Globalisation, vocational institutions and the rise of work-based learning

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This paper will take as a focus for analysis the policy environment which is pressing education and training institutions to take up the challenge of relocating vocational learning to the workplace rather than the formal institution. My interest is not in the details of the development of workplace learning programs, work-based learning degrees and the like but the general trend to make the locus of vocational programs the workplace rather than the campus.

Work-based learning I define as the organisation of vocational learning through activities in the workplace rather than formal classes in an institution. The learning arrangement in work-based learning is a three-way partnership between the organisation, the learner and the university, where the individual's learning program is linked to the strategic goals of the workplace, while assessment and accreditation are the responsibility of the university (Boud 1998).

I need to make clear that this term is not being equated to ‘informal learning in the workplace’ or to workplace training activities. The paradigm case of work-based learning degree organised as a partnership of employer, university and student-employee (Boud 1998) or the workplace literacy program organised as a partnership of a technical and further education (TAFE) institute and a company and its employees.

In taking up this topic, I am drawing on work being done by the Researching Adult Vocational and Learning group at UTS on work-based learning programs (Symes and McIntyre forthcoming). The argument does not regard the sectoral differences between higher education and further and technical education as material and I am going to use the term ‘vocational institutions’ to refer to post-compulsory education and training in general, because the developments we are talking about refer to broad changes in vocational knowledge and institutions.

My interest is an analysis of the broad changes that are forcing a reconfiguration of vocational institutions, an analytical and speculative approach rather than description of any particular developments, though the UTS experience of work-based degrees
in a large Australian de-mutualised financial institution is one of my reference points, as is the development of flexible delivery in TAFE NSW.

I will refer to the ‘deschooling of vocational knowledge’ (McIntyre and Solomon 1998) as a way of capturing the significance of the shift of vocational learning (activity, resources and persons) from formal institutions to workplaces.

In this way, the point of the paper is to open up the interpretation of work-based learning in a policy perspective. By this I mean understanding work-based learning as a policy solution to a range of problems that are strategic for both employers and institutions, but more significant as a policy response of governments as they intervene to re-shape post-compulsory education and training to make it more responsive to the impacts of globalisation on national economies, their politics and social institutions. However, I also want to refer to the need for a new analysis of vocational learning that takes into account changes in contemporary knowledge formation.

In brief, the argument is that work-based learning is a manifestation of the fundamental changes that are being wreaked upon vocational institutions, not only by government acting on political agendas to reduce or extract more value from public expenditures, but also by forces of globalisation acting to restructure the economy and the nature of learning for work. At the same time, there are the responses of the vocational institutions themselves to both ‘education and training reform’ and to social and economic impacts of globalisation.

The paper is organised in a number of sections to explore this admittedly broad canvas. The paper will —

- examine how globalisation processes are creating policy pressures for vocational institutions to shift to work-based learning programs. I discuss globalisation as a policy perspective, suggesting that to understand the zeal of reforming governments we have to appreciate that ‘globalisation’ is a policy discourse as well as a complex set of late modern economic, cultural and political forces — that is, understanding how governments employ narratives of globalisation as a rationale for their ‘reforms’ of vocational education and training. One feature of this policy environment is that ‘globalisation’ is in itself a globalised policy discourse in the new political economy of global capitalism.

- outline the nature of the thesis that work-based learning signals a ‘de-schooling of vocational knowledge’, arguing that this is only partly due to the reforming zeal of governments obsessed with economic rationalism and is as much due to changes in the workforce and the formation and utilisation of vocational knowledge.

- expand on some aspects of this ‘de-schooling’ thesis, especially the concept that curriculum knowledge is being ‘de-codified’ and also ‘re-codified’ in terms of workplace practices, and the concept of de-professionalisation of vocational teaching and its counterpart, the emergence of new VET professionals who are able to work across institutional boundaries.

- draw out some implications for further analysis and research in the area of work-based learning and the future of formal vocational education and training.
Globalisation as a policy environment

Globalisation is much talked about and even acknowledged by the Australian Prime Minister as having undesirable social and economic effects. The term has many meanings. The opening pages of Australia’s key national strategy for VET state the imperative of globalisation:

More than a decade ago, Australia recognised that the forces of globalisation would make international competition even tougher. We recognised that our future national prosperity depended on fundamental reforms, starting in key areas such as finance, banking and trade, and extending over time to virtually all areas of the Australian economy and society.

In this environment, the response of the vocational education and training sector had to be swift and intense. Reform to the sector itself, as well as to its products and services, was inevitable. A long period of profound change in vocational education and training has followed.

While it is now important to consolidate and implement the agreed reforms, still more is required of the vocational education and training sector. Reform must continue as complex economic, technological and social changes continue to impact on people’s daily lives and pose new challenges and opportunities for Australian enterprises. (ANTA 1998, p.4).

Waters (1995) argues that globalisation has been accelerating since the European mercantile era through imperialism and colonialism, and that it is the outstanding feature of modernisation. He distinguishes economic, political and cultural globalisation.

**Economic globalisation** refers to the global spread of capitalism, and with it intensified and open economic competition, the rise of multinational corporations, the decentralisation of financial markets and the mobility of capital, and the deregulation of labour. There is the technologisation of work and the consequent reduction in the power of organised labour. This is the world of ‘fast capital’ where there is a ‘virtuous circle’ of technological change and ‘informational capital’ (Castells 1995). New information technologies, by increasing inter-connectedness, provide a technological basis for global capitalism, ‘knowledge work’ and the ‘information society’. Changes in work, especially the intensification of work knowledge, impact on educational institutions and their vocational relevance. As we have seen recently in Australia, globalisation can encourage a reactionary and racist politics as the competitive nature of the economy disadvantages individuals and groups who are not in a position to take advantage of it.

**Political globalisation.** Economic globalisation has brought a challenge to the economic power of sovereign states, which are seen as more limited in their ability to control and provide for their populations. As Yeatman has pointed out, globalisation undermines ‘customary’ definitions of citizenship based on racial exclusiveness and challenges societies to reshape national institutions to accommodate this diversity (Yeatman 1994, p. 104). Globalisation is characterised by the growth of international government and non-government agencies such as the UN, OECD, aid, peace and law enforcement agencies, as well as religious, professional and labour organisations, and sporting and cultural bodies.
Cultural globalisation. Globalisation has accentuated local identity and ethnicity while apparently undermining local values and traditions through the spread of consumer materialism and ‘privatised consumption’. It has accentuated fundamentalist religious movements of the East and West, while also spreading ideas of universal human rights and so on. There is a greater movement of people beyond national frontiers and the crossing of cultural boundaries, creating changing and ‘hybrid’ cultural identities through migration, and creating ethnically diverse national populations in settler societies such as Australia. Cultural globalisation is accelerated by new technologies enabling better transport and communications, and information exchange. It emphasises the crossing of national and cultural boundaries enabled by the virtual relationships of computer-mediated communications.

In this paper I want to emphasise both these processes and their implications for vocational education and training and they way national governments of nations such as Australia have set about ‘reforming’ their education and training systems so that they contribute to the goal of an internationally competitive economy. While there are many aspects of globalisation, I particularly want to single out changes in contemporary knowledge formation – of just the kind that are highlighted by the National VET Strategy document:

The skills and knowledge of the workforce are key factors in the international competitiveness of enterprises and their workforce and in national economic growth and productivity. This will become increasingly so as ‘economies are more strongly dependent on the production, distribution and use of knowledge than ever before’ [OECD 1996].

Knowledge based occupations and industries are the fastest growing and best remunerated. They call for new and different skill mixes in their workforce, and particularly, proficiency in information and communication technologies. It is crucial that vocational education and training equips people with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet these demands. (ANTA 1998, p.8).

Much of the commentary on education reform and policy intervention has concentrated on the domination of policy by economic rationalism, where education has been re-interpreted in terms of human capital theory (Ferrier & Anderson 1997, Marginson 1993). As Marginson points out, economic theories have tended to ‘colonise’ all areas of public policy, and to set up economic life as the basis of social value.

The commentary has perhaps given less attention to the huge implications for rethinking vocational and our understandings of technical or vocational knowledge. However, this has been going on for some time. It is well known the explosion of technical and vocational knowledge, the expansion of formalised provision and the increasing professionalisation of work resulted in the great proliferation of vocational institutions in developed economies in recent decades. However, there is now an intensification of working knowledge and its technicisation thanks to information technology, driven by global capitalism and associated with the emergence of ‘knowledge work’ mentioned by the National Strategy. Changes in contemporary work and knowledge formation are beginning to challenge the basis of vocational institutions.
We have (at least in Australia) been more preoccupied with the impact of ‘training reform’ and the impact of national education policy on vocational education and training institutions. National governments, under the thrall of economic rationalism and the global marketplace, have set about education and training reform, on the premise that institutions are too inflexible for their key new roles in building national economic competitiveness. The policy mantras of ‘flexibility’ and ‘responsiveness’ are applied to working out arrangements between enterprises and institutions. The neo-conservative nature of these policy reforms have given vocational educators reasons to resist change rather than ask what kind of change is required by changed conditions of ‘working knowledge’.

The debates about competency-based training occasioned by national policy intervention in Australia turned on issues of the desirability of such reforms, often judged from the perspectives of vocational educators and the subversion of their professional competence by imposed curriculum change. It is rare to hear it argued that the formal vocational institutions were in fact, in a deep legitimacy crisis regarding their relevance and economic role.

The imperatives of policy-led ‘reform’ and ‘restructuring’ have caused us to question the changed conditions of education policy. There is an important sense in which globalisation has changed the nature of educational policymaking. Government uses policy in a more strategic way, as it becomes more corporate, and policy itself becomes an educational discourse displacing those of education professionals as rationales for action. Policy is a resource of lean and mean corporate managerialist government, setting new parameters for professional effectiveness (see Yeatman 1998). The emerging policy studies literature, especially in Australasia and the UK, has been actively theorising the nature of policy as ‘intervention’ (eg. Dale 1989; Ball 1990, 1994; Halpin and Troyna 1994; in Australia, Marginson 1993, 1997; Yeatman 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995a, 1998; Lingard Knight and Porter 1993; Taylor Lingard Rizvi and Henry 1997).

Thus it is crucial to recognise that ‘globalisation’ is not just a set of processes, it is also an ideology for policy. Policy texts deploy narratives of globalisation which constitute powerful accounts of the imperative to restructure institutions, just as these narratives represent apparently ineluctable forces acting on governments, corporations, public institutions, communities and ‘require’ new responses for new economic times.

Thus a key aspect of political globalisation is global policy hegemony, as Solomon and I have argued in our papers on work-based learning (McIntyre & Solomon 1998, McIntyre & Solomon 1999). That is, bodies such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have internationalised policy, and disseminate dominant policy constructions to member governments. Reform is mandated in no uncertain terms. The new rationales for education reform are global, however expresses in terms of economic nationalism.

For this reason we argue, with Ball and others, for an understanding of the semiotics of policy – for its meaning–making powers. Globalisation is important in shaping moves to work-based learning in part because it is presented as force majeure in educational thinking. Through the narratives of globalisation, policy mediates to educational institutions the imperative to ‘change’ and to participate in innovations
such as work-based learning. We suggest it is important to recognise that this meaning of policy extends beyond that of a ‘state control perspective’ to acknowledge the negotiated and contingent character of policy processes worked out in and through institutions, Ball’s Foucauldian idea of policy as an economy of power’ (Ball 1994, pp.10f).

We say that policy mediates the semiotics of change through new representations of the contemporary workplace and its education and training requirements, just as it does new representations of the adaptive academy and the kinds of relationships that ought to obtain between education and the economy. This is The point then, is not simply that work-based learning is an effective way to promote vocational learning that feeds into national economic competitiveness, but that policy governs our thinking in this way, providing human capital theory as a persuasive rationale for promoting work-based learning, promoting the ‘learning organisation’ and giving industry bodies and employers more control over vocational education and training (McIntyre & Solomon 1998).

It is for this reason that we say that the rise of work-based learning can be understood as a symptom and result of the working out of ‘globalisation’ in the local settings of educational courses and workplaces. In this way, we want to see work-based learning as a key location of change in post-compulsory education, with many implications for the future of vocational institutions, of whatever kind.

**Work-based learning as ‘de-schooling’**

Nearly thirty years ago Ivan Illich became notorious for his book ‘Deschooling Society’ which criticised the domination by institutions of every aspect of social life especially education, where he argued for ‘learning networks’ to replace the formal organisation of education that served the interests of teachers and the professional and managerial classes far more than they did the interests of learning and learners.

We can perhaps now laugh at this nineteen-seventies idealism but in some ways de-institutionalisation of education is on the agenda, albeit for reasons other than those Illich advanced. The shift to designing programs for the workplace and delivering them at work and in terms of learning at work represents a de-institutionalisation of vocational education — that is, a reversal of the formalisation of ‘vocational learning’ in technical and vocational institutes that occurred in the massive expansion of post-compulsory education in the post-war period. This is not the place to try and argue this in any detail, but rather it is drawing attention to the question of ‘institutionalisation’ that deserves more analysis in the context of workplace programs, flexible and client-driven delivery and new technologies for open learning. Unfortunately, much of the debate about the ‘national reform’ of education and training has not focused on a critical analysis of institutional and professional perspectives.

By institutionalisation I am referring especially to the way vocational learning in modern societies has been formalised through a range of processes which include the embodiment of technical knowledge in vocational curricula, the development of vocational (TAFE) teaching as an organised and professionalised specialisation, and of course the evolution of vocational institutions. Referring to ‘vocational institutions’ in this way, I have in mind the way older technical institutes gave rise to polytechnics and technological universities. I emphasise this because the rise of
work-based learning is not to be understood just in terms of its challenges to vocational pedagogy, curriculum and assessment practices in one ‘sector’ of post-compulsory education. It is about a ‘legitimacy crisis’ of educational institutions. The term ‘formalisation’ is significant. A large amount of attention is being paid to ‘informal learning in the workplace’ as the antithesis of formal vocational education (eg Watkins & Marsick 1993, and in Australia Garrick 1998). The emphasis on informal learning can in fact take for granted the question of what it means to ‘formalise’ learning and adult education, and it can take for granted questions of what is learned and what counts as knowledge in the workplace.

There is a significant potential for misunderstanding the nature of work-based learning, in the sense being discussed here of a work-based learning qualification being achieved through the ‘curriculum of work’ (see Boud 1998) where classes are replaced by learning activities organised in and through work. This is not, of course, the same as informal workplace learning in all its variety, though such a work-based qualification may utilise and indeed depend on informal learning. What is crucial is that work-based qualification formalises work-place learning, subjecting it to educational processing of various kinds (particularly curriculum and accreditation processes).

Nicky Solomon and I have argued that work-based learning qualifications entail a ‘politics of curriculum’ (McIntyre & Solomon 1998) as they challenge at every point traditional criteria of educational legitimacy and indeed, as they threaten the existing institutional order.

In this argument we emphasise that it is vocational knowledge that is being ‘deschooled’, suggesting that vocational curricula and pedagogy are increasingly out-of-step with the rapidly changing nature of contemporary knowledge and knowledge formation, particularly in enterprises that value knowledge formation. It is the institutionalised forms of knowledge as well as their ‘transmission’ that are problematic. Work-based learning qualifications represent a break with such forms, as does flexible delivery, open learning and similar developments. Our argument is based on a social analysis of changes in contemporary knowledge that are challenging institutions and their vocational curriculum and pedagogy.

Though we argue a ‘de-schooling’ of vocational knowledge is going on, it is the case that work-based learning qualifications represent a new institutionalising of knowledge in a different sphere, the world of work, through the recognition of prior learning and new codification practices relating curriculum objectives to work-performance. We suggest that ‘new and different kinds of boundaries provide the framing around work-based curriculum … which does not become unbounded or de-regulated, that is, without any framing, but rather the framings and representations are different, locally specific, more complex, more contested and more fluid’. To labour the point, this is a new institutionalisation of vocational knowledge. This is the basis for some of my assertions later in the paper that work-based learning is not only ‘de-schooling’ traditional educational practices but activity ‘re-schooling’ workplace learning through re-codifying workplace knowledge and reconfiguring the professional roles of vocational educators (McIntyre & Solomon 1998).

It can be predicted that debate about the legitimacy of work-based learning will intensify as it becomes more widespread, and equally one could predict that the debate will be in terms of the cherished educational values that will be defended
against this development, rather than by a critical examination of the adaptability of vocational institutions.

Aspects of ‘deschooling’

Rather than reiterate the argument of the ‘politics of curriculum’ paper, I would like to return to Ivan Illich and elaborate the thesis that work-based learning represents a ‘de-schooling’ of vocational knowledge’. In particular, I would like to expand on three inter-linked aspects that expand upon the idea of de-institutionalisation.

1. **the re-codification of vocational knowledge.** Work-based learning can be seen as ‘deschooling knowledge’ in the sense of ‘de-codifying’ vocational knowledge as formal curriculum and, importantly, ‘re-codifying’ it in terms of dynamic workplace knowledges (such competencies). Overt two decades ago, Bernstein and other social analysts of education showed how to understand curriculum in terms of a privileged knowledge code (eg Bernstein 1975, Atkinson 1985 and see McIntyre & Solomon 1998). Historically, in technical and vocational education, the movement was from knowledge embedded in work practices (eg the apprentice-master relationship) to knowledge abstracted and formalised in curricula and transmitted through institution-based teacher-delivered courses. Largely because of the growth of knowledge work, we see pressures to break down this organised curriculum knowledge and recodify vocational learning in terms of the acquisition of knowledge through work.

2. **the de-professionalisation of vocational teaching.** The press to relocate vocational learning in the work place has enormous significance for the traditional role definition of the vocational teacher. This is complicated, but it can be argued that de-professionalisation of vocational teaching accompanies the ‘de-schooling’ of vocational knowledge. In Australia vocational (TAFE) teachers rapidly professionalised from the 1970s largely through mandatory formal teaching qualifications as TAFE underwent a rapid expansion. Professionalisation, among other things, entails a set of exclusionary practices whereby particular sorts of knowledge and practices are controlled by an occupational group able to monopolise public resources for private benefit (compare medical practitioners). Almost continuous ‘restructuring’ has helped to weaken the organised industrial base that underpinned professionalisation—but there was also another reason. Professionalisation requires a legitimate knowledge base. Not only does their technical knowledge soon lose currency, in principle current knowledge cannot be readily embodied in formal curriculum without losing some of its credibility and application. If national policy dictates the formal curriculum is irrelevant, then the tenuous basis of ‘professional’ vocational teaching is also discredited.

In short, the pedagogy of technical instruction and its formal curriculum lacks legitimacy where policy increasingly demands ‘flexible delivery’ and ‘client driven’ approaches. To survive de-schooling, the TAFE teacher is challenged to take new professional roles as workplace trainers, educational brokers, learning consultants, and technology experts and so on. In contrast, it is the human resource managers in the private sector who have been able to position themselves as the significant VET professionals, not only because of ‘training reform’ and its valorisation of the private sector but precisely because they are
attuned to the new demands of knowledge formation in the workplace, and because their knowledge base is the managing of organisational learning, not the technical knowledge of a particular occupation. Of course, all this is broad-brush and thus contentious, and needs further analysis.

3. **diversifying contexts of vocational learning**. Work-based learning can be seen as breaking the domination of institutions in vocational learning – as legitimating a wide variety of contexts for learning. A development contemporary with Illich’s book was the rediscovery of Gramsci’s analysis of the state and education and the notion of schooling as a form of hegemonic control. Thus one sense of the de-schooling of vocational learning is a breaking of the monopoly that vocational institutions have held over the regulation of access to legitimate (recognised) vocational learning. The de-regulation of training by the state, its creation of a quasi-market in education, the valorisation of private provision, the emphasis on user choice can be critiqued from an economic perspective. From another perspective, it might be asked (afresh, since it was a key debate in twenty years ago) how the institutionalised ‘knowledge monopoly’ (Hall) of institutions will be challenged by developments in contemporary knowledge formation.

The paper has said little about the critique of contemporary knowledge production that it holds out as important (eg Gibbons et al 1994). However, sufficient might have been said to suggest that this perspective on institutionalised learning is needed alongside the dominant economic critiques being offered of education and training ‘reform’ as a global policy phenomenon.

**Implications**

In conclusion, it will be useful to examine some consequences of this analysis of the rise of work-based learning and its challenge to vocational institutions. Clearly the paper is sketchy in its analysis, but nevertheless it suggests a wide field for further analysis.

First, there is a need for a new analysis of vocational knowledge if this is not already underway as a result of the challenges of competency-based training to curriculum thinking in vocational education and training. This analysis could draw on the rich field of postmodern analysis to explore the contradictions that new knowledge formation pose for contemporary institutions. This would obviously have to take into account the role of information and communication technologies in shaping work and learning practices.

Second, there is clearly scope to research the changing roles of vocational educators as they define the options for a de-professionalised teaching career under conditions of a marketised VET system, examining both resistant and adaptive responses and the creation of new professional identities. Comparison across the public and private sectors, analysed within a professionalisation perspective and focusing on the professional knowledge base will be instructive.

Third, the paper reasserted a policy perspective on globalisation and argued that we need to better understand how policy discourses mediate to us the meanings of globalisation, for example, through narratives of economic competition, cultural diversity, political integration and the like. The field of VET is seen by government as a significant field for policy action, particularly when influenced by international
organisations such as the OECD. The notion of ‘global policy hegemony’ in the area of VET calls out for more analysis.

References


