



Musings on Vocational Education and Training in Australia

Edited extracts from the blog of

Paul Rasmussen

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Skill Sets, Specialised training or Full Qualifications.....	6
Units of competency, skill sets and qualifications	8
Does our Government funding model effect training delivery.....	10
How long does it take to be competent	12
A review of VET regulation standards	14
So you need to hire a trainer – qualifications, skills or lack there of	16
TAFE recommendations from the Skills and training taskforce	18
The AQF, Volume of Learning, regulation and RTO’s	20
VET, RTO’s and innovative accelerated learning	22
What does Job Ready mean.....	24
The Greens, TAFE and the public VET system	26
Stop doing training for trainings sake and stop funding it as well	28
Workforce participation, training for the long term unemployed and the needs of industry	30
Trainer utilisation, trainer quality and learner outcomes	33
I don’t want to be a trainer all my life	35
Hand VET back to the States – Results of the commission of audit.....	38
Senate enquiry into TAFE (2014)	40
Creating a sustainable VET sector in Australia.....	44
So why do VET-FEE HELP programs cost so much.....	46
VET-FEE HELP, Diploma’s, Certificates and actually getting a job.....	48
Rubber Stamping and the Qualifications factory mentality	50
Competency based, time based or something in between	52
I wish TAFE people would just stop whining (Rant warning).....	55
TAFE and the contestable marketplace	56
Marketing, marketing, marketing; selling training ethically	60
Training packages and the industry-training connection	63
Diplomas or Certificates – Qualifications vs employment outcomes.....	65
Setting a maximum retail price on VET	67
If not industry led then what	71
Reinventing the VET brand – untarnishing VET in the eyes of the public	73
How do you lose \$70 million and still have a job – work for TAFE Victoria it seems..	76
So who are these private RTO’s really	77
Measuring outcomes in vocational education – are we doing enough.....	81

Connecting L&D and the VET Sector.....	84
Does our VET system work? I actually think it does	86
Prior Skills and knowledge – The VET – L&D intersection	87
Branding Vocational Education – Connection L&D and the VET sector	89
Time to competence, vocational assessment and organisational need	92
Funding, funding, funding – Providing real sustainable vocational outcomes	95
Career progression, professional development and VET	97
A registration board for the VET Sector	100
What’s wrong with just being a trainer	103
Fruit of the poison tree – The problem of non-competent trainers	105
Conclusion.....	108

Introduction

As many of you are aware I have for quite a number of years now published a blog, in various forms, on training, Learning and Development, organisational learning and the Vocational Education Sector in Australia. This small book is an attempt to collect all of my writings relating to the Australian VET sector in Australia in one place, both for current readers of the blog and for those who have never read it before.

There are a couple of things to note as you read through this collection, the first being that sometimes the things I say may challenge or even offend you. That is ok, some of them are supposed to and are in fact written in an attempt, not to upset people, but to force people to look closely at their views and their views. Secondly some of the pieces in the collection are a little dated now, but I have included them for completeness and to provide a background to a number of the other discussions in the book.

So I hope you enjoy this collection and if by some chance you have come across this but have not read my blog come on over and visit.

I am a multi-award winning Thought Leader and Speaker on Organisational Learning and Development, The Australian VET and RTO sector, Formal and Informal Learning and the future of learning.

I speak regularly at a range of conferences during the year and have published work in the areas of organisational learning, vocational education, learning evaluation and the business of learning. I also write one of Australia's most widely read blogs on the Vocational Education Sector and Organisational Learning.

www.organisationallearninganddevelopment.wordpress.com

With a background in Human resources and talent management I have been involved in the training sector for almost 20 year and have worked in wide range of public, private, government and not for profit organisations.

I have a range of qualifications across the areas of Ethics and Biomedical ethics, organisational learning and development, training and business management which provide me with a unique insight into the vocational education and learning and Development sectors.

My goal is to better connect the worlds of organisational learning and Vocational education to ensure that organisations and their staff get quality outcomes from training. In order to achieve this I assist a range of organisations with the following range of services;

Development of Organisational Learning Models and Frameworks;

The business of learning (Commercialisation and Continued Viability);

Creation of robust Learning Cultures

Workshops and presentations on Ethics, Learning Management and Evaluation, Learning Culture and Vocational Education and Training.

Skill Sets, Specialised training or Full Qualifications

So I thought that I would share a few of my thoughts about the whole qualifications, skill sets, and non-accredited specialist training mish mash. From an organisational point of view, what I want from training is value for money (a good solid 'real' ROI), an increase in the skills of the staff members who attend the training, to have this achieved in the most efficient and effective manner and to have both participants and managers happy with the outcomes of the training they received. I would rather send staff on a two day sales training course for which I will get a real ROI on in terms of increased sales, better customer service etc. than a full qualifications. I want staff who can do their jobs and do them well, not just staff with pieces of paper and will utilise the best training to get that result, whether it be a non-accredited course, a skill set or a full qualification. One of my biggest complaints in terms of the way some RTO's seem to run is this; I get 3-5 calls a week from BDM's at various RTO wanting to offer me all of this wonderful training that they can deliver to staff for no cost to the organisation. However it is clear that they neither have any understanding of our business nor in a lot of cases have even bothered to look at our website. The training is also not what we need and they don't in a lot of cases even bother to ask what it is that we might be looking for. Where they do bother to ask the question they take the response they are given and try and squeeze what it is I want into some qualification which is not actually what is needed, which staff will not be happy with because they neither need nor want segments of its all because there is government funding and we can give it to you for free. Why does it make sense to go down the qualification route? More often than not qualifications do not have the same content in them as specialist course because specialist courses are not tied to having to deliver and assess UOC's, in fact most of the non-accredited courses we send staff on are not part of any training package but short specialist courses designed to upskill a staff member in specific skills they require. Alternatively it could be a short course with one or two UOC attached to it which the staff member could then use towards a qualification that they might wish to achieve. Too many people in this industry focus solely on full qualifications (probably because they are

government funded) and not enough on what it is that both organisations and staff want. It is not just organisations that want to have their staff do skill sets and non-accredited training, in fact the vast majority of requests I have from staff are not for full quals, but rather for with skill sets or specialist training that will make them better at their jobs. Too many providers rely on selling government funded training rather than training that people and organisations need. If an RTO's business model relies on selling government funded programs to people and organisations without truly understanding what the person or organisation actually needs then I think that is seriously flawed.

Units of competency, skill sets and qualifications

I have been talking a lot recently about accredited and non-accredited training, skill sets and units of competency. One of the things that concerns me is the focus on full qualifications and how they are delivered. Now I understand that a RTO's and TAFE market full qualifications and market them in the way that they do is driven almost entirely by the way in which the Australian Governments funds training. For the most part funding only applies to full qualifications. The unfortunate thing about this is that it constricts the way a lot of training providers think about delivery. I want to put forward an idea today about an alternative and what I think is ultimately more effective method of delivery. Those of you who have heard me speak over the last few months may already have heard outlines of this idea and of how it works for our organisation. Think about undertaking an undergraduate Arts degree at university. You choose from a wide range of different subjects spread over a number of semesters, which gradually build towards a major or maybe two. This is not necessarily how VET training works and I wonder if there is not some value in thinking about delivery differently. Rather than (and I will give examples from the community services package because I know it well) enrolling someone into a cert IV in community services work why not let them choose from a range of courses say 'effective communication' 'maintain quality service delivery' 'cultural competence' 'work effectively with young people' 'advocate for clients' etc. Let the participant choose their path, develop the areas they want, get a feel for different sectors of work and decide where they might want to go. Given this idea a participant may start off thinking they want a qualification in social work, but may end up realising that they realise and want to do youth work or maybe they might decide they want to do both. Of course funding this form of training delivery from a government point of view is going to be much more difficult than just funding a place in a cert IV in disability work, which may not be what the participant really ends up wanting to do. It would also make it more difficult for RTO's and TAFE's to market and administer. However it seems at least in

my mind a model of training delivery that has a much more congruent outcome for the learner.

Does our Government funding model effect training delivery

I have touched on the effects of government funding of Training within Australia and the effect that this has or might have on both the kinds and types of training that is being delivered and what might happen if there was a change in the government models of funding. I wanted today to start to talk about this in a little more depth and look at what might happen under different funding models. As I have said the Australian governments focus on full qualifications stifles delivery options, and even when formal skill sets are dropped into the mix it really doesn't make for the ability to deliver VET training (at least funded VET training) in ways that are interesting or in a lot of cases useful in terms of what organisations need. So I have been thinking, what if the Government stopped funding training all together; this is one that I kick around in my head quite a lot. It raised its head for me a little while ago when I was at the AWPA future of work consultation and someone suggested that most organisations would still do the same amount of training that they currently do, it would just be done very, very differently. I was really challenged by this initially as my initial thoughts were no that is not what would happen, what would happen is that we would go back to doing nothing but legislated training. Then I realised it wouldn't actually change a lot for us, sure we would less training that was outside the scope of our internal RTO, but then we would probably increase the scope of our RTO so we could deliver more. We would just ensure that all of the training we currently have to do for legislative and audit purposes was mapped to Units of Competency, run them as separate programs and if people eventually got to the point of being able to gain a full qualification we would issue the full Qual otherwise they would just have a whole pile of Statements of Attainment for a range of Units. It certainly wouldn't cost us anymore than training currently does and there definitely wouldn't be large groups of people going through programs like the Diploma of Management or Cert IV in FLM, or really anything that was non-core business. I probably would also have a smaller team, but as I think about it probably not as most of our generated income comes from our specialist non-accredited courses. Now I do understand

that there is a lot more going on with government-funded training than just skilling up people who are already employed, there is workforce participation rates and equity issues as well to mention just two so I don't actually think no more government funded training is ever going to happen. So is there another model that might work? Something that I have been thinking about recently is would happen if the government-funded Units of Competency, rather than full qualifications and formal skill sets. When I think about it this seems like not a bad idea, but what would it mean. It would mean much more flexibility in the way in which courses could be packaged delivered, assessed and funded. Units of Competency could be bundled together in various ways offering people choices about how they approached their training. As currently under the Traineeship model there would be an amount of money allocated to a person in terms of funding that they could then be drawn down on as they completed various UOC's building up to a full Qualification if that was what they want and if not a series of UOC's that match what they wanted to do in terms of career progression. RTO's and organisations would still only get the funds on completion of the specific units according to the funds allocated to the units. This would certainly make it more efficient for organisations where the person leaves before they have completed their Qualification or for whatever other reason doesn't complete (which currently leaves the organisation out-of-pocket). Yes it would probably be harder to administer, but then again with the introduction of the Universal Student Identifier maybe not. I would be really interested in knowing what everyone else thinks about this and also if there are any other models out there that people have been kicking around in terms of ways to fund or not fund training.

How long does it take to be competent

I have had several discussions recently (yes I do tend to get myself involved in a lot of discussion, you may have noticed that by now) about work placements, trainee and apprenticeships, job readiness and how long it actually takes for someone to be considered to be competent at a task or with a skill. There has been a lot of discussion over recent times about the what could be call 'time served' apprenticeship model, where student were expected to spend 3 or so years working while training in their chosen trade. Criticisms of this have been made on the grounds that at least some of the students could have been deemed and in fact were competent long before their apprenticeship time was up. At the other end of the scale we have seen criticisms of the '2 week industry placement' that we are seeing in the delivery of some aged care and community services courses where concerns are raised about whether that is enough time for someone to demonstrate their competence in a range of situations. There are lots of areas, psychology for example, where not only is there a need for students to undertake a lengthy internship prior to be recognised as being competent practitioners, but quite strict guidelines for continuing professional development in order to maintain such recognition, now admittedly the breadth of skills and knowledge required to be a registered Psychologist may be much wider than those required for a Certificate III in Aged Care, however we still need to ensure that whoever we grant qualifications to are actually competent in the range of skills we say they possess. Our staff, on average take about 8-12 months to complete a Certificate IV level qualification. They attend on average two days of face to face training every 4-6 weeks, and work on the assessment tasks from the Units of Competency covered in the face to face training, while they are back in the workplace. A large number of these assessment tasks involve their managers or supervisors observing them undertaking tasks and activities and providing them with feedback on how satisfactorily these tasks were undertaken. There are written tasks and projects, interview, role plays and a range of other activities which they undertake in the presence of an accredited assessor. Importantly by the end of this process

I am confident that every person we say is competent and issue a qualification or a statement of attainment to be actually competent. Could we do it quicker; yes certainly we could. Would I be as confident; No I don't think I would be. Why; because it would be much easier for someone to slip through the cracks so to speak. Could we do 2 weeks straight of face to face training and then send them back into the workplace to do their assessments? We could but I fear we would have substantially lower completion rates and I think the learning transfer back into the workplace would not be as effective. I say this because even after two-day of face to face training most of the staff have more than enough information to keep their minds spinning for 4-6 weeks and I think that trying to cram more information in there may well be counterproductive. So I am interested to know how long you think it takes before we can really be confident to say that someone is competent and how long should it take a student to complete say an average Certificate IV qualification.

A review of VET regulation standards

While I am not going to go through each of the issues in detail in the review of the standards there are some things in the paper that struck me as I read through it which I think are worth commenting on. Such as the following statement; "It may be necessary to firstly identify what outcomes VET is trying to achieve and using this to guide the development of the standards for the regulation of VET. Consideration may also be needed to define what constitutes 'quality' in the context of VET and how can this inform the development of standards." For me the idea that there needs to be a serious discussion about what the actual outcomes of VET should be is long overdue. If you were to listen to some researchers, commentators and government folk you would think that the only thing which mattered was completion rates for full qualifications. Completions is not in any way a metric that provides any real information about the importance of VET or its outcomes from either a student or industry/employer point of view, except in those areas where the qualification is linked to a licensing outcome and even then I am dubious of its validity in providing us with any real useful information. If we are going to have a robust VET system that actually provides outcomes for both participants and employers, then stop asking the academics and researchers what the outcomes should be and ask the students and employers, at least that way it might be meaningful. On the issue of quality training and assessment, the following rang true for me and I think will ring true for many others in the industry; "The standards therefore need to focus on the core function of training providers - that is, the provision of quality training and assessment. Business processes to support training provider viability and sustainability, while acknowledged as important, should not overshadow the real business of VET." The purpose of the VET sector is to train people, to provide quality training and assessment so that participants can have better employment outcomes as a result of the training. To my mind the word Vocational in VET gives it away. The business processes around the provision of training should never take precedence over the actual provision of quality training. I was also somewhat heartened to see mention of volume of

learning mentioned alongside qualification outcomes in the suggested approach; “Develop standards to ensure RTOs have the capacity, experience and resources to provide high quality training and assessment, including Recognition of Prior Learning, meeting AQF requirements (both qualification outcomes and volume of learning) and providing access to relevant workplace training and assessment.” The idea that there perhaps should be minimum delivery timeframes/work placements/supervision arrangements etc. around the deeming of a participant competent is something that I have mentioned in other places and in principle endorse. It has the potential to stop, the what I think is flawed and difficult to justify practice of very short delivery and placement timeframes. In my opinion you simply can't deem someone as competent after 5 days of face to face training and 12 hours of work placement. It is just not a long enough time period to ensure transfer of learning and competence across a wide enough range of scenarios. It will also create an environment where articulation pathways with Universities may be better able to be negotiated, as the Universities will feel more comfortable that the students with VET qualifications are actually competent. The other part of the document I found of real interest was the in the discussion around consistent interpretation of standards particularly in relation to auditors; "The VET regulator standards, in resolving issues of inconsistencies, could include standards for auditors which identify protocols and / or a code of conduct governing their work." I think having clear guidelines, a code of conduct and a range of other protocols around the actions of auditors, how they apply the standards and what they should be looking at and for when they speak with an RTO is vital. Without this the process of audit will be seen as something that is entirely at the whim of the auditor, rampantly inconsistent, and not producing any kind of valuable outcomes for any party.

So you need to hire a trainer – qualifications, skills or lack there of

The review of Standards for the Regulation of VET around the area of Minimum qualifications levels for trainers has raised some interesting issues and quite a bit of chatter, so I thought I might take a look at some of the more interesting areas, and look at it more particularly through the lens of someone needing to hire a Trainer/Assessor. The first thing I found interesting was the number of people we suggested they either knew of or had experienced the situation where the people training the Certificate IV in TAE (or an old version), had only just completed their own Cert IV, or whose experience in terms of training and assessment was all related to the TAE. So essentially they had become a trainer to train other people how to be trainers. If I was hiring a new trainer, even one whose job role was going to be training and assessing TAE qualifications I would want them to have some other training experience, other than just training the TAE. If I did then decide that I wanted to bring them in for an interview, my first question would be so why did you want to be a trainer, why did you go down this career path? The reason is that I am not sure how you could decide that you wanted to train people to be trainers without first having been a trainer yourself. (I might be wrong, but it seems a bit weird to me). I could understand if their response was that they been delivering non-accredited training for a substantial period of time, but even then it would be need to be outside the training area, because (and again I might be wrong here) it would seem that developing presentation skills, and the like happen as a result of training people, not as a result of being trained. If there is someone out there for whom the vast majority of their experience in terms of Training relates to training others to be trainers, particularly in their early career I would love to hear how and why it was you decided on this career path. The other thing that came out of the discussions was the number of people who, had undertaken, knew of, experienced the result of, TAE training with no presentation component. Where there was no requirement for the participants to actually stand up in front of an audience and present material. Again this is a situation that I find bizarre; how is it possible to deem someone as competent to be a trainer, if you have

never seem them present training to a group of people. This is why whenever I have interviews for trainers, everyone is told that they will need to do a 15 minute presentation to the interview panel. They get to choose the topic, but presenting is mandatory and it is the first thing they do before anything else takes place in the interview. The reason for this is simple, if you can't stand up in front of a small group of strangers and talk about a subject of your own choosing for 15 minutes and do it well, then as far as I am concerned you shouldn't be a trainer. It is to my mind as simple as that. There are two things about this process that have always amazed me; the number of people who look good on paper who are challenged by this process, who ask questions like 'what do you want me to present on? To which I answer 'Anything you want it's not about what you present by how you do it. Others then suggest that they are not comfortable with the process that they have never had to do that before to get a job, etc. (I usually suggest at that point that if they are that uncomfortable presenting to people that they are probably not right for the job anyway and that unless they are happy to do the presentation then there won't be an interview.) The number of people who are awful presenters, I don't just mean ordinary, run of the mill, functionally competent or even nervous, it mean really awful. Boring, uninteresting, full of um's, ah's and something I am seeing more of 'like's', not confident, and the worse sin of all, given that they got to choose the topic, inaccurate, mistaken or wrong with the information they provide. Sitting through interviews like this is an enlightening if quite challenging experience, because you come to know that for all of the good, high quality trainers out there, who are way beyond competent and who can create learning environments no matter what their surroundings there are a whole lot of people who call themselves trainers and have pieces of paper attesting to their competence who are just awful and an embarrassment to the industry.

TAFE recommendations from the Skills and training taskforce

I promised a little while ago that I would make some comments on the recommendations made in the Queensland Skills and Training Task force in relation to TAFE in Queensland. The recommendations that struck me most were those around the employment model for TAFE staff, Recommendation 3.5 in particular and the 'New TAFE Queensland recommendations (Recommendation 3.12 in particular). Recommendation 3.5 The Government pursue a revamped industrial relations arrangement which addresses at a minimum the following: - the need for a wider spread of hours and contact time, including removal of the in-built systemic barriers to evening classes - the current practice of non-attendance time becoming de facto additional annual leave - implementation of industry competitive overtime arrangements - the ability of management to have full discretion in engaging casual staff - greater class size flexibility. I was actually shocked when I saw the conditions of the TAFE Teachers' award (and I know I am going to be criticised for these comments), while the remuneration rates are definitely on the high side particularly when you look at rates within organisations and commercial training providers, it is the conditions which strike me as way out of line with what I would consider to be reasonable and expected practice. Teaching more than 21 hours (3 days) in a week incurring overtime payments as not more than 21 can be programmed in any one week for teaching is ridiculous. Not that I am suggesting that you would want to have your trainers doing nothing but delivering every day of the week, for any extended period of time. There have been plenty of occasions where I have done nothing but deliver training every day of the week for in some cases up to 4 weeks in a row. (A major project roll out which also included substantial travel around regional areas and then assessment). I am not even sure what 'five weeks of non-attendance time' even means, particularly when it is in addition to annual leave and when it ends up with the situation where 'TAFE teachers only undertake scheduled work of 32 hours for 39 weeks a year, and less if overtime is worked' some of the

issues surrounding costs and availability to delivery become abundantly clear. These conditions seem definitely not in line with what would be expected of a trainer/assessor with a commercial RTO or an organisational setting. Recommendation 3.12; the idea of rationalising TAFE campuses is also something that resonates with me, particularly within the Brisbane Metro area. I have never understood (I know there are historical reasons) why there were some many TAFE's and campuses in the Brisbane area all at least to some extent separately staffed and administered. Surely a reduction in the number of campuses and a rationalisation of management structure, perhaps even administration at a regional level and regional pools of teachers available to work a multiple campus locations would have substantial effect on the level of base funding that was required to sustain the TAFE infrastructure. The same can be said I think, but to lesser extents in other areas of the state as well. These recommendations make sense to me, along with the other recommendations made in the report with respect to TAFE, they would allow Queensland's TAFE system to be able to deliver, services that were more responsive to need, in a more competitive, cost-effective manner that provided for the needs of both students, industry and Queensland.

The AQF, Volume of Learning, regulation and RTO's

I am sure a lot of you already know of the issues with the delivery of the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and what implications the statements around volume of Learning in the AQF could have on stopping the very shoddy delivery and assessment of this qualification that goes on in some RTO's. I want to move away from that particular discussion however and look at something that I have to admit vexed me a little more about the whole discussion and situation. It seems and correct me if I am wrong that the Industry Skills Councils, who are tasked to administer and develop the VET qualifications, should be writing the qualifications in such a manner that if assessed properly, the length of time it would take someone to be able to be assessed as competent in the Qualification would meet the Volume of Learning rules. Therefore an RTO who was delivering a Qualification in under the time set out in the Volume of Learning would need to show how and why it was that they were able to do that. But on the other hand, and again correct me if I am wrong, if the RTO can show sufficient evidence to support the fact that that it has meet the assessment criteria for the unit, then there is nothing that the regulator can do about them being under the volume of learning. Which seems to me to mean that the ball is firmly in the court of the Industry Skills Councils to get this right and to actually put some robust assessment criteria, such as some quoted today, in one of the hospitality qualification the student has to prepare a dish 57 times, successfully using all of the skills in the unit of competency. Does this mean that they might do things like state the minimum actual placement (not simulation) hours that someone doing an aged care or community services qualification would have to undertake? The other thing that vexed me as the statement 'well if you have signed up to be an RTO then it is your responsibility to abide by the rules not ASQA's job to crack down on you' now while this is correct and is in fact the role of a regulator it strikes me that there is a deeper issue here as well. Both the VET and HE markets in Australia (as they are almost everywhere) are commercial competitive markets, with a whole range of ways, from Fee for service, to traineeships, to shall we say

bulk funding which is to a large extent (and going to become more so in QLD) competitive and contestable. So it stands to reason unless there are actual, enforceable consequences around not delivery nothing will actually change.

VET, RTO's and innovative accelerated learning

I have been involved in a number of discussions around the time it takes for someone to be competent. Mostly this has revolved around the Cert IV in Training and Assessment qualification, however it did bring home to me once again the abuses of Australia's Nationally Accredited VET system that occur in the name of profit, while be wrapped in this veneer of Innovative or Accelerated Learning. Now first off I need to be very clear here; I am not against innovation or accelerated learning, I have plenty of examples of both, both within the VET sector, and external to it that has provided participants and organisations with the outcomes they were looking for. Too often though, the terms Innovative delivery and accelerated learning, are simply code for how can we get as many people through the door as possible in the shortest possible time. Why is this such a large issue in the RTO world, well because, despite what people may argue, it is not an open commercial market place, where market decides the value of the course or program and part of that decision is how the program is delivered and the outcomes it provides. No the VET system is one where, the government sets the price for courses, through funding. Now I admit this is a little bit of a simplification, the government does not actually say that the price of a Cert IV qualification is \$3000, it says we will give an organisation or a person \$3000 to be trained in this qualification, it is not for want of a better analogy a recommended retail price on top of which the RTO may place a premium. It is simply the dollar amount the government will provide for the qualification. So if therefore it costs an RTO \$2500 to deliver the program and the government funding they get, either directly or through organisations is \$3000, then they are making \$500 per participant. So therefore it makes sense if an RTO can reduce the cost related to delivery they can increase their profitability. One very easy way to do this is to simply make the course shorter, with less contact time between the trainer/assessor and the participants, therefore reducing a significant cost and releasing the trainer to run other courses. Shorter courses also means more course can be run over a 12 month period of time, therefore again more profit. Again I need to state that I am not against RTO's

making a profit, private RTO's are necessary and they need to be able to be profitable in order to be able to provide the service they do. The problem for me is RTO's that put profit before outcomes, who believe that they have some right to issue Nationally Accredited Qualifications (rather than it being a privilege) and using the smoke screen of Innovative Delivery and Accelerated Learning to cover up bad practices and bad outcomes solely designed to increase their profit margins. It takes time to train people properly, particularly if they don't have any background skills in the area, it takes more than 5 days for someone to be a competent Trainer and Assessor, it takes more than 12 days for someone to be a competent aged care worker and it doesn't matter how you wrapper it. Competence takes time.

What does Job Ready mean

It got me thinking again about a range of issues around new staff starting a role in an organisation, be they entry or executive level or anywhere in between, but in particular what it we mean by is job ready. Now of course the content of what we mean by job ready for a senior executive, is going to be different from a long term unemployed person looking to gain an entry level position in an organisation, but to me it comes down to the idea that the person is ready and able to step into the role they are taking on and that the organisation is able to provide them with the information, technology and support that they need to do the role. There is a lot of noise made by training organisations both public and private (at the entry level) that their programs produce staff who are Job Ready, unfortunately in most cases that is not the case in a significant amount of cases. I suppose that I should add for clarity sake here that I am primary talking about those programs that are not connected to organisations, where members of the general public sign up to undertake a course in say Aged Care, because for whatever reason they want a job in Aged Care and the provider has told them this course will provide them with the skills that they need. Whereas in reality, in some circumstances, the training provider is more interested in getting the person through the course as quickly as possible in order to make sure they get their relevant funding payments, than in actually ensuring that the person has the skills. Even when it is the case that the program focuses on the skills of the participant, they still often come out of the program thinking that they are ready for employment only to find that they are under prepared for the workplace they are entering. Employers also I think fall into the same trap in a number of ways, they hire people of the strength of their qualifications only to find that they need to do a substantial amount of work in order to ensure that the person is able to do the role they have been hired for, or they send people to training in the hope that when they come back they will have the skills and knowledge they need for their new role. The problem is again that this in a lot of cases simply doesn't happen for a range of reasons. So why is this such an issue, well because of the costs involved, if a new hire is not, for various

reasons, able to do the role that they have been hired for, for a period of time, then this costs the organisation money. If individuals 'spend' their training funding on courses which they expect, mainly due to advertising, will get them a vocation and then find out that they can't get a job, this costs the government or the individual money and disadvantages the person who has undertaken the course. Now I understand that training providers are preparing participants against a generic set of industry standard performance criteria, but I think that they can do better, particularly if they build strong links with organisations and industry, create opportunities for participants to undertake real work-placements rather than competency assessment in simulated environments and just work a bit harder to make sure that they are producing what industry needs. Of course if it is difficult to ensure that people being training to undertake specific rolls, even entry level ones, are job ready, then what do we mean by job ready in the more workforce participation sense, where the skills and knowledge that are being providing to participants are those preparatory style skills. This is not to say that we shouldn't be running these types of programs, we need to do things that assist people to be able to participate in the workplace, but we need to be doing the right things and again we need to ensure that the skills that are being taught to these participants are actually worthwhile and will produce someone who in at least some sense of the word could be called 'Job Ready'.

The Greens, TAFE and the public VET system

Before I even start talking about this, please note this is not a political discussion, it is a discussion about the Public VET system and the Greens position on it. So as some of you are aware the Greens have released a position paper on TAFE and the public VET. Essentially it seems to be their position that the competitive VET market place has ruined TAFE, failed miserably and not met the needs of the country, so in order to rectify this they needs to give TAFE \$1.2 Billion. First off (and for any of you who read this regularly yes I am on my soap box again) as with so many discussions of the VET system in this country the people who have written this paper show an utter lack of understanding of the landscape, by simply focusing on the TAFE vs Private provider. Yet again the Enterprise RTO segment of the market is not even considered, mentioned or acknowledged. The ERTO space is not about making a profit through the provision of training, it is about providing the best possible training to its staff, and, and I have said this many times before, if the public VET system worked and provided industry and organisations with the level of training and quality that they required then there would be no reason for enterprises to go through the costly exercise of becoming and maintaining their own RTO status. They also as I have discussed elsewhere lumped all of the so called 'private' providers into one bag, which again simply shows their lack of understanding of the system and the players who make it up. However as I have said before time and time again, at least in my experience TAFE has failed to provide the level of service and outcomes that organisations need and this failure has little to do with funding levels or having to compete and far more to do with inflexible systems, generic programs and overly convoluted management practices. So if you are going to have a discussion about VET and if you are going to have a position on it, please at least be aware of all the players and stakeholders. (Ok I am off my soap box now)

So what about the position paper; firstly let me be clear about this, I support public education, to my mind education should be free that has always been my position, whether that is primary, tertiary or vocational, people's social and economic status should not prohibit

their ability to get a quality education. I also support the TAFE system, in principle; we need to have a public provider of quality education, we need it for a range of reasons, but and here is the but, it has to deliver the outcomes that industry needs and it is not doing that and I fail to see how throwing more than a billion dollars at a broken system is going to change that. Rather than just throwing money at TAFE, fix what is wrong, make them more competitive, responsive, innovative, less bureaucratic and top-heavy, more about the outcomes that industry, individuals and the country needs. If the VET system is failing it is not failing simply because they don't have enough money, it is failing because there are systematic flaws in the bureaucracy that surrounds the entire area, which makes it much less agile and responsive to need than it should be. If a non-TAFE provider can deliver a program, which gets better outcomes and suits the needs of business and individuals better than the one delivered by TAFE, why should people be forced to undertake the TAFE program and get a lesser outcome. My question is why shouldn't TAFE compete with everyone else who provides training, those TAFE's which have embraced this competitive funding model, and who are responsive and innovative and who provide industry with the outcomes that they need are successful, it is ones who not willing to do this, who are stuck in their old models who are failing. TAFE needs to be supported, but it needs to be supported in a way that makes sense, that provides for the future industry needs of the country. Just locking away funding and throwing it at TAFE is not a sensible way forward.

Stop doing training for trainings sake and stop funding it as well

So as some of you are already aware I attended the first of the QLD Governments Industry Skills Forum today. Firstly I am going to say if you get the opportunity to attend one of these forums (and apparently there will be more to come) you should. If for no other reason than to ensure that you know what is going on. The morning was hosted by Brett Schimming from Construction Skills Queensland, and I will come back to what Brett said a little later. Assistant Minister Saxon Rice spoke, outlining the government's position on training and TAFE. The keywords were; Engagement, Accessibility, and Quality with the main engagement piece being around the creation of the Ministerial Industry Commission, an independent body providing advice directly to the Minister for Education. Assistant Minister Rice and everyone else who spoke, pointed out quite strongly that this would not be a representative commission. It would not be a table around which all of the industry groups and sectors and other interest groups sat. Its purpose would be rather to look the evidence are training and employment needs in the state and on the basis of the evidence it would advise the Minister, in particular on skills and workforce development priorities. So where will that evidence come from the various sectors and industry and other stakeholder groups, through consultation and submission to the commission which will then utilise that and a range of other data to decide on priority occupations and other workforce development needs. The biggest takeaway if you will from the morning came from Brett, when he said and I am paraphrasing here a little (sorry Brett feel free to correct me if I have got to badly wrong) 'the VET system is not the main game, it is not the centre of the universe for business, it is the benefits derived from training not the training itself that is important, we need to stop doing training for the sake of doing training.' This position seem strong through everyone's talks and hits the nail on the head at least in my opinion. There are too many RTO's out there who continue to say that they can't stay in business because the government has changed the funding model. It is not about you (or us as an RTO) it is about industries, the organisations, the business and the individuals, who derive value from

the training. Training for the sake of training, (at least funded training in the VET sector where there are supposed to be employment outcomes) provides very little benefit to industry, organisations or the individuals who utilise it. Giving someone a Diploma of Management just because there is government funding available to do it (and trust me that is the pitch of almost every RTO that has cold called me in the last 2 years) is pointless unless there is going to be some benefit derived from that training and some tangible benefit, not one of these oh so common increased productivity calculations that are nothing but trumped-up nonsense. There must be strong, evidence based reasons for the funding of training, we should be able to show what the benefits to the business or individuals are in terms of employment or productivity or workforce participation, we should have strong and robust evaluative systems that allow us to actually show this value. If training is not linked to an actual employment outcome and strongly linked (and let's be serious is a personal training certification really an employment outcome when I can't walk to the train station without tripping over people currently doing the qualification) then why should it be funded

Workforce participation, training for the long term unemployed and the needs of industry

I attended a very interesting breakfast earlier in the week, where the central topic of discussion was around the subject of how to better unemployed and underemployed people with industry needs in order to facilitate meaningful return to employment. Aside from a range of other issues that were discussed one thing that was raised a number of times was the gap between the skill level of, in particular long-term unemployed, and to be even more particular long-term unemployed youth, and the skill needs of industry and business. So I got to thinking what are those basic skills that employers, large or small, need job seekers, particularly those coming from medium to long-term unemployment to have, in order for the employer to feel comfortable employing them initially and to retain them. So I have come up with a list of what I think those really, really basic skills are, so here goes: Punctuality - The ability to be at work and ready to start work, at the time their day/shift/whatever begins. I was always taught when I was young and in my first couple of jobs, both when I was at high school and in the workforce, that you should be there 10-15 minutes before your starting time so that you were ready and able to start work on time. Appropriate clothing and accessory choices - All work places have rules and expectations, some safety related, some organisational and culturally related. Insisting that you wear a long sleeve shirt, that you're uniform is clean and or ironed, that you removed some of your piercings, are not unreasonable requests. When I was in the police force in the very early days of my career (it was my first job) our Senior Sargent used to check our uniforms, shoes etc., to make sure that we looked professional and well turned out before we went out in public, representing the organisation. Basic maths - If you can't figure out that \$1.60 is the out of \$10.00 when I purchase an \$8.40 item, without the use of a cash register or calculator, then you probably shouldn't be working in a role that requires basic maths, and it shouldn't be up to an employer to give you training in basic maths. Basic appropriate communication/language

skills - I am not suggesting that new job seekers or those returning from long-term unemployment need to have the communications skills of senior executive or master facilitator, but they do need to be able to talk to customers, in a polite, respectful, understandable manner. Basic customer service skills - I don't care what job you are in, you have customers, they might be internal or external, but you have them, everyone needs to have some level of customer service skills, even if it is don't swear at the customer when they ask you a question, because it drags you away from your txt/Facebook conversation.

Basic understanding of business - Really all I am saying here is understand that a business is not going to change its policy on facial piercing, simply because it is your preference to have a three-inch, pointed, metal stud protruding from the centre of your forehead. It is an understanding that they work for someone else and that working there comes with a set of rules and expectations, both from the business and from the clients of the business. Now certainly there are going to be roles out there that are appropriate for the groups of people that I am talking about here that require, different or higher levels of skills to the ones listed, but for most entry-level positions, having these six basic skills, place those candidates head and shoulders above all of the others. How do we give youth, long-term unemployed and other groups, these skills. Is it something that young people should have been taught at school, (particularly maths and communications), or come from parents and role models (punctuality and politeness), some of it should and for those that have it, it probably has. Unfortunately though, for some long-term unemployed, whether they are in the youth demographic or not, even if they did have these skills at some point (and a lot of them probably didn't), they have dissipated with lack of use over time. The bigger issue for me, (and this seemed to be a bit of a theme at the breakfast) is how do we teach these people these skills. In Australia we have government-funded organisations, whose roll it is to assist people with entering or re-entering the workforce, particularly those who have been unemployed for a significant period of time, but still we seem to have this situation where candidates turn up for interviews and ongoing employment without even the basic skills I

have listed and then we wonder why business and employers either don't take them on in the first place or only retain them for a short period of time. I would really like to hear what people think, both about my basics skills list and any ideas about how we might better be able to increase these skills in the people that need those most.

Trainer utilisation, trainer quality and learner outcomes

How many hours a week should a trainer deliver Face to face training? What is a manageable, reasonable and maintainable number of hours a week in which a trainer can deliver face to face training, and does delivering very high hourly levels of face to face training have an adverse effect on the quality of the training and the learner outcomes? So the old TAFE award in Queensland said 21 hours a week was the amount a time a trainer could be scheduled for face to face training, so in my book that is three days of training. The rest of the time was for preparation, marking, administration, professional development and other related activities. However and this I think is where the question gets interesting, what if the Trainer is a full-time staff member, so 38 Hours a week, and the training is all already developed, there is only a small percentage of marking/assessment involved and most of the administration is done by dedicated administration staff. Is say 4 days of face to face a sustainable level, where the trainer won't burn out over a period of time and quality and learner outcomes won't suffer? Before I continue I will say that I think 3 days of face to face a week (60%) of workload, is a good minimum standard. I say this because I have over the years been involved in roles where the levels of face to face training were much higher and after a while (and really to be honest not all that long), the quality of the presentation and the outcomes for the learner decline. In my single biggest year as a trainer I trained over 3000 people face to face and worked in excess of 190 days, which works out on average to be 4 days a week. (The fifth day of the week was more often than not taken up with travel) This I can tell you from firsthand experience is unsustainable in the long-term and perhaps even in the medium term. The other part of this question then also relates to assessment. Through our RTO we have a fairly large number of students, a lot of whom are doing, assessment only, RPL, distance learning for most of their learning, so for a number of our trainers rather than delivery of face to face training making up the bulk of what they do on a daily basis, assessment is the prime component and for others it is about s 50/50 split. So therefore a follow-up question is, is it reasonable to expect a trainer might

be fully utilised (100% 5 out of 5 days) doing only either face to face training plus assessment? If that doesn't seem unreasonable what then is a reasonable split between training and assessment or is it just a scheduling and workload issue at that point? I have to admit that I have reservations however about suggesting that a trainer/assessor could be for all intents and purposes 100% utilised simply doing training and assessment, without there being a decline in the quality of both the training and the assessment activities and as a result a decline in the learner outcomes. The final question then is should utilisation be made part of performance reviews, particularly in a situation where the trainer has no control over the amount of training or assessment that will be required on a week to week basis as it is really not about their performance, it is just a question of volume of work. I would be really interested in hearing what everyone else thinks about this and how (if at all) they use trainer utilisation within their organisations.

I don't want to be a trainer all my life

Over the past couple of weeks I have encountered a number of conversations or articles, around how to get started or how to progress one's career in the world of L&D. While I firmly believe that L&D really is the HR sweet spot, some of the comments and issues that have been raised about the L&D industry seem quite valid both from an international point of view and from an Australian perspective. The question I have been asked a number of times recently has been, 'How do I get started in training?' My initial off the cuff response, at least to those people in Australia was to go out and get their Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, but recently I have realised that I was actually embedding quite a lot of assumptions in the statement I was making, mainly I think due to the fact that I have been involved much more heavily in the management of L&D and training in the last few years than the coal face shall we say. This minor revelation came about when myself and a long-time friend were talking about how we got involved in the industry and realised that both of us started outside the VET sector, delivering non nationally accredited training in fee for service providers and that neither of us when we started had a TAE qualification and worked for a number of years quite successfully without even needing it. But now it seems that everyone in the training industry and beyond whether involved in the delivery and assessment of accredited training or not, expects that everyone will at a minimum have the TAE qualification. But what about an HR person with a degree and a specialisation in Learning and Development, do they need to get the entry-level qualification on top of their other qualifications. Definitely, if they want to deliver training, or and let's be fair here, even work in the RTO/VET sector in Australia, but more and more it is simply expected that those involved in L&D in this country will have a TAE. Now I am not intending to argue whether or not this is a good thing or the value of the qualification or anything like that, but and I come back to my revelation, getting the qualification is not by necessity the first thing you should do if you want to become involved in L&D, what you really need is experience. Now I am not talking here of just experience in training and L&D or HR, I am talking about a wider

workplace experience, that begins to develop your depth of knowledge about how organisations and the people within them think and work. This was driven home to me recently when I was having a conversation with a younger person who was taking part in a TAE program and when she was asked what it was wanted to train and why she wanted to do the course, she responded by saying she didn't know what she wanted to train, but she just really wanted to train and teach people and become part of the L&D/Training industry. I mean I wish her the best but with a Cert IV TAE, a generalist business degree and almost no experience, I think it might be a very hard road for her. But what about when you are already in the industry, most of us involved in L&D and the VET sector are very passionate about what we do, we do it because we love it, it is as they say 'in our blood', but and this is what really struck me was there is little or no career progression within organisations, be they dedicated training organisations or L&D units within businesses. Unlike a lot of other career pathways, you don't start in a junior role and slowly progress into more senior positions, for me like Sukh, all of my career progressions have been because I have moved roles from one organisation to another. We tend it seems to hire trainers as trainers and don't really offer them a pathway to anything else, except perhaps 'Senior Trainer' or the like. So they train for as long as it excites them and then they either leave the profession or they look for other roles outside the organisation they are in. The same goes for Admin people and Compliance people and the works, we seem to want to pigeon-hole people and once they are in their hole that is what we continue to think of them as. Then as an added 'bonus' in Australia you have the TAFE, Training providers, organisational divide, where it would be exceedingly rare for someone to be given a role in a TAFE that had not had experience in a TAFE, though in reality there is very little difference between running a TAFE, a large training organisation or an organisation L&D department. And the same goes in other directions as well, most non TAFE people think TAFE folk are boring, conservative and not terribly innovative, TAFE people thin commercial providers are cowboys out for a buck and corporate L&D thinks itself aloof from everyone. So I wonder whether we can

have the kind of progression in the L&D world that we might see in other professions, I think the problem for us is that there are a lot choices available to people who want to be involved in this sector of the workforce, and a lot of different avenues for people to explore and often the higher you get up the food chain and the more experienced you get the less you end up doing the things that make you passionate about this life we call L&D.

Hand VET back to the States – Results of the commission of audit

As a lot of you are probably aware by now the Australia Newspaper has reported that the Federal Governments Commission of Audit has recommended that the commonwealth should “pull back” from its involvement in vocational education and training. They should hand full policy control back to the states while still “rolling out market reforms “to achieve demand-driven VET outcomes”.” So what does this most recent twist in the already winding path of the VET sector? I have to admit that I am in two minds about it. One thing that has always made the government-funded side of the VET industry problematic has been the fact that funding has been handled at both a state and federal level, meaning multiple possible sources of recurrent and non-recurrent funding all with differing rules and reporting requirements and different methods of applying and utilising the funding, with funding for the TAFE sector being somewhat separate from that relating to enterprise and commercial RTO's. All of this of course meant that it was difficult even for those who knew the arena well to navigate it and get the best value for money and outcomes, but for those with that almost insider knowledge it was almost impossible. And for once I am in agreement with (and you won't see this often) Martin Riordan from TAFE Directors Association when he says federal involvement had led to a “hybrid system” which had amplified confusion and red tape. One particular example of this in my mind is having a national regulator (ASQA) which not all states were forced to sign up to, fragmenting the regulatory system. I have never understood how you can have a national regulator (and lets avoid arguing about whether or not ASQA has done a good job or not) who is not responsible for all of the various areas it is supposed to be regulating. There are essentially two things at stake here, one is who funds training and how it is funding and the other is policy and regulation of training providers. As has been pointed out on occasions and is mentioned in the article by Danny Bielik when he talks about Victoria “the role of the Victorian government, which owns large providers while maintaining its own regulator, was “eminently more conflicted”. Whether true or not a significant number of voices in the sector have always felt

that TAFE's not just in Victoria but across the country have had a much easier road with things like compliance and governance, audit and scope adjustments than either private or enterprise RTO's, being that the government both owned institutions and controlled the regulator for their state. Yet by the same token I also feel that the States have perhaps a better grasp (in some cases) of what is needed in terms of funding, an example of this was the Strategic Investment Fund rolled out through Skills Queensland (when it still existed). This provided focused funding to organisations to meet their skills needs in a meaningful way, unlike the federally funded National Workforce Development Fund which was to put it mildly at least in my opinion and ill-conceived right royal pain in the ass to both apply for, manage and attempt to get paid for. Apprenticeship funding however might be better controlled on a national level, at least from a macro point of view, with the states given latitude in terms of skill needs. So here is an idea; Regulation of all RTO's be they TAFE, Enterprise or private, should be maintained at a federal level through a SINGLE I repeat SINGLE regulator and all RTO's should be subjected to the same set of and application of regulations. Macro level policy around the general direction of the VET sector and the needs of nation in terms of its skilled and unskilled workforces should be a federal responsibility. Funding of the VET sector should be handed back to the States to be directed to those areas of particular state need, informed by the macro level policy decisions made federally. The states control the funding and the federal government controls the RTO's themselves.

Senate enquiry into TAFE (2014)

The Senate Enquiry into TAFE has been released. So what does it say and what if anything does it mean? Well like a lot of these Senate enquiry reports, while it makes a lot of recommendations (some good, some bad, some interesting) that all they are recommendations. It is always up to the government of the day to make decisions based on those recommendations another other relevant information. This is particularly interesting given that there is a dissenting report (coalition senators) which forms part of the paper, and additional commentary from the Greens Senator. The dissent is interesting as it would be might contention (not presuming to know the minds of either the Minister for Industry or those in the Department themselves) that the dissenting view shows us the Government thinking and direction on these matters. The first and large standout for me that came from the dissension view was: **Recommendation 1** **1.29** The Coalition Senators recommend that states and territories take steps to ensure each TAFE is given capacity to negotiate industrial agreements to ensure TAFE operates on an equal footing as other vocational education providers. There is a strong view here I think that TAFE is the property and responsibility of the States and that the States need to be able to act in such a way as to ensure that TAFE is able to compete with other vocational providers. **1.35** Amend Recommendation 1 from the majority report to read: **The committee recommends that the Commonwealth work through its COAG partners on the National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform to ensure that all States and Territories provide clear statements of policy direction on the role of TAFE in of TAFE in consultation with affected industries to ensure a quality education for students.** The dissenting amendment to the original recommendation is a small one, but again points to the heart of what seems to be the Government thinking on the relationship between the training sector and industry. The current view (which is one that I have sympathy with) is that there needs to be strong consultation and links between industry and the providers of education. In previous roles where I was more directly involved in the industry/TAFE

interface, I was often critical of TAFE's perceived inflexibility and inability to deliver to the needs of industry.

1.36 Amend Recommend 6 from the majority report to read; The Committee recommends that COAG work collaboratively to develop a national workforce strategy for TAFE that addresses the level and quality of teaching qualifications in the sector.

Again the amendment to Recommendation 6 is a telling one, while the intent is essentially the same, any specifics, such as the reference to casual workforce have been removed.

Now for what I think is the most telling part of the dissenting comments;

1.37 Coalition Senators do not support Recommendation 10 in its entirety.

1.38 Coalition Senators recommend that for quality vocational education outcomes, a mix of contributors is required that includes government, industry and students.

This sits in a very different space to the Recommendation 10 in the main report which reads; 4.51 The Committee recommends full and immediate reinstatement of TAFE funding cuts by State Governments. TAFE is an expensive proposition, it is necessary, but it is expensive and there is a need to make it more economically viable while maintaining its ability to deliver training in those areas and sectors where other providers can't or won't deliver. While some will disagree with me I tend to lean towards the thinking of the QLD government in the Skills and Training Taskforce Report which spoke to the need to know the base costs involved in the delivery of programs by TAFE, better asset management and better staff and workforce management. Now for the comments from the Greens. I am troubled by the comments from the Green senator, some of you may remember a post from last year where I was concerned about a policy paper released by the Greens prior to the last election. Whereas I stated it seemed to be the Green position that the competitive VET market place has ruined TAFE, failed miserably and not met the needs of

the country, so in order to rectify this they need to give TAFE \$1.2 Billion. So when I read the comments in the enquiry from the Greens and looked at their recommendations I struggled to see whether the comments came from a deep misunderstanding of the sector in general or from an inability to overcome their ideological tenets (this is not to say that other parties do this better by the way). Recommendations like 1.15 The national entitlement to a guaranteed training place should only be offered at TAFE, it should not be restricted to selected qualifications or industry areas, and it should be available as many times as a student requires seem to be ideologically based and fail to see the evidence of the high quality of training which has been delivered by providers other than TAFE and the contribution of private and enterprise RTO's to the market and to the provision of quality training. Also to say that there should be no restrictions on qualifications and that students can have guaranteed training places seems to simply be something that would just shall we say exponentially increase the bill that government would be footing, for perhaps tenuous actual effect on real vocational outcomes for both participants and industry. The comment in Recommendation 5 - Every provider seeking registration to deliver vocational education in Australia should have the provision of vocational education as its primary purpose shows an utter lack of understanding for the contribution that industry itself provides, through organisations who don't have vocational education as their primary purpose, but still run and maintain high quality RTO's, and whom in the vast majority of cases have better connection to the needs of their workforce, their industry and sector than a TAFE could ever hope to have, no matter how much consultation was undertaken. It is a deeply misguided statement. As I said at the start I am deeply troubled by the position taken by the Greens in this report. So in general I don't really disagree with anything in the main recommendations (with the exception of Recommendation 3, but what it would mean in real terms I am not sure of, so I am currently happy to reserve my judgement), although I do prefer the additions and changes made in the dissenting comments from coalition senators. We need all parts of the VET sector to work together from providers, be they TAFE, Private RTO's or

Enterprise RTO's, to industry, to Federal and State Government and to participants. It is only then that we will have a system to provide high quality vocational outcomes.

Creating a sustainable VET sector in Australia

How do we create (and fund) a sustainable VET sector in this country? I was asked for my opinion on this question a little while ago, gave a fairly quick answer and have been thinking about since. It is one of those questions which tends to dig into your brain and just keep niggling at you for an answer, well more precisely a good answer, or at the very least a better answer than the last one you had. So why is this question so difficult to answer, primarily I think because there are so many factors to consider when even beginning to think about a question like this. The problem is also, that there seems to be a not insubstantial number of people (on all sides of politics and everywhere else as well) out there who seem to think that this is a fairly easy problem to solve, where as in reality it isn't. For me the place to start when thinking about all of this is the first word in VET, that is Vocational. This is a system which, at least to my mind, is about vocational outcomes, it is about meeting the workforce needs of the various industry sectors. It is not a system whose purpose is to create wealth for RTO's be they public, private or enterprise, or so that organisations can back away from their responsibility to train staff, or to reduce government unemployment statistics. This is a system whose purpose is to skill people to either get a job or to be better at the job that they already have. One of the big questions around a sustainable VET sector is of course who pays for it? Which of course brings up a number of really salient questions such as;

What courses should the government fund and at what level?

Should participants contribute to the cost of their courses?

If particular industries need particular skill sets should they have to foot the bill themselves?

Should industry be subsidised for training its staff?

These are all tough questions and I think that the real answer sits somewhere in the middle of the whole swamp of competing agenda here. We need however to have some sort of sustainable, sensible, cohesive approach otherwise we end up in this strange situation where for example a Diploma of Counselling can cost you between \$0 and \$20,000 depending on the provider you choose, your circumstances, your employment status and your employer. That is a big variation in cost for a course which by its very nature should have the same outcomes for students whatever they pay, as everyone is assessed against the same performance criteria. However I think if we look at thing through the lens of vocational outcomes, funding and sustainability becomes a lot clear, because after this is a system which is supposed to build capacity and capability. I know this might sound harsh to some, but I have long thought that if a course is not going to result in 'real' vocational outcome, like a job, or an increase in productivity or a decrease in workplace incidents, then it shouldn't be funded. Further if it is 'less sexy', less well paying, difficult to learn or where there are large shortages of trained staff, then there should be more funding, better incentives and easier processes around those qualifications. The big thing for me is that the system needs to be driven by the workforce needs of the States and Nation as whole, it is not about what providers need or want, again be they TAFE, private RTO or enterprises, or the particular agendas of industry groups. It is about what we as a country need to keep us moving forward and meet our workforce needs both now and into the future. So do I have a definitive answer, no, do I have ideas, yes and one day with some luck they might form themselves into a more cohesive package of thinking, but for right now it is something that I like to toss around in my head from time to time.

So why do VET-FEE HELP programs cost so much

I have to admit over the past week or so I have had a bit of a dilemma floating around in my head, it start when the changes to [VET FEE-HELP](http://studyassist.gov.au/sites/studyassist/helppayingmyfees/vet-fee-help/pages/vet-fee-help) were announced in the federal budget and has continued to grow across a number of discussions I have had in various forums and the fact that I am seeing more and more Facebook ads for VET FEE-HELP courses. So my question is really quite a simple one. Why does the cost of a Diploma vary from \$4000 to \$20,000? Now let's be honest here and look at some figures, even at a base price of say \$4000 per student, a cohort of 25 students produces a gross income of \$100,000, however at \$15,000 per student it produces a gross income \$375,000. I guess my question here is does it really cost, even with making a profit, \$375,000 to deliver a Diploma to 25 Students. One of the arguments I have often heard around why some providers charge much higher fees for these programs than others is that their course is the best and provides the best outcomes and is delivered by 'insert name here', however these aren't university courses we are talking about, these are VET, nationally accredited courses, all of which have exactly the same performance criteria and everyone who is deemed competent, whether they have paid \$0 or \$20,000+ for their Diploma ends up with a piece of paper that says the same thing. It doesn't matter how much you have paid for your Diploma, the system says they are equal. The real problem I have with this is that there really is something that is not being made clear here and that is students opting for VET FEE-HELP courses are getting themselves into and often the students who are taking up this option are the ones who can really least afford it in the long run but who are seduced by slick marketing, new iPad or laptops and promise of never really having to pay it off, well unless you earn over, a dollar amount that could be changed tomorrow and severely affect your ability to pay your bills. I also know that one of the arguments for the costs associated with the delivery of higher level qualifications is that there is a lot of administration and marketing and other costs involved

in the VET FEE-HELP system and that may be true, but even if the delivery of a diploma level program to 25 Students, with everything included (admin, marketing, student toys) was \$250,000 (and I have to say I think I am being really generous here) the gross profit margin is still >33% I am trying really hard not to think that at least some of the providers out there utilising VET FEE-HELP as a part of their business plans are simply grossly overcharging their students and trying to suck as much money out of the Government and in the long-term the students as they can, but when I think about the figures it really does seem that at least some providers might be. If anyone has some figures about how much it actually costs for the delivery of Diploma level programs under VET FEE-HELP or a justification for why a Diploma of Counselling and other course should cost a student in excess of \$18,000 I would really love to hear them.

VET-FEE HELP, Diploma's, Certificates and actually getting a job

If you have no other skills or experience is a Diploma going to get you a job!

There had been a lot of talk recently about VET-FEE Help programs, the cost of the Diploma and above qualifications and the way in which these courses are being marketed by some RTO's and their Agents, but in addition to all of the other things that trouble me about this issue, Debt, quality, outcomes, what really worries me is that it seems that a large amount of the marketing of these programs is being done to people who do not have any other formal qualifications and little who possess little or no experience in the area in which they are commencing study. Which leads me to today's question, Is that Diploma that you spent \$10-20,000 on actually going to help you get a job if you don't have any experience or would you have been better spending \$3000 or less (and much less if you are eligible for government funding) on a Certificate III or IV. I think if we are being really serious about this, the answer is pretty straightforward; if you don't have relevant experience or other qualifications a Diploma is not going to get you the job you think it will. Let's look a scenario or two shall we. So you are in your 20's and unemployed, your friends say you would make a good counsellor, so when you see an add on Facebook to become a counsellor for no upfront charges and not have to pay until you make a certain amount of money you jump at the chance, particularly when you get a free iPad as well. So you do your course (which in reality ends up costing you nearly \$20,000, but you don't really notice because it is on VET-FEE Help), get your certificate and go and go and look for a job. Now the real question here is this person going to actually find a job as a counsellor? My initial reaction is probably not, (ok they could set themselves up in their own business, if the course they have just finished is accredited with one of the registration bodies for counsellors, but they didn't ask that before they signed up) I don't know many organisations who are going to employ someone with just a Diploma of Counselling and no other experience in the Community Services sector, particularly when there are a lot of people out there with higher qualifications and

better experience. So in the end the person takes a role in an organisation as say a support worker, or an admin assistance or intake officer, if they can get one, over people who actually have a qualification (which is likely to be a cert III or IV) relevant to the role. This is of course not just the case in the community sector, is just having a Diploma in Project Management is going to land someone a role as a project manager, probably not, again they will probably end up in a role like a project officer or something similar. Of course the real problem with both these scenarios is that the person in question has accumulated a massive debt, to get (if they are lucky) a role they could have got with a qualification which would have cost them much less. Unless you have some relevant experience, or at least some other relevant skills, then a Diploma by itself is not going to necessarily help anyone get a job, and they may well have been better off in the long run, doing a government-funded Certificate III program and saving themselves \$10-20,000 in Debt.

Rubber Stamping and the Qualifications factory mentality

As I am sure almost everyone OTEN Part of Western Sydney Institute (TAFE) has been the subject of a report of rubber stamping of VET Qualifications 9News. Now whether or not the allegations are true or not is not what is really of interest to me. What I find really interesting is that this sort of thing is still going on. It wasn't that long ago that the issues with construction qualifications in Victoria were brought to the attention of the media, we have also seen ASQA de-register a range of RTO's across several sectors for breaching the Standards and everyone I talk to nose at least one RTO, be they TAFE or otherwise who are well be shonky, be it across the board or only in relation to certain qualifications. Yet on the other hand we see discussions at the highest level of government about returning regulation back to the states rather than having RTO's regulated federally, and the suggestion that certain RTO's would be able to self-regulate. I am betting that most TAFE's would fall into the category of being allowed to self-regulate, yet if the 9NEWS report is to be believed even in an environment of regulation they can't be trusted to do the right thing and obey the standards. The Australian VET system is one that is respected around the world and in general I think has a good reputation within Australia, but if we don't see this Rubber Stamp, Qualification factory mentality stamped out, the industry will decline even further and will be nothing more than a joke. But what can be done to ensure that VET maintains its high standards and that RTO's be they TAFE's or commercial providers, both maintain the standards and ensure that all of the stakeholders involved in Nationally Accredited Training in this country have their outcomes met;

One set of rules, applied equally to all RTO's whether they are a TAFE, a Commercial Provider or Enterprise,

One regulator - A single federally managed regulator, not the mishmash we have now, or a state based system or a self-regulated system, one single regulator, and

A greater degree of regulation or at least investigation into what is actually being delivered by RTO's and how it is being delivered.

Now I am not suggesting that this is all that is necessary, but it is in my mind a very good start. Now I know that there are going to be people out there who disagree with these statements and would really like to hear what you have to say. I would also like to hear from those who agree with me.

Competency based, time based or something in between

I have been involved in a number of conversations recently about training (what a shock), but in particular about how long it takes to train someone. The easiest answer here seems to be well as long as it takes, different people will learn at different rates so the amount of time it might take me to learn something may be radically different from the amount of time it takes you to learn the same thing. Now essentially that is the right answer, particularly where we are talking about skills based training, if I am able to demonstrate that I can perform a skill to whatever criteria are necessary then surely I have demonstrated that I am competent and shouldn't need to spend additional time on 'learning' that skill simply because it should take say 5 days to learn that skill. I have a question though, let's take the example of making a cup of coffee. I attend an online training course called making a cup of coffee, the course is delivered in a state of the art simulated coffee-making environment, includes a range of videos from the world's best coffee makers and lots of reading questions to think about. Oh and there is a 'skills assessment' at the end of the course where I have to make a cup of coffee in the simulated environment. I answer a range of questions about making coffee and do a project on how coffee makers work, well to be fair my project is about how the simulated coffee maker works and my answers are largely regurgitated from the videos and printed materials and it takes me less than a day to complete. These questions are assessed and found to be satisfactory. I then undertake the 'make a coffee skills assessment' and pass with flying colours. Am I competent? Some people would clearly argue yes, of course I am competent I have done all that is required to show my competence in making a coffee, however what happens when I go out into the workforce with my making a coffee qualification, get job, and find myself confronted with a coffee machine that is utterly unlike the one I have used on every previous occasion (in the simulated environment) and my consumers are much more demanding about their java than my simulated customers ever where, and struggle to manage to make a cup of coffee. Am I still competent? Would the situation have been any different if there was a requirement that

the course took a minimum of 6 months and 100 hours of placement to complete or are we going to get exactly the same result. Am I more likely over this extended period of time to encounter situations and equipment and people who stretch my skills then I would have been with entirely online or face to face training plus a practical skills assessment. When we add to this the added dimension that in most cases I am not undertaking this training alone, but rather as part of a group, a group which has both widely ranging skills and abilities, including how fast they learn, how does that affect not only my competent but the competence of the other members of the group.

The first thing to say here is that I am not bashing online training, I like online learning and find it really useful for what it is. What my focus here is the question that if we are truly serious about competency based training then surely we need to recognise that there is for the most part actually a minimum amount of time that it takes someone to become competent in a particular skill. Now for me whether that time comes from work experience before entering training or through work placement or on the job training is unimportant, what is important for me is that there is minimum amount of time and that that minimum should be part of the recognition of competency. If you have only ever done 40 hours of work in an aged care facility in your entire life and that was a training placement, then no matter how good the training is you have received I am going to really, really doubtful that you are actually competent across any real range of situations and environments. There is simply not enough time for you to have experienced enough variety of situations to be able to be competent, even if you have done hours of simulated, intensive, innovatively delivered training to go along side this. To caveat this, of course there may be a very small range of people who after this type of training are competent, but in my opinion and experience not many)

We need to have a system that ensures that when someone is given a qualification that they are actually competent and one step towards achieving this seems to me to be the concept

of mandating at least the level of placement hours that various qualifications need. That's what I think anyway.

I wish TAFE people would just stop whining (Rant warning)

I really am starting to get sick of TAFE staff right from the top to the coal face complaining about how hard their world is! Right now that I have offended half my audience.

It seems like every week now there is a new article in a newspaper or somewhere else about how tough TAFE are doing things and how complicated the market is for them now that they have to compete with private sector training providers. I for one am sick of it. I tell you what, all of you who are complaining about your life in the TAFE system and how hard it is now that you have to compete with private providers, come and work with a private provider. Come and work somewhere where your existence depends solely on being able to find enough students to pay the bills, without the support of government for infrastructure and the like. And I don't care whether you are a big commercial provider or a niche market one, it is all the same, there is no support out there, if we fail we fail end of story. There is no government that is going to bail us out, or restructure us to assist us with continuing to operate, that is just not going to happen. If individual TAFE's can't sustain themselves (except in environments where there a very solid social participation reasons) then why are they being supported by the government, for the most part, private providers would be more than willing and able to step into the spaces left.

TAFE, do not do a better job than private providers just because they are a TAFE, they are not only providers of VET training in this country and it is about time they just stopped whining, accept the fact that they have to compete and get on with it. Just like in my opinion TAFE in Queensland is doing, and interestingly I rarely here the comments we here from the southern states about having to compete with private providers from the QLD TAFE sector. Also if you are a TAFE teacher/trainer, stop complaining about how hard you work. Trainers and Facilitators in the private sector work much harder.

TAFE and the contestable marketplace

So many of you saw my little rant about TAFE recently so I thought to be fair what I might, or perhaps should do today is discuss my thoughts around a contestable training market place, how it affects TAFE and what might need to happen to change things. There are a couple of things I need to make clear first off,

While I have been around the L&D and VET industry for quite a while I haven't taught at a TAFE in a very long time, but I have been involved with them in a number of different roles I have had over the years,

I don't believe solutions like the one suggest in the Greens pre-election policy paper (we need to give TAFE \$2 billion and restrict the private sectors access to funding) are well thought out, viable, in the best interests of VET education in this country or solve the problem),

I believe that there are in some cases strong social justice, equity and workforce participation issues, particularly in regional, remote areas for TAFE's to be provided with additional funding to allow them to serve that function,

There should be one regulator for everyone public, private, enterprise, regardless of State with which everyone has to comply.

I have had some very interesting discussion with some wonderful people from a number of TAFE institutions about how they these changes are effecting them. Despite what we might think education is never free, someone (either the user or the government or someone else) always pays. However that being said I also believe that education should be 'free' to the end-user (within reasonable limitations) One of the things that has always worried me about TAFE has been the sheer size and amount of physical infrastructure that they seem to have, a lot of which, if we extrapolate from the findings of the Queensland Training Task force a

number of years ago is vastly underutilised. This creates a system where funding for education is actually funding for the maintenance of buildings and infrastructure. Now there may be good social and economic reasons why in some areas it is necessary to maintain underutilised infrastructure, such as the need to provide specialised training equipment to meet a regular though not constant need, or because they are the only education facility within a certain area. However why are we maintaining or in some cases even really maintaining standard classroom facilities when the overall utilisation rates are say below 50%. This is not to suggest that there should be just enough classrooms for students, there should be room for growth and allowances made for contractions in student numbers etc., but underutilised space is costing money that could be redirected to the actual cost of student learning. Now I know that this rationalisation of resources is occurring in a number of TAFE environments and I know it worries some people. However having to consider how to best utilise limited space is a dilemma that a lot of private and enterprise providers face every week. We have two training rooms, so we can theoretically conduct 10 classroom based trainings a week, however in reality we only do about 6-7, mainly because one of the training rooms is bigger than the other so we try to fit our bigger classes into there first, we also have a number of other groups and activities where go on in the rooms, study groups (formal and informal), one-off workshops, staff presentations and programs, which means that the building is about 90-95% utilised each week (at least during working hours). It would be great to have another classroom, but that would drop our actual utilisation down to 60% or less and it seems difficult to justify that cost on the grounds of 'if we build it they will come.' If we decided we wanted to provide some training that required specialised equipment or resources the costs would be even more significant. What would be great would be if TAFE and private provides worked together to get the most out of all of their resources. I would gladly lease space at our campus once a week for a TAFE to run a program and I would gladly lease space over in another suburb from a TAFE to run our programs there. I know it would make life easier for our clients who live in another area to

get to face to face class. Most private providers run fairly lean in terms of management and administration. I think even the staunchest TAFE supporter would have to admit that TAFE management and admin is not lean. Now I know that they have large user bases and provide a range of services and programs, but still there seems to be a lot of duplication and a lot of layers of management. The problem with this of course is the speed at which a TAFE can react to the need or a request from a client as opposed to how quickly a small to medium or even a quite large-sized private provider can react. This is a problem that just TAFE needs to grapple with however a lot of very large businesses and government departments face the same problem, lean, agile businesses, with flatter management structures and well delineated autonomous decision-making at all levels are adapting and responding to markets in ways traditional companies and government departments simply can't. The other big challenge is simply that of change itself, as someone commented to me the other day, there are a lot of people in TAFE who are there because they believe in public education, they believe in TAFE and have worked in an environment for years which mapped very closely to their values and ideology. A market driven system is seen as changing this, as putting their personal values and ideology at odds with the values of the system they have worked and believed in for years and this change is therefore quite stressful. I was mildly criticised for being a little less than empathetic when I suggested that change is inevitable and in the world outside of TAFE and Government, if you can't work within the value and ideology of an organisation then you are going to have a hard time and it is probably better to leave before you are asked to leave. Even though I take the criticism on the chin, I stand by my statements, there are no jobs for life anymore and change in both inevitable and in most cases necessary, we need to either accept that or move on to somewhere that fits better for us. I also think that a lot of long-term TAFE facilitators might be pleasantly surprised to find that if they came over to the dark side of private providers how many of these providers might be a good match for their values and ideology. So what is the answer, I don't know, but I think that TAFE needs to be leaner, more agile and

responsive, less infrastructure and resource heavy and more focussed on the needs of not just students but of organisations and employers as well. They also need to be for the most part self-sustaining, if a TAFE isn't getting enough students to pay the bills, they need to seriously think about their future. As I said to someone the other day, old TAFE is dead, and everyone needs to either embrace the new TAFE direction or get out of the way.

Marketing, marketing, marketing; selling training ethically

The VET industry in Australia at the moment seems to be beset by unscrupulous marketing programs, designed it seems to do nothing more than rip of the most vulnerable people in society, by promising them degrees and qualifications that will get them jobs and which they don't have to pay for, oh and don't you worry we will through in a free computer with that course as well. So what is going on here, why are we seeing such a rise in this, what can we do about it and what alternatives do RTO's have in terms of marketing. The first two things that spring to my mind when I start to think about why we have seen such a blatant increase in this clearly unethical behaviour are;

The influx of large commercial providers (often part of even larger overseas backed companies) into the market, who in order to survive, profit and pay for their sparkling offices and campuses need a substantial constant income stream (hence we end up with people being charged \$18,000 for a Diploma of Counselling)

The rise of lead generation websites and companies who sole purpose is to funnel students into high cost, VET-FEE Help programs to both generation profits for themselves and to provide fodder for number 1.

This should not be taken to suggest that all providers fall into this category and that all marketing is evil and unethical, but it does raise substantial issues in terms of quality of training, the ability of these students to go on to participate in the workforce, the quality of workers available to industry and of course the elephant in the room (which is always hidden behind the words, Study now - Pay later) the amount of debt some of these students are accumulating, which will have a whole range of effects on their future choices, but that's ok we gave them a free computer. To give you a real example of what is happening out there, I was recently talking to a relatively person who was looking for work, she had left the job she had had since finishing high school, because she wanted a change and wanted to have

more options than she currently did. She saw one of the website advertising study now-later and sent them an email asking for all of the details about the course she wanted to do (dual diploma counselling and something else). After the fourth phone call from the lead generation company attempting to get her to sign up to the program she finally 'decided ' it was the right thing to do even though she wasn't entirely sure of all the costs and details. So she started the program, mostly online, there were a couple of face to face sessions where there seemed to be students from a range of different courses there and found that there was very little assistance available, it took weeks to get her assessments marked and there was little in the way of feedback when she did get them back. There was no help finding placements, or any assistance in that way at all, but after about 13 months she finished the program and was really please and happy (even though it took nearly 3 months for her to get her certificate) and ready to move into a new career. She found however that no one was interested in hiring her, because despite what she had been told there were not a lot of roles available and almost none for people without any real experience. So she took a casual role in a related field, not one that she was particularly interested in, and for less money than she had been getting in her previous role. The really interesting thing was that once she had got her certificate the marketing company contacted her several times again to see how she was going and when she said she was having trouble finding work, they suggested that what she needed was to do another diploma, this time in management to give her those extra skills that she probably needed to get the roles that she really wanted and oh she 'study now-pay later' again as well. If she had chosen that path the total cost of her study when she had finished would have been between \$30-35,000 and she probably would not have been in a terribly better place than if she had done a Certificate III or IV and started from the ground up in organisation, she certainly wouldn't be in as much debt as is now. Now I know some of you will say that is her own fault, she should have done her research and looked at the market, the costs of the course and all range of other things. Which is of course what we would do, but we know that system, we know and can

understand the fine print and the details, these marketing groups and the RTO's providing the courses are specifically targeting people who either don't know how to do that or for whom the information is meaningless because they can't understand it and the lovely person on the phone has convinced them that it is the right thing to do and not to worry because they may never have to actually pay it back anyway. What can we do about it though, firstly we can report to the various regulator (and not just the VET sector regulators) that this is going on, send them links to the websites, expose these things were we find them, and I know there is a lot of this going on already, where people are speaking up and saying something, but there needs to be more voices, the more complaints that flow in the better chance there is of getting something done. What else can we do and what alternatives do we have, well in the words of Google, Just don't be evil.

Training packages and the industry-training connection

As a lot of you know I have for a long time been fairly critical of at least some of the ISC's and their work with the various training packages. I think the Minister is right when he says that business and industry feel as though they are left out of the development process and aren't getting what they need or expect out of graduates of these programs. Now if we put aside arguments about quality of training and the like, it seems clear that there are a lot of training packages and qualifications out there that miss the mark in terms of providing employers with graduates with the skills sets that they require. The level of flexibility to be able to provide a training program which meets the need of both employer and the packaging rules can sometimes be difficult and graduates can sometimes be missing critical skills needed for more specialised areas of the industry. As I have said previously (and I am happy that the Minister seems to be thinking in the same direction) the skill sets and knowledge requirements for job roles must come from within the relevant industry, it can't and shouldn't be driven by training providers. If industry provides the basis, that is the skills and knowledge that various job roles require, then it is the role of the training industry to take that information and to translate it into trainable outcomes, outcomes that ensure that graduates of the programs should everything else being equal, meet the needs and criteria of employers. The fact that it does actually meet those needs and more than that, that it is understandable by employers needs to be firmly ascertained. Too often employers have not been kept in the loop or simply don't understand why training has been constructed in the way in which it is, and that is not their fault, it is ours, if industry doesn't understand how training works, what the outcomes are and why things are how they are then that is clearly the fault of the training industry. So for the most part I think the Minister is right, at least in theory, how it plays out in practice will of course need to be seen, there needs to be a much stronger link between industry and training, but with each party providing input into their areas of expertise. And let's not forget as I often say, this is Vocational Education and Training we are talking about so if the programs aren't providing real vocational outcomes

for graduates, then why are they even programs and why are they are being to delivered to students.

Diplomas or Certificates – Qualifications vs employment outcomes

Given a number of discussion I have had recently around Vocation training (VET) in Australia and in particular the rise of debt funded diploma industry I thought I might take a look at some actual figures and see whether or not getting a Diploma (AQF level 5) made any significant difference to employment options and outcomes, or whether it was the case that a lower AQF qualification, in particular level IV or III actually had the same or better outcomes in terms of employment. So to the figures. As most of you know NCVET is the place to go to look at statistics relating to the VET industry in Australia. Now it is important to note that this data is around 12 months old, but still I think worth looking at now if only in the context of us then being able to comment on the new data when it comes out. If we look at the student outcomes to total VET activity by key measures table it seems to be at least to my eyes beginning to tell us some interesting stories. If we look at table 21 - Key findings for graduates by qualification firstly what do we see?

We see that the biggest proportional increase in employment before and after training at 8.9% is at the Certificate II level with the Certificate III (7.8%) and Certificate I (6.9%) not far behind. The lowest performers (and significantly lower are Certificate IV and Diploma or above Qualifications at 1.6% and 1.7% respectively. When we look at table 22 which represent module completer's rather than graduates we see that the situation is even worse with what appears to be almost 1% fewer people employed out of those that started but did not complete a diploma level course again with the result better at a certificate III, II and I level. And the trend continues when we look at Improved employment status after training for those employed before training, at a certificate III and II level 21% of respondents were employed at a higher skill level while only 14% and 10 % for Diploma's and Certificate IV's. Of those not employed before training 51% of Certificate III graduates were employed after the training as opposed to 43% at a Diploma level.

So what does this all mean? Well and I am happy to take any challenges to this as I am now making some assumptions, what I think it shows is that if you are unemployed your best choice in terms of what training to undertake in order to maximise your ability to gain employment is to undertake a certificate III level qualification. It also seems even if you are employed and you want to improve your employment outcomes a certificate III is still the better option. This becomes even more relevant when we start to consider the relative costs of certificate III vs Diploma programs. Certificate III, negligible cost to participant due to direct government funding arrangements versus up to \$20,000 debt through government study assistance for a diploma. It seems to me, and this has been my position for a long time, when we look at the vocational education system in this country and how it relates to that group of people who have for whatever reasons not gone on to tertiary education, it seems that the best approach is to undertake lower level courses (certificate II and III) courses to maximise the opportunity of gaining employment and then whilst employed access higher level training qualifications to improve overall job position. This use of the system seems to be supported in general (particularly in QLD) by the structure of government funding, where Certificate III level qualifications are heavily subsidised for people without qualifications, yet higher level (IV and V) qualifications require participants to already be employed in the sector they wish to study in. Also given that gaining a higher level qualification first, rules out the possibility of individuals or employers being able to fund lower level qualifications, it really does seem to me to be the case that you are far better off, starting at a lower level of qualification and working your way through the system, than starting higher up the ladder and hoping for an employment outcome.

Setting a maximum retail price on VET

(at this point mostly confined to Victoria and previous market darling Vocation), but it has got me thinking about the business of vocational education again and how best to ensure that business and industry as well as participants and governments, get the best deal, the best bang for buck so to speak. Now as anyone who has read my blog will know I am a firm believer in the system that currently operates in Australia, I believe there is a place and a necessary, place for both private and public education providers in the VET sector, I also believe that it is in the public good for Governments to make education as affordable and as accessible as possible for every member of our society. This of course does not just mean the VET sector but across the entire educational landscape from preschool through to university and everything in between. Education is good for this country. Education of course has to be regulated, we have to ensure that our providers, both public and private are not simply becoming degree and diploma factories, churning out students without regard for quality of learning, or that what they are teaching has any relevance to the industries in which these graduates might hope to gain employment, we have to know that our electrician's, support workers, nurses don't just have a piece of paper which says they are competent, but that they are actually competent and competent in the things that their respective industries need them to be competent in to work. On top of this someone has to pay, and I have said this on a number of occasions previously, there is always a cost involved in education, which needs to be paid by someone, be that someone, the individual, business's or industries, the government or someone else. There is always going to be a cost. There is a cost if we try to deliver VET sector training only through public educators like TAFE, there is a cost if we utilise private providers to enable the streamlining of the public system, there is always a cost. As I said earlier I believe in the system we currently have, I think having a mix of private and public providers to meet the needs of participants and industry is important, it provides flexibility, innovation and if properly organised value for money. I also think that given the public good of an educated populace it is difficult to see

that user pays system is one that can be justifiably adopted. One only has to look at the American experience to see the problems their tertiary system is encountering, rising levels of debt and the inability of a significant number of Americans to be able to afford to access the education they want and need are but two obvious ones. It is also obvious though that the Government cannot be held responsible for the funding of every possible permutation of educational wants that people have, particularly in the VET sector. Why do I say particularly in the VET sector, well the answer to that is pretty simple, it is in the title, vocational education is education that prepares people for specific trades, crafts and careers at various levels, this to me means, and always has, that there needs to be a vocational, employment outcome related to the education that is undertaken. Now this should not be taken to mean that every person who undertakes a VET program should either be working, or be tied to a specific post study role, before they are allowed to undertake training. It does however mean that we shouldn't be providing funded places for people to do study, just for the sake of it, in areas where there is little or no likelihood of them gaining employment, the much spoken about situation from a few years back where there many many more people studying to be personal instructors than there were roles or one could suggest even need is one example. Of course this only applies to funding, if you want to a course in underwater basket weaving you should be allowed to, you should just have to pay for it yourself. And lets not even start to talk about VET FEE-Help and the outrageous prices being charged by some providers, both public and private for Diploma level courses, however when the dollar amount set by the government for direct funding for a diploma course is a quarter of what some of these institutions are charging there seems to be something wrong with the system. Now I understand that there are financial viability issues across the board for both public and private providers however here is an idea about costs and pricing that just seems to make sense to me. Why isn't there a recommended or even maximum retail price set by the government for various programs, this price could then be used to set the direct funding that the government was willing to provide for that particular program, if any, but it would set the

maximum price that institutions could charge for a program. How would the price be set, well that is probably the tricky part, but it is something at governments currently do, they set the level of direct funding which they are willing to pay for particular courses, so by extension establishing a fair maximum price from there should not be exceedingly difficult. The relationship between the funded price, where one existed and the maximum price would be representative of industry need, employment opportunities and other such factors. This would not only stop what seems to be rampant profiteering in some areas but would also provide potential students with another indicator of how useful or not the qualification they were considering might be in getting them a vocational outcome.

For example; If the cost of a Diploma of Counselling was set at \$6,000, but the funding level was say \$500 this would be an indicator that this was not a high priority course or that there were not strong employment outcomes from undertaking this course. However, if the cost of a Diploma of Disability was set at the same level (\$6000) but the funding was say \$5000 this would indicate that this was a much higher priority course with much stronger employment outcomes.

Now I know there are going to be people out there that say but you can't do that, that is restricting the market, or that we provide a better service or a laptop or additional resources or whatever, and my answer is a simple one, so what. A system like this would weed out, in particular, the VET FEE-HELP profiteers, it would allow students and employers to have a real idea about the potential outcomes of programs and well maximum or even recommended retail prices are set all over the place on things and everybody else seems to survive, what are we as an industry any different.

If not industry led then what

With the VET reform process has come a lot of questions around the creation, development and management of the Training Packages which make up the VET system and there are currently two discussion papers released by the Department in relation to this. Now even at this early point in the discussion there has been some robust discussion around the training packages, their content and their development. When I start to think about this issue a couple of things come to mind for me, the first is, that I am not terribly interested in how the Training Packages were originally developed, they are what we have and the discussion should I think focus on what is the best path forward from here. I don't think there is much appetite out there for the wholesale reinvention of training packages, but please correct me if I am wrong. The other thing that sits heavy on my mind is this;

If not industry led, then what?

As most of you know I am a strong supporter of the VET system in this country and it capacity to increase workforce participation, provide a skilled workforce for the current and future needs of industry. However the only way in which it can meet the needs of industry is if industry are the central to informing what the required skills and knowledge. If we look at the first principle from which the reform process is being undertaken namely; The national system of qualifications must provide a reliable signal to employers about the skills an individual has, and must be underpinned by industry-defined occupational standards that:

- reflect the technical and generic skills and knowledge that are required in jobs;
- provide a basis for consistent assessment of competence in those skills across the training system;
- provide a mechanism for the national portability of those skills; and
- are flexible enough to cater to the needs of different individuals, employers and industries, including as these change over time.

A couple of really important things come out of this first principle for me and these are the ideas of providing a reliable indicator to employers about the skills of

individuals, the technical and generic skills and knowledge required for Jobs and flexible enough to meet changing needs over time. For me as I have always said, the VET system is about at its base vocational outcomes, it is about providing matching the skills and knowledge of students to the needs of the industries in which they are going to be employed and for me if the skills of the graduates do not map onto industry need and expectation then the system has failed. The question that comes out of this for me is, if the system is related to vocational outcomes, the needs and expectations of industry, how can this be achieved without the strong, connected and engaged input from industry. One of strong criticisms of the current system is that it struggles to keep up with changes in industry and employer practices. This along with an apparent mismatch (in a number of qualifications) between the skills and knowledge of graduates with the needs of employers and overly complex and bloated training packages shows what happens when is not as engaged and connected to the process of development as they could be. So if at least part of our goal is to ensure that graduates of the VET system have meaningful employment outcomes from their qualification and that industry and employers get the skilled workforce that they need both now and in the future it seems to be absolutely necessary for industry to be a the leader in the development of what is required in the various units and qualifications that make up the training packages and that means that there needs to be more, better, consistent and real, actual engagement and consultation between industry and whoever ends up developing the packages themselves.

Reinventing the VET brand – untarnishing VET in the eyes of the public

Learning is a Business and Brand is everything. The VET brand in this country is tarnished, you only have to look at the numerous newspaper articles and commentary associated with them and across social media, (and yes lets never forget that LinkedIn is the 3rd largest social media site in the world) to see that both in the eyes of practitioners and the general public that there is some rust on the gold standard that was VET in this country (Yes I know Gold doesn't rust it's a metaphor folks). I, like so many others from both the public and private sector are passionate about this industry, passionate about the good that is created for both individuals and the country as a whole through vocational education. I believe that both public and private providers deliver (for the most part) outstanding results for their stakeholders and that both are necessary for us to have a vibrant and agile and engaged VET system. All of this passion though is **meaningless**, it is meaningless if in the public eye the VET brand is not as polished and sparking as it once was. What has caused this is also unimportant, be it political point scoring and ideological differences, the rampant pursuit of profit by some private providers or the animosity for some public sector providers about having to be commercially viable and change the way they operate to meet the needs of a new world. But what about quality you ask. We need to ensure the quality of the system, we need regulation, we need research, and we need data. Yes yes we do and without a quality product you can never hope to develop a quality brand with good longevity, however quality is not enough. Research papers on outcomes don't interest the average person on the street looking to improve their educational or employment options, they are interested in the brand, the perception, they are interested in what John next door says his sons experience of doing an apprenticeship through TAFE was. They are interested in the fact that Kelly loves the Diploma of Counselling course she is doing through a private RTO that a friend recommended to her on Facebook. It is the same at an organisational level, L&D and HR folk and managers and the like, all buy training on perceived value and more often than not that is brand related. I know, as the CLO for a

very large organisation I purchased millions of dollars' worth of training every year and a lot of those decisions were based on reputation and brand perception, admittedly there was also a lot of personal knowledge and other factors as well, but here is an example of what I mean. A business unit spent more than \$250,000 to purchase a training program from the US (developed at a US university) plus probably the same amount of money again on training and delivery of the program for under 200 staff. The content of the program amounted to about 1/3 of the content contained in the related Diploma Level course from the Community Services Training Package. Why? The answer is easy the US program has a strong brand and is perceived as being a valuable certification to have even though in reality the certification is really nothing more than a certificate of attendance, while the VET program was perceived as being well 'vocational' so therefore less valuable and the VET brand was simply not as strongly perceived in value terms as the US program was. But we do a great job without own marketing. Yes a lot of providers both public and private do exceptional jobs building their own brands and reputations and if you want to see the effect a holistic branding exercise can have you need look no further the rebranding of TAFE QLD, gone are the boring websites, media, brochures etc. and in their place something that seems more vibrant, alive, agile and able to meet the needs of the future. These are all however individual marketing designed to present a sub-brand if you will in the best possible light to enable it to compete with other sub-brands in the same market. The overall brand here is VET, the industry relies on that brand being strong. If the VET brand itself is tarnished or perceived as not as valuable as other offerings either from within Australia or internationally the job of marketing for the sub-brands, us, is so much more difficult. As I have said on numerous other occasions learning is a business, someone always has to pay for it, be that the government, organisations or individuals the money has to come from somewhere and people talk with their wallets, be that through individual choice of service provider, organisational return on investment calculations or the quantifiable outcomes of government funding it all comes down to perceived value in the end and the strength of the

brand people are purchasing. If we want a strong, successful, well-respected VET industry in this country not only do we need to make sure the quality is right, we need to ensure that the message that the VET system, however it is accessed, should be the first choice that people make and the choice that they continue to make for their educational and employment options and the only way to achieve that is BRAND.

How do you lose \$70 million and still have a job – work for TAFE Victoria it seems

An article yesterday in the Age foreshadowed losses of in excess of \$70 million in the Victoria TAFE system and I have to admit I have been thinking about it a little more overnight. I mean where else but in the public sector could you amass such substantial losses and then get an offer from the government to give you more money. I struggle to see how that can come about. Did they spent money that they didn't have in the budget for things like a new SMS, did they grossly underestimate the amount of students.

Unfortunately all of these things point to really bad management practices. I have managed very large budgets and even losses of \$1 million plus are heavily questioned. Surely they know their business well enough that they can plan forward or are they simply working on the assumption that it doesn't really matter in the long run because the government will just bail them out and pay the shortfall. Not a way to run any kind of business be it public or private in my opinion. Now that being said we need to have a public VET education system, but we need to have one that doesn't constantly need to be bailed out by the government, throwing more money at a system that is clearly broken isn't going to fix it. TAFE has a place, but it is struggling to find that place. There are arguments that suggest that it provides support and training in places where non-public providers don't because of economic reasons, but even that is changing there are plenty of providers particularly NFP's who are willing to and already do the kinds of work and in the kinds of places that traditionally only TAFE did. If a business (and even though it is a public entity TAFE it is still a business) can't support itself with the population base it has around it or its infrastructure costs are too high or whatever the reason is, then something needs to be done. Unless there are strong social and economic reasons for keeping it then closing or merging needs to be seriously considered, as does staffing levels and executive salaries and packages. Why have separate CEO's and boards and executive teams at each TAFE why not centralise at least a bit, cut down on management overheads and put the money where it needs to go, the teaching of participants.

So who are these private RTO's really

I have heard a lot of talk recently about private RTO's, the need to restrict the number of them, the funding available, stop funding free enterprise with public money and the like, so I thought that at least for a moment I might explore who these people and organisations are who seem to be being demonised a little bit in this whole discussion of TAFE, public education and the VET sector in general. It seems quite easy I think to lump all non-public (read TAFE) suppliers of VET education into the private provider category, however it is not as simple as that by any stretch of the imagination. There are at least 3 major distinctions which can be made with the 'private' RTO sector:

For Profit commercial

Enterprise

Not for profit

And even within these broad categories there are going to be a huge variety. If we take for example For Profit Commercial providers, the vast majority of these providers are small to medium size businesses, who are not making substantial profits, work in niche areas in one maybe two sectors at the most. There are very few private providers who are making millions out of government funding or out of training in general. Most of them started their businesses not because they wanted to make money or get rich, but because they saw a need, they saw sometimes personally that people were dissatisfied with the training they were getting, the quality of students, and the outcomes and thought they could do better. And a lot of them do, a lot of these smaller 'for profit' providers provide services which are at least as good as and a lot of time better than those offered by the large corporate or government providers. Why? That is easy, they actually care about the work they are doing, the businesses and industries they work with and the people.

So what about enterprise RTO's I have talked long and often about Enterprise RTO's, their place and purpose in the VET sector and why an organisation would choose to become an ERTO. For most of these organisations becoming and maintaining an RTO came from two reasons, firstly, it is a relatively natural extension from the standard operations of an L&D unit to provide accredited training to the organisations staff and want to be able to provide it in-house so that the content, delivery, outcomes, and costs can be better controlled and managed. Secondly is dissatisfaction, dissatisfaction with the quality of people being recruited who already have qualifications and dissatisfaction with the quality of outcomes for existing staff doing accredited training. It therefore becomes a relatively easy decision to move to a position where those qualifications which are vital to the business are delivered in-house, as part of the normal regime of Learning and Development activities. Again however for most of these ERTO's the number of qualifications are small and in sector that relate very strongly to the core business of the organisation. Now some of these ERTO's operate entirely in-house, they train only their own staff and no one else, most of them utilise government funding where it is available but also provide a wide range of training that is funded, others choose to take their expertise to the market place and provided training services to a wider (though usually only within their sector) group of stakeholders. Again, why? Because they know what is needed to make a competent worker, they know what a good outcome is and how it is best delivered and they know this because they are actually embedded in the industry.

Then we have the not for profits, most of which are either enterprise RTO's of some description or deeply embedded in another not for profit organisation. These providers don't seek to make huge profits, they seek to ensure that both those who currently work and those who want to work in their sectors (usually community services) have the best opportunities to be able to do that. They work with the disabled, the disenfranchised, the disadvantaged and they do it well. They do it well because that is their core business, they know and understand the world in which they work, they are embedded in the industry, and

they live it day in and day out and want to pass that knowledge and experience onto other. Now not only do a lot of these providers like all of the others provide services and outcomes that are at least equal if not better than those provided by the large and public providers, they also tend to do it cheaper, making it more affordable and accessible to those who are both most vulnerable and most in need of these programs, but in general they do it with far less fees for students. Take for example a Certificate III in Disability which attracts funding of around \$2500 in QLD. Now a student even with a concession card wanting to do this qualification at a TAFE in Queensland would have to come up with around \$1000 in student fees. How much would they pay at a not for profit provider between \$20 and \$100. Why? because these providers know that most of the people who are looking to do this course can't afford \$1000 and because they are connected to their communities and understand the need for people to be able to access affordable training in order to be able to change their lives. So for me I sometimes tend to get upset when people use the term private provider like a stick, to beat the non-public side of the industry. They drag out the horror stories of the small number of providers who do the wrong thing and suggest that is the case for everyone. They make the assumption that TAFE is good and non-TAFE is bad. They make the assumption that only a public provider can provide services for people with challenges and disabilities, or at a price that people can afford. They make the assumption that public providers know the industry better than the organisations and people who actually work in the industries. They talk about cutting access to funding and only allowing TAFE to provide Government funded courses as if this would have no effect on the lives of the thousands of people and organisations who use these non-public providers, let alone the effect it would have on the lives and livelihoods of the people who own, manage and work in these providers. As I have said on so many occasions we need a public provider, but we also need the non-public providers as well and to suggest that TAFE can do everything that the non-public providers do, or to lump all non-public providers into the

'Private' handbasket. Is a few that misunderstands who these providers are and the services they bring to their communities.

Measuring outcomes in vocational education – are we doing enough

With the deadline for Total VET activity reporting fast approaching us my mind has turned to how we evaluate outcomes in Vocational Education in Australia, or at least the data that we collect nationally which seeks to provide us with information on the Vocational Education Industry in this country. Now we all know and love the Learner Questionnaire and the Employer Questionnaire, but really what are we capturing here and is it really giving us any real useful information. Let's be honest, when we look at the Questionnaire's, even the employer one, they really nothing more simple level one satisfaction (smile) sheets and anyone who has been in the L&D industry for even a few weeks knows how resounding useless smile sheets are if you want to convince anyone about anything that has to do with training. Now I know that these are only one source of data, but if I had used that sort of data to convince an executive team as to why they should invest in a learning program I would have been laughed out of the boardroom. If we look at the well know Kirkpatrick model of evaluation with its four levels

1. Reaction.
2. Learning.
3. Behaviour.
4. Results.

Realistically here all we are doing is evaluating reaction. We are not really looking at anything that comes close to the other 3 steps, at least not on any consistent regular basis. Now of course, someone could suggest that levels 2-4 and even level 5 (ROI) if we want to include that is something that should be done in the organisations that are sending their employees to be trained and that is a fair point and I would suggest that most organisations with L&D units are already doing this. However, what about all of the people who are undertaking training not at the behest of their employer, they may be unemployed,

casual, wanting to change careers, we seem not to be collecting and analysing any higher level data on these people. We also seem not to be asking those employers who are collecting robust data on the learning of their employees for their data either. Now admittedly in Queensland, and this may be the case in other states as well there is some collection being done of employment outcomes for students undertaking funded programs, but really if we are trying to make a better system don't we need some real data to allow us to make decisions about what is working and what isn't. (If we are collecting this data and someone knows about it and how we are doing it please let me know) I come back again to the point that if I was to try and justify an organisational L&D budget on the kinds of data that is being collected on training, I would be told to go away and come up with some real figures. So what should we be capturing, If we look at the Kirkpatrick model (I will talk about some other options later) we should at least be capturing whether or not the student actually learnt something, where the learning objectives met, and how much change has there been in their skills, knowledge or attitude. Now of course to do this properly, we need to collect data before and after training, and it could be suggested that by virtue of the person going from not having a qualification to having a qualification (becoming competent) that there is an increase in knowledge, but is this actually the case, has there actually been a change in the person's skills, knowledge or attitude. With the data we are collecting at the moment we just don't know we are making assumptions, but without good data those assumptions could very well be wrong. What about whether or not we are seeing any changes in behaviour, are the learners putting what they 'learnt' into action in the workplace, are their behaviours changing as a result of the training that was delivered to them. This is not something that can be answered with a smile sheet at the end of training, or an employer questionnaire with general questions about perceived improvement. This is data that needs to be collected once the learner has been in the workplace for a while, once they have had time to adjust and integrate their new learnings into their work environment. Then of course there is the question of what the result was, did this training improve

anything organisationally, on a state level, on a national level. Was it good for the organisation, the country, the learners, and the bottom line, whatever? We need to figure out what areas we are seeking to see improvements in and then track and see whether or not we are seeing those improvements. Again this is a step up in complexity in terms of the types of data needed and how we might collect it. Finally of course there is the question of Return on Investment. It lets us begin to answer the question, has the billions of dollars the government has handed out in VET-FEE HELP and other programs and the money spent by business and organisations on top of that has been worth it, have we got the return on that money that we expected or did it just swirl away into a black hole where it didn't improve anything which we would consider enough to measure. Is all of this easy to do? No. Am I suggesting that the reporting requirements on RTO's change so that they are required to capture a whole range of additional data over a timeframe long after the student has finished their courses? No. Am I suggesting that perhaps we need to do a yearly survey, akin to the kind done by ATD (what was ASTD) on the state of learning, and include employers, organisations, training providers and learners and try to ask them some serious questions? Maybe. Am I suggesting we need to do more with this so called big data thing that has been talked about so much? Maybe. I don't have a definitive answer, I just think we need to be doing more if we really want to capture the true outcomes from our Vocational Education system.

Connecting L&D and the VET Sector

We talk about VET as being industry led and aimed at the needs of industry and skilling of workers, yet in most organisations L&D departments spend large sums of money on non-accredited, sometimes overseas based programs to meet their staff training needs. A few clear examples are

Prince2 Project Management Training VS Certificate IV or above in project management

The C.A.R.E and Sanctuary Models in Youth work VS Certificate IV or about in Child, Youth and Family intervention.

Why is an organisation happy to spend \$250,000+ on a program from the USA, with no accredited outcomes, but not willing to spend the same amount on a VET program that provides or if well-constructed is able to provide the same kind of learning outcomes and more. Why do organisations send staff to a 5 day Prince2 course costing close to \$3000 dollars when they could undertake an entire Certificate IV in Project Management for the same or less? While some of the answer here lies with brand, reputation and portability of qualification (particularly with say the Prince2 program which is recognised internationally), some of the answer also lies squarely at the feet of the VET sector and while some of the issues have to do with the construction of the training packages, how they are developed, others are directly concerned with how the VET industry interacts with organisations. There is a lack of understanding of how VET works within industry and organisations, it is often viewed as being inflexible and focused on full qualifications, while what industry wants in flexibility and the ability to access and train their staff in particular skills or skill sets. The VET industry also seems to fail at capturing and utilising well, all of the formal and in particular informal learning that occurs in organisations and converting that into accredited outcomes. L&D departments have specific business goals that they need to meet and the VET sector needs to be able to intersect with those goals and offer solutions that are

appealing in both in terms of outcomes and in terms of budgetary considerations. Trying to sell an L&D manager a certificate IV in business program on the basis that it is government subsidised fails even though the cost might be much less than other options because it is not what they want. They want time management for some staff, excel training for others, communications skills for yet others and they know that trying to sell the concept of a full qualification to the operational managers in the organisation will fail for the same reasons. It is not what they want. While full qualifications may make sense to individual students looking to participate in the workplace, improve their employment options or to make themselves more attractive in terms of promotions, it is rare, (or at least this seems to be the case anecdotally), that even with customisation of content and the importation of units to try to meet the organisations need, there are still gaps and things that are not needed. I can't count the number of times I have heard people say 'Can't we replace that Workplace health and safety unit with something more relevant?' Or 'Why are these units in here, that is not how we do business, can't we change them?' Unfortunately as I have before this often turns around on students who have done a generic program through a provider and are out looking for a new role or career. On the surface the qualification looks ok, but when the potential employer looks into the units before deciding to make and offer or worse they find out later through an incident, that something that they consider critical to the operation of their business wasn't covered, the whole qualification looks worthless as does the sector in general. But what can we do about it how can we better connect the world of L&D to the world of VET.

Does our VET system work? I actually think it does

So as most of you know I was out at the VET Reform consultations in Brisbane today. (Thank you to Assistant Minister Birmingham, Peta, and the whole Vet Reform Taskforce crew, job well done.) It was an interesting morning with a lot of conversation and discussion and a couple of comments and ideas actually stuck in my mind and I while I was digesting them on the way back to the office I asked myself a question. "If I was building a national vocational education system what would it look like?" The answer I came up with was something pretty much like what we have. A system where the training is developed and maintained by industry bodies to meet the needs of the industries they represent. A mix of public and non-public providers to deliver the training to meet the needs of organisations and individuals. Government funding to assist with the priority areas for the ongoing workforce needs of the nation and a single national set of standards which governed the delivery of these qualifications by all providers. So pretty much what we already have. Now I am not saying that how the system operates is perfect for everyone and that there are not issues at some of the points along the way, but overall I think we have the structure right. Not everyone agrees that the ISC's are the right way to develop and maintain packages, a more ad hoc committee structure might work better, but I don't think anyone is arguing that we don't need to have the industry connection. We are not debating the overall structure at a high level we are just debating exactly what the best way to achieve it is. Sure there are providers and individuals (both public and non-public) out there who may not be doing the right thing, but that is an issue of governance not the structure. Funding for programs may not always be what everyone thinks they should be, but again, that is about funding and Government priorities not structure. We have a good, if not great system here, let's make sure we don't throw out the baby with the bath water. Sure we can do things better, but is the system ever going to be perfect, no, no system ever is. What we need to ensure is that we have a robust and sustainable system that provides the necessary outcomes for all of the stakeholders, everything else is just tinkering around the edges.

Prior Skills and knowledge – The VET – L&D intersection

Continuing on from my last post and in response to a question from one of the LinkedIn Groups I am involved with, I want to look at how the knowledge, skills and experience that a person brings to a role are incorporated in this model. My initial answer was that this is, could and should be handled through the RPL process of the Training organisation which is involved in the model. This is I think however not the entire picture of what is going on here and why, because really there are three things happening all of which may be heading towards different outcomes. Firstly we have the person who comes to a role with a set of skills, knowledge and experience, some of which may be directly applicable to the role in question while others may not. Secondly we have the organisation whose goal is to, at least at a base level, ensure that all of their staff have whatever minimum set of skills and knowledge they have decided is applicable. Thirdly we have the RTO who is trying to tie all of these threads and others together and translate that into formal outcomes. Now I have discussed some ideas around how this third piece might be achieved in other places, but I will discuss additional ideas here as well. Let's start with the organisation whom the person is employed by. There are two issues here, the first is that all organisations have a level of expectation in relation to the skills and knowledge of their employees and seek to have all of their employees at that level. Additionally however even with industry transportable skills, there may be quite large differences in the way those skills are utilised or play out between different organisations. For example it may be the case and often is that two different community service providers may be utilising totally different delivery and care models. Both of these models will use and rely on the same set of skills and knowledge, however those same skills and how they relate to service delivery and care, how they are used and at what level will depend on the model and the employees place within that model. So these issues then in turn lead to the need to train people in 'how we do things here,' it also points to one of the biggest complaints organisations make about staff they hire who have been trained 'generically' by a provider; while they may have certain skills and

knowledge they don't possess the organisational mindset around how these skills are used. This in turn of course leads to over training of staff, needless refresher courses and a range of other activities that are done in the name of compliance, but ultimately just cost the organisation money. From the point of view of the individual coming into a role with an already established set of skills, they rightly or wrongly feel that they have the requisite skills and can, again rightly or wrongly be quite adverse to receiving training in those areas they already feel skilled in, giving rise to the cries of 'I did this in my last organisation,' or 'I learnt all of this at uni.' However, and I spoke about this a couple of years ago at the Edutech conference, a lot of organisations both big and small already have a lot of the information they need to manage this interface between employee, organisation and provider much more easily than they do, but either don't know they have it or don't know what to do with it. A great many organisations out there capture resume, training, and qualification data on their employees when they commence and through their time with the organisation, but few of them use this data to its full potential particularly with respect to training needs analysis, skills and knowledge assessment, or even RPL or credit transfer and competency assessment. If this data is properly stored and mined it can provide a wealth of information, particularly when added to more formal assessment, as to what training is necessary for each individual to undertake. To give you a conceptual idea of what I mean, we could collect a whole range of information from a new employee, including things like qualifications, training they have under taken, responses to skill and knowledge questions, any testing which took part, in essence a whole range of information. This information could then be filtered against not only internal training requirements, but accredited training requirements to form an individual map for each employee and their managers of that person journey from induction to qualification. Of course this won't be all that is required, particularly at the accredited qualification end of the scale, but having a map like that would assist everyone, the employee, the organisation and the RTO to produce the outcomes that all of the stakeholders require.

Branding Vocational Education – Connection L&D and the VET sector

So today in my continuing series of pieces on connecting the Vocational Education and Learning and Development communities I wanted to talk a little about brand. Now I have spoken about the VET Brand before and the need for us to ensure that the VET Brand in this country is a strong and vibrant one, that is both attractive and well-respected. Now given the current climate and negative press that has been circulating around the sector it seems an appropriate time to talk about it again, all be it from a completely different angle. Before I go any further however, last time I talked about this there was a number of people from the public provider side of the fence who shouted to it shouldn't be about brand, it was education and just providing people with a quality education was what was required, almost as if everything else would then simply take care of itself. As I said then however, in my mind learning is a business, a business which is worth in excess of \$150 Billion worldwide and if we don't start treating the vocational education sector as a business then we will see it eroded on a range of different fronts and despite calls to the contrary brand and the value and perception of that brand are vital ingredients in the equation. So what do I mean? Well if we look at the example of Prince2, which I have talked about before as well; why would an organisation or an individual choose to spend \$3000 on a Prince2 course when they could spend the same amount and get a certificate IV or even a diploma of project management through the Australian VET system? While as some commentators have rightly pointed out, part of the reason has to do with the time frames associated with the completion of the program, however one of the other significant reasons behind this choice is BRAND. Prince2 is a powerful brand, it is an internationally recognised and accepted certification of knowledge of the Prince2 project management methodology. It is a 'requirement' for employment in an ever-increasing range of government and public service positions, as well as in the private sector, so strong in fact is the brand that often experienced project managers with degree level study in the field, find it difficult to obtain roles without it. So given the choice of sending your staff or yourself to a certificate IV in

project management or on a Prince2 course, which one would you choose? Now we can was lyrical about the quality of outcomes and education in the VET sector. We can discuss at length, how it should be structured, what components it needs, whether it should focus on immediate job role skills or knowledge for future roles, BUT if there are no students there is no VET sector. If organisations choose international qualifications and programs over our home-grown accredited training system, then we won't have to worry about who pays for TAFE infrastructure costs or how much profit is being made by gigantic private RTO's because there won't be any students and there won't be a vocational education sector. Now I am being a little melodramatic here, but sometimes we need to realise that without students there isn't sector and if students see more value in doing a certification from an American or European training organisation, because it has a stronger brand or is better recognised, and employers and organisations see it the same way, then the value of our sector will continue to erode. Of course I can hear the cries now;

It's the private RTO's that are the problem, get rid of them and give it all back to TAFE, everyone trusts TAFE,

If only the Training packages were more flexible that would solve all of the problems,

TAFE is so inflexible, they make it hard for everyone,

The ISC's cause all the problems they take so long to update anything,

If the government didn't stop changing the rules things would work much better, and so on.

Guess what, it doesn't matter. All this arguing is doing is hurting the VET brand. It is making organisations and individuals less likely to choose a VET program over some other program with a better brand and stronger, cleaner reputation. We need to pull our socks up, all of us. We need to stop thinking that what matters to organisations are completion rates, and free or heavily subsidies training or full qualifications, or whatever else it is we are

worrying about today. Organisations care far more about what the training their staff do means to their day-to-day business than they do about subsidies and completion rates or pretty much anything else. If the only reason someone is going on a training course is because it is free or almost free, you can bet the organisations perceived value of that course is fairly low. If we want this sector to be strong, vibrant and to provide for the needs of organisations and individuals now and into the future, we need to build a brand that both organisations and individuals view as valuable as worthwhile and as meeting real business needs and actually providing some real tangible return on investment.

Time to competence, vocational assessment and organisational need

So in this post on better connecting the L&D and VET sectors I want to look at time frames and how the concept of time to competence may encourage L&D people and organisations to look at professional development training over nationally accredited (VET) qualification. Most L&D departments are under pressure to deliver programs in quite short timeframes, which I have explored in other works. There is almost always a pressure from the business to ensure that staff are not taken 'off the job' for more time than is actually necessary. In this way a program that runs over even five consecutive days and then is finished may be preferable to a program that runs for 6-12 months even if it only runs one day a month. The logistics around making staff available are easier for one-off programs, in a lot of cases particularly where the person works in direct client facing roles, other staff have to be moved around or rostered in order to allow for a staff member to go on a training course. It is also often the case with VET training that there will be work that the staff member is required after the delivery of the program itself to meet the assessment criteria of the program. This in turn then, in a significant number of cases, leads to the staff member applying to have some of their work time allocated to completing their study which in turn puts additional time and resource pressure on the business manager. The other time related factor which often comes into play here as well is that of the time commitment necessary from any managers, supervisors or team leaders involved with the staff who are undergoing training. With most professional development programs as opposed to nationally accredited programs, there is little or no involvement needed from the supervisory staff of those undertaking training. However this is, in most cases, not the same situation when we look at VET training. There is almost always in the case of VET training a requirement of 'on the job' observation or training which needs to be undertaken with the staff members in question. This is often further exacerbated where the manager or supervisors are not in the same workplace as the staff requiring supervision and observation and by the by the fact that often these activities have to happen on more than one occasion for each participant.

In addition there is also the issue of the time involved for the individual L&D staff members, with professional development style programs there is often not a lot of additional work which they are required to undertake. Again this is often not the case with VET training, in particular where the training program being delivered is not simply a generic program. There is time spent consulting with the RTO around the content of the program, looking at what needs to be contextualised to the particular business unit or units who are being trained, signing off on paperwork, which is of particular relevance where VET training is being delivered through a funding or subsidy program such as an apprenticeship or traineeship scheme. The other side of the coin is that one of the things that organisations like about VET is the robustness of the assessment and the competence that results from on the job training and rigorous training and assessment practices. This is particularly attractive to organisations who work in areas which could be considered to be high risk or where parts of the business deal in high risk areas. Should something tragic occur within an organisation which results in the serious injury or death and the organisation needs to testify about the competence of its staff, being able to say that staff had undertaken nationally accredited and been deemed competent, is far more potent than saying that they attended a 2 day course with no assessment of competence. Now of course this should not be taken to suggest that RTO's need to shorten their time frames, forgo 'on the job' observation and assessment or compromise the integrity of the training and assessment. Remember it is the robust assessment of competence that organisations value about VET. What it does mean however is that we need to understand and work with the needs of the business. This means asking questions like, do they need a full qualification or just some units, and is their training already being done in the organisation that we can map to accredited outcomes. Make the observation and 'on the job' processes as simple for the managers as possible, create good checklists, not just the performance criteria, give the staff journals to fill in themselves, explain to everyone how the process works and what is expected. Map out everything so the process makes sense for everyone. The more that both the managers

and the staff understand and are engaged in the end to end process the easier it is for everyone to get the result that they want. Also the easier we can make the process from the perspective of the L&D staff the easier it will be over all. If L&D can see that the time requirements for them in terms of staff undertaking an accredited program can be minimised, allowing them to do other value add undertakings the more like they are to champion the program and the easier it will be to get those successful outcomes.

Funding, funding, funding – Providing real sustainable vocational outcomes

I was talking with a group of industry friends last week, some TAFE, some non-public and some non-VET people thrown into the mix and as it often does the issues of funding, market contestability and VET-FEE HELP came up. After we had finished a quite lengthy discussion (to be fair we did get derailed on VFH for a while) I got to thinking that it might be time to revisit the issue of funding. One of the things that really brought this to the front of my mind, was when one of the people who were not directly involved in VET, ask 'How the hell do you guys keep track of all of the different funding and what about to who and how to access it. I tried to look for something the other day and it gave me a headache after about 5 minutes.' The problem is that they are right, between AAC funding for apprentices and trainees, direct grants to organisations, JSA funding, direct funding to providers, VFH (which I know technically speaking is not funding but a loan), and whatever else is out there, it is a nightmare and if it is a nightmare for those of us in the sector and for industry types who have some understanding of the system, how much more difficult is it for the average person in the street, particularly the average person in the street who is heading to Centrelink to start looking for work and is approached by an Educational Consultant on the foot path on the way in, providing all sorts of promises.

IS IT ANY WONDER WE ARE SEEING PEOPLE BEING FUNNELLED INTO
INAPPROPRIATE VET-FEE HELP COURSES AND HUGE DEBT!

Now I have spoken at length, both here and in other places, about things like the effects of contestable funding on Public providers, focussing funding efforts on real vocational outcomes and how government funding effects training delivery, however as a sector we really do need to get this whole, who and what is funded and by whom piece sorted, sooner, rather than later. The problem though, and I think this is a problem more so for the VET sector than other educational sectors, there are often a range of other factors involved that

are not as present in other areas. Training is often linked to workforce participation, eligibility to benefits, employer benefits and incentives, it is often used as an instrument to manipulate certain workforces, industries and groups in line with policy, strategy and perceived needs. It is also often used within organisations to reward staff, to establish talent pools and meet compliance needs. So rarely is training solely done for the educational benefit of the individual doing the training, there is always other forces at work, usually managed through funding initiatives (except perhaps and in the case of FFS and even then there is still an effect). Then on top of this there is the argument around public and non-public providers which I am not going to get into here. Now before I go any further I should put a couple of things out there. Firstly I believe in equality of opportunity when it comes to education, if you are capable of doing a PhD you should be able to do it, if you are capable of doing a Certificate II you should be able to do that as well. Secondly there is no such thing as free education, just because the student doesn't pay directly doesn't mean it is free, someone, somewhere has to pay for it eventually and thirdly there are always going to be those people who are going to require additional assistance in order for us to provide equality of opportunity. So what should funding look like; it should be as simply as possible, if it is not easy to understand, then read the big letters above, because we will continue to see these things happen if people don't know what is available and how to access it. It should provide students (and organisations) with the opportunity to choose where and with whom they are trained. Students (and organisations) should be able to decide (within reasonable parameters) how they want to study and what works best for them. It should provide the best possible return on investment in terms of vocational outcomes, after all why are we subsidising vocational education if it is not providing a vocational outcome. It should for the most part be about education outcomes for participants, not a new Mercedes for TAFE directors or multimillion dollar profits for non-public providers. Funded training should be focussed on providing what the participant requires for a real vocational outcome. It should allow us to be able to meet the needs (as much as actually possible) of our various

industries (including trades and small business) for skilled competent workers. And it shouldn't give you a headache to try to figure out whether someone is eligible.

Career progression, professional development and VET

I wrote about this topic almost 12 months ago, (but a couple of conversations I have had recently have got me thinking again about the whole concept of career progression, talent management and succession in both organisational L&D and the VET sector. As I sit back and look at the world of Learning and Development and Training, after having been involved in it for quite a lot of years, in all parts of the industry, accredited and non-accredited, public and non-public, delivery, management, strategy, in very large enterprises and small ones, I realise that the path I took to get to where I am was (like with most of the other people I know) quite crooked, there was very little in the way of straight line progression in terms of moving from one role to another and gradually climbing some career progression ladder. Not that these days it seems there is really that linear progression in terms of careers which were very much part of the generations before us. The other thing I noticed was that there was very little in the way of mentoring or talent management in any part of my career. I was essentially left to my own resources. Which brings me to the subject of professional development and how it ties into career progression and talent management. It seems to me that the world of Professional Development in the VET sector is divided into two distinct streams;

How to be a better trainer (which includes look at this lovely new piece of technology)

How to meet compliance standards

Now some might try and paint their PD programs to make them look like they are something else, but in reality at least from what I can see the vast majority of PD falls into these two

categories. Please note that I am intentionally avoiding talking about any PD that relates to industry currency that is a whole different ball game altogether. So my question is where are the professional development programs around leadership, ethics, management (not compliance management, management), mentoring. There are a whole range of skills that just don't seem to make it onto the PD offerings for training professionals. Now I know what some of you are going to say, that sort of stuff is available through other avenues and generalist programs and you are probably right, but wouldn't it be nice, I dare say even useful to have leadership, management and ethics programs that focussed on the sector. I certainly think it would be. In order to do that however we would need to know what career progression looks like in this sector, and I am not sure that we do. One of the problems is of course one that exists in any sector where there are practitioners and administrators/managers, and much like in the social sciences practitioners at some point have to choose, whether to stay a practitioner or do I want to be a manager. Trainers and facilitators have to choose as well, do they want to stay heavily involved in the teaching side of the profession or do they want to move over into administration and management. This is why in a lot of organisations, particularly as the organisation gets bigger, more and more of the management staff coming from the administrative/co-ordination/compliance side of the business than the training side, the move seems a lot easier to make. And make no mistake this is not just the case in the non-public side of the sector, even in the public (TAFE) side we see the same thing and they have a very structured environment with all of these levels and things for trainers to traverse, but again at some point the trainer has to choose and in the case of TAFE added to the change in focus from actual training to administration which comes with any move like this there is also in a lot of cases a loss of 'perks' such as non-contact hours and the like, things that people from the administration side have never really had anyway so they won't miss them when they move. The other thing we need to know is what makes a good manager in this sector, what is the skill set of someone in Educational Management? We also need to know how to take someone who is

a good trainer and help them to become a good manager and we can't do this if we don't know what we are aiming for. Then of course it is just a simple matter of getting people on board with the idea of doing something for their staff other than sending them to a conference or a two day program in flipped learning and that more than anything may actually be the biggest challenge.

A registration board for the VET Sector

After my previous post and a number of comments and discussions in a variety of forums, I got to thinking about this idea of a registration board for Trainers and Assessors in the VET sector. Now I know this idea has been floated before, and that there are several groups out there who have or are attempting, as membership organisations, to utilise this idea to lift the general level of professionalism in the industry. But let's face facts, unless membership of an organisation is linked to some kind of regulated authority to train, then there is always going to be a systematic failure. There are registration boards for Teachers in all of the states, statutory bodies, set up to regulate and determine who is appropriately qualified and suitable to teach in our primary and secondary school systems, so do we need something like that? A single national registration board for all trainers and assessors in the VET sector. While I think in the long-term that might be a very good idea, I think there might be an alternative which at least in the shorter term may have a significant effect on the professionalism of the industry.

A registration board for all Trainers and Assessors delivering a Training and Assessment Qualification!

So if you want to be able to train others in the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment or above or any qualification from the TAE package, you would need to be registered by a single national board which provided you with an Authority to Train. It should like most other boards of its ilk, charge membership fees which would be used to cover the expenses of running the board, and have clearly defined membership entry and maintenance requirements. These requirements should revolved around skills and knowledge as well as experience. Imagine the difference that would be made overnight if the 'TAE registration board' required 5 years of training experience before you were able to apply for membership to allow you to deliver a TAE qualification. Gone instantly would be the incidents of doing a

weekend TAE this weekend and then teaching the same class the next weekend. A skills and knowledge component, perhaps an exam could be added into the mix for initial registration, as well as strong on going CPD requirements including delivery thresholds, peer supervision and mentoring requirements, then add to this penalties for non-compliance including suspension and de-registration and even just at this level, directly aimed at those teaching TAE qualifications this would have a rapid and marked effect on the quality not only of the TAE suite of programs, but a knock on effect to all other qualifications as well. This added to increased regulatory pressure at an organisational level would should see the quality of the qualification and the sector lifted quickly. Now people might argue against this proposal in a number of ways.

This industry is already over regulated. I am not sure of this for a start, but even so the vast majority of regulation at this point in time sits at the level of the RTO. Trainer registration sits at a personal, not organisational level. It is something that is managed by a person for themselves. Individuals can choose whether or not they wish to be registered and have an Authority to Train or not. Trainers and Assessors not delivery TAE qualifications would not be required to undertake registration, although there could either initially or over time a registration process developed for those who did not deliver TAE products.

The cost of a TAE qualification would go up. Probably, but is that a bad thing? Is a \$300, 2 day, Certificate IV in Training and Assessment really worth the money it is printed on for anyone?

Who would run it? The simple solution in my mind would be the regulator (ASQA). Given that it needs some kind of regulatory force behind it to be effective, it either needs to be the current regulatory body or some of other statutory body. I suppose it could be an independent organisation, but issues of continuity always concern me in these cases.

It is another expense for the Trainer. I, as I think most reputable training organisations would be more than happy to pay the registration fees and associated costs of our TAE trainers or in terms of a new employee who came with registration, renewals of the registration for as long as they worked for us. However that aside it would be an expense, yes, but it seems one that anyone who was interested in the quality of training and assessment would be willing to pay.

The single most important thing about this however, is that it needs to have regulatory force, it needs to be built into the standards that Training providers delivering TAE qualification may only employ registered trainers to deliver those qualifications. No working under supervision arrangements or anything like that, you either have the registration and the authority to train or you don't and if you don't you can't be employed in a role relating to the delivery of TAE qualification. .

What's wrong with just being a trainer

I am proud to be a trainer!

I am a trainer at heart and I have been for quite a long time now. In fact since the 90's I have trained more than 20,000 people in subjects as varied as how to use outlook or word, how to manage multi million and multibillion dollar projects, how to help people in crisis, how to be better counsellors and support workers and pretty much everything in between. I know what good outcomes look like and I know that the work I do and have done is valued by organisations and individuals across the globe. But you know what, I am sick and tired of people saying that trainers need to be better educated, or better skills or have more educational theory pumped into them!

I am particularly sick and tired of it when the people saying it are academics or researchers, self-styled educationalist gurus or whatever pithy title they want to have for themselves, who have for the most part never or at least hardly ever actually set foot in a training room and delivered training. The vast majority of trainers who I know and have worked with, and trust me there is a lot of people who fall into that group, are absolute professionals, who are highly skilled not just in delivering training but in their field or fields of excellence as well. They are not someone who has just spent time at university learning how to teach curriculum from a book, but who have never actually been out in the work place doing what they teach. No these are people who not only know their industries and the skills and knowledge that that industry needs but they also know how to pass it on. And I am not just talking about the VET sector here either I am talking about the whole training and L&D industry professionals delivering solid outcomes to people and organisations every day. On any particular day these people might be teachers or educators or coaches or mentors or facilitators or whatever is required, but like me at heart they are trainers. Now teaching is typically defined as, "to cause to know something, to guide the studies of, to impart

knowledge or to instruct by example, precept or experience.” whereas training seeks “to form by instruction, discipline or drill” or “to make prepared for a test or skill.” Training usually has a more specific focus than teaching, which seeks to instil a deeper knowledge over a longer period of time. Training, on the other hand, seeks to help people master a specific skill, or skill set, until they are able to execute it efficiently, and training is what I do and that is what most of the people I know do. We give people the skills and knowledge they need to perform tasks and job roles both now and in the future, to help they get employment, improve their position or just simply be better at what they do, and here is the thing, that is what the people that we work with want, whether they are organisations or individuals, they are not particularly interested in me assisting them on their lifelong learning journey or to assist them to engage in an immersive andragogical educational experience, they want the have a particular sets of skills and knowledge either for something they need to do now or something they want to do in the future. Now I know that there are going to be people reading this who go, 'well you just have a very limited viewpoint on what this sector is' or 'well that because of the way things are structured, if we had more educationalists (or whatever) involved and a different structure things would be different' or 'You just don't understand your just a trainer.' <

Dam right I am just a Trainer and I for one am proud of that fact.

Fruit of the poison tree – The problem of non-competent trainers

So what happens when a trainer or assessor who is not-competent assesses someone as competent? So I have been involved in a number of discussions recently about the quality of delivery and assessment of the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and the resulting competence of 'trainers' as a result of that. Now before I go any further here it is important to note that this is not just something that is occurring in the non-public sector, but across the board, we are seeing it seems just as many people coming out of TAFE lacking the skills and knowledge they should have as we are from the non-public providers. A lot of the conversation has been around the problems of finding good, competent capable staff out of what seems to be these days an absolute tidal wave of rubbish. People who can't present, don't know basic things like the principles of assessment, or how to unpack a unit of competency. Now of course over time some of these people are going to become competent despite their original non-competence, but there still exists of course the problem that at the time the certificate was issued they weren't competent and therefore should not have been given the qualification in the first place. Now there has been much discussion about what should be done about this and how it can be addressed, but there seems to be a consensus that at some point the regulator must have to step in and cancel or withdraw a whole pile of qualification which were issued where they should not have been. Now whether or not this will actually happen is certainly a matter for conjecture, however a recall of this nature would have quite a significant effect on people who had built careers on these qualifications which have been found to be soiled. This is even more problematic for those who were actually competent in first instance but whose qualification is called into question by association or for those who have become competent since the issuance of the certificate. Now the argument could be made that given that they are now competent or were competent originally the withdrawal or cancellation would not prove to have an adverse effect because they would simply need to provide evidence of that competent to acquire a 'real' qualification. The big question which pops up then however is who is going to pay for

that. If the person in question undertook their qualification in good faith, and then at a later date the regulator removes that qualification then it would seem that either the company that issued it (which is probably then out of business) or the government should be responsible for the costs of re-assessment. Of course it could also be suggested that very few people do a 2 day certificate IV or a 5 day diploma in good faith or that they can be unaware that after a 6-12 month program where they are struggling that they are not actually competent. On top of all of this though sits the issue of 'Fruit of the poisonous Tree' as they say in the US. If someone who has a qualification but who is not competent, assesses the competence of another person then it is not a reach to suggest that that person's competence and resulting qualification may also be questionable. We have already seen a significant number of qualifications from one provider cancelled and a range of others from both public and non-public providers called into question, now not to question the competence of those people who assessed these qualifications, but it would seem to me to necessary to investigate that issue as well as the providers from which they gained their qualification. Now let's explore what might happen is ASQA starts to cancel, withdraw or recall certificates from even one Certificate IV TAE provider, let alone more than one. Even if not all certificates are 'recalled' it throws into question the veracity of all of the qualifications issued by the provider even those non-TAE qualifications. Further it must call into question two things,

The competence of any person deemed competent from someone with a 'recalled' qualification,

The hiring and assessment practices of any providers which employed a person with a 'recalled' qualification.

It is as I have indicated above a 'Fruit of the poison tree' scenario, none of the decisions about competency can be taken at face value and from there it is 'turtles all the way down' So what can be done about all of this, well , one solution (which will probably never happen)

is to license only a very select number of providers both public and private to assess VET sector competence, rather than the almost open slather that we have at the moment and support the sector (through funding) to have everyone re-assessed. It would be a mammoth and costly task. Another solution would be a formal licensing process for VET sector professionals assessed by an independent 3rd party with strong ongoing CPD requirements. This would also solve the problem of PD and currency for trainer and facilitators. The other thing that sits in my head alongside of all of this is the skill and knowledge sets (and qualifications) of those in education management roles and what we expect them to be. Ethical, experienced and appropriately qualified CEO's and education managers in training providers would not allow the delivery of poor quality or substandard qualifications, and not hire non-competent people thus over time improving the quality of the training being provided and the industry as a whole.

Conclusion

So there you have it, a little bit of a walk through the world of vocational education and training in Australia from my point of view. Now even if you didn't agree with everything I have said over the past couple of years, I hope at least this collection provoked some thoughts and challenged some ideas.

Thank you for reading.

Paul Rasmussen can be contacted either through Rasmussen Learning Solutions

www.rasmussenlearning.com or his blog
www.organisationallearninganddevelopment.wordpress.com

