation emerges from a deeper understanding and meaning of the work undertaken. Training and skill frameworks play a critical role in understanding and interpreting the meanings associated with work and are critical to establishing and cultivating a sense of 'vocation'.

A vocation asserts the 'meaning' of training in a wider social and labour market context

Understanding the value of training beyond the sectoral or job level and engaging with the 'meaning' of training in a wider labour market sense appear to both enrich worker experience and strengthen sector resilience. Understanding the significance and value of skills acquired means that sectors are in a better position to make the transition to higher-order skills development, should the opportunity present itself, or be necessary for sector expansion or consolidation. While it could be argued that job security may form the larger part of securing and engendering commitment from workers, as Seddon (2008) notes, it is only a deeper interpretation and understanding of the meaning of work which will ultimately harness the interest and psychological engagement of workers in a genuine and enduring way (Sefton, Waterhouse & Deakin 1994). Cohen (2003) notes the power of a vocation in eliciting commitment from workers, as commitment and connection occur with the 'act' of work, rather than with an individual employer.

Sefton, Waterhouse and Deakin (1994) further argue, however, that in building this commitment, competencies form only the very beginnings of vocation. In order for a vocation to be created, training and work arrangements must focus on expanding the emphasis of training away from competency alone and towards what is described as 'holistic competence' or the clustering of competences to do a job well, while mindful of an occupational identity. The notion of 'vocation' has been used to harness commitment from workers in industrial systems elsewhere. In Denmark, for example, the notion of a vocation is based on a dual system, in which more than half of all training takes place in the workplace, but the value of this training is not tied to the 'context of delivery'. In other words, training is not devalued simply because it occurs in, or in direct association with, the workplace. As Jorgensen (2009, p.16) highlights, vocations are built from a 'combination of formal training and education, union involvement, culture and vocational identity'.

A major criticism of VET is that when the 'meaning' of VET (the broader occupational value of skills acquired) is lost, the value of the training acquired is diminished. The intense and narrow focus on competency and 'tasks', it is argued, has fragmented the potential vocation that might emerge, because competency alone offers no scope for this expansion. As Maloney and Barblett (2002, p.3) note, 'competency based education can have the tendency to measure only tasks to a designated standard, rather than knowledge and understanding of why the task is performed'. In other words, it is assumed that the gathering together or the accumulation of competencies will culminate in the acquisition of a 'craft'; however, the lack of theoretical knowledge and the deeper and broader contextual 'meaning' of skills acquired is not present within many VET models. Recent work conducted in the education sector and on the Australian Qualifications Framework describes this as the 'problem of underpinning knowledge' (Buchanan & Yu 2010; Buchanan et al. 2010). The case of child care demonstrates this. With the introduction of the quality framework in early childhood care and education under the Rudd Government, the VET skill frameworks (training options, competency frameworks) available were effectively 'put to the test'. As commentators note, the ability of VET training to reflect and fulfil more pedagogical aspects of early childhood work, such as reflective practice (Noble 2003), was found to be limited (Cahir 2008). Maloney and Barblett (2002) note, 'using RTOs, including TAFE, where training is competency-based, has had a detrimental effect on the quality of training, and hence the quality of the worker entering the field'. Recent studies

demonstrate that the introduction of competency-based training in some fields has actually served to entrench and polarise training experiences rather than offer the opportunity for greater articulation, and hence an opportunity for students to study in multiple training settings (higher education, vocational, workplace). Buchanan et al. (2010) found that the introduction of competency-based training in fields such as engineering actually served to reduce the levels of articulation between VET and higher education.

In the context of a consideration of options for future workforce development, vocational competencies have the potential to be limiting. As Standing notes, definitions of skill are fundamentally driven, not by the 'order of skills development' and whether this is considered higher or lower, but by the relationship between the worker and work and the wider structures of work. As Standing defines it, 'the centre of the technique is not complexity but autonomy and freedom' (2009, p.25). For a sense of vocation to be built, systems of knowledge and learning need to be organised in a manner which extends beyond vocational 'competencies', as these structures are too limited and narrow. This, it is argued, contributes to the devaluation of vocational knowledge and training, and subsequently undermines the level of satisfaction to be derived from work labelled 'low skilled'. Underpinning knowledge and the meaning of skill acquisition are often absent from VET discourses, as these rarely extend beyond the performance of work functions (Mulder 2004, cited by Clarke 2008). This is demonstrated by the situation in meat processing. It could be argued that the unpleasant and confronting nature of abattoir work underpins all the problems in sourcing labour for the sector. As one commentator noted, *you can't escape it, it is difficult work ... you are dealing with dead animals*. However, other occupations also face this challenge. Butchers, for example, also work with meat. Yet, as Norton and Rafferty (2010) note, butchering is built on a sense of vocation or 'craft', which provides a structure for worker experience. As these writers note, the shift toward a more task-based skill structure, which has occurred progressively since the 1960s, has stripped the work of some of its occupational identity. Without this, the sector has struggled to engage its workforce, and yet the act of work is no less confronting or gruelling than it has been historically.

A vocation fosters 'pride of craft'

It could be argued, for example, that 'clustering' skills is more likely to develop pride of craft. It is also argued that a desire and willingness to engage with a vocation are vastly different from a commitment to a job role. Unwin and Fuller (2003) note that, while training may be common in many work sites, not all represent sites of learning. Workplaces can offer either expansive or restrictive learning opportunities for workers to develop comprehensive skill sets that might form the basis of a vocation. As Hanrahan notes, much vocational learning is not vocational at all (2000b). This is also a radical notion, as it posits a vocation as conceptually quite different from a career, in the conventional sense. Hanrahan (2000b) argues that vocation is a stream of learning which extends beyond a job or occupation. In the context of VET, the notion of vocation is applied in a very narrow way. Alternatively, a vocation might also represent a direction in life. Unwin and Fuller (2003) note an absence of 'vocation' in much workplace-based training experience, claiming that this has implications for both occupational and career-identity formation. This suggests that the VET sector as a whole may need to draw a finer distinction between vocational education and development and 'learning' versus job or task-based training than perhaps has been drawn in the past.

Both the meat and child-care sectors acknowledge their poor status, in workforce terms, and that neither sector has represented a 'vocation of choice' for many workers. Cultivating and building this sense of vocation, however, is no easy undertaking as it requires a shift in the content of training, the way in which training engages at the institutional level (with workplaces and with other agencies) and in the engagement between the student and the teacher and with the act of learning itself. As

Rojewski (2009) comments, rebuilding the conceptual frameworks underpinning technical and vocational education and training requires ‘reflecting underlying beliefs and perspectives of constituents’. In other words both individual and collective shifts are important. As Sistrup (2004) highlights, how an individual engages with their own work role and how an individual understands the significance of this work in a wider labour market context are both relevant to the building of a notion of vocation.

Building an associated continuum of skill

For skills acquired through VET to be evaluated free of the perhaps negative connotations of ‘work-based learning’, a number of factors need to be addressed. Some academics posit a slightly different paradigm as the solution to the conflicted role of VET in workforce development (Standing 2009). These academics advocate for the creation of a continuum of skill which forms more definite and direct links between VET and higher education (Buchanan et al. 2010). In this paradigm, the conceptual notion of a continuum is critical, as the term is non-hierarchical and ‘continuity’ of skill is emphasised. The notion of a continuum also implies the capacity or scope for more lateral movements between different skill clusters. This, it is argued, may provide a way to remove some of the negativity and the ‘ranking’ associated with the setting for learning. Meijers (2006) notes that engendering a sense of vocation and a sense of identity among workers must also value the notion of ‘authentic learning’ (workplace-based learning). In addition, academics claim that a more comprehensive understanding of competencies would help to elucidate links and meanings across all educational settings (including work, school, higher education, and VET) (Buchanan & Yu 2010; Buchanan et al. 2010). In other words, the way that we broadly reflect and acknowledge skill development would have to change; at the same time however a closer qualitative assessment of the broader value of the content of VET and work-based learning more generally would need to be undertaken.

Adopting new paradigms of skill development would require changes at the societal, workplace and systemic levels. At the workplace level, significant change would need to occur. In both meat processing and child care, some innovative employers had sought to implement new ways of reflecting on skills, in order to improve the status of work. In meat processing, one workplace had specifically focused on changing the culture of supervision and leadership to foster a more team-based and participative structure. This was done by changing the preconceived ideas held within the industry about the rigid demarcations between skills. As one interviewee noted, in an effort to avoid the implications of a hierarchy the language between staff had to change (for example, *I’m a boner, you’re just a labourer*). In child care, the best-practice centres considered by the analysis focused on the need to adopt non-hierarchical structures, in which every worker, regardless of their qualification level, could be involved and participate in decision-making processes (through team-based sessions and mentoring). In one case, a centre had adopted the policy of referring to all staff at the centre as ‘teachers’, regardless of whether they were certificate III, IV, diploma or degree-trained. While this may represent a controversial approach to some, it does re-cast the notion of skill around a ‘vocational area of practice’ and away from narrow and procedural notions of competency. This type of approach implicitly recognises that, to raise the status of a sector and ultimately promote it as a ‘vocation of choice’, strategies must be designed to lift those at the bottom of the qualification hierarchy. While a ‘continuum’ of skills remains an underdeveloped and somewhat abstract concept, it does identify that underlying presumptions of what activity should be defined as ‘skilled’ can limit the options for workforce development in both internal and external labour contexts.

Conclusion

This paper identifies that both the meat-processing and child-care sectors share similar challenges in relation to workforce development, and that the scope for VET to respond to these challenges is thwarted by competing and conflicting expectations. In this paper, a four-domain model is used to consider the issues and factors that surround and influence workforce development. Both sectors make a distinction between internal and external labour supply and development decisions. This distinction proves to be a profound one, as it highlights the degree of difficulty that VET faces on both sides, as it is wedged between high and competing expectations on both sides of the workforce development debate. While wider employment conditions, workplace culture and extrinsic rewards play a huge role in the ability of employers to retain and develop labour appropriately, researchers also identify that the broader issues of low status cannot be remedied without associated changes in the meaning and value placed on skills.

The notion of a vocation and an associated continuum of skills may present an alternative way to view skill development, one that may be more relevant to the unique challenges facing both child care and meat processing, because of their reputation as low-paid, low-status sectors.

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