COMPETITION, OUTSOURCING AND QUALITY ISSUES IN THE VET SECTOR: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT: This research is currently exploring competition and outsourcing policy and practices within the VET sector nationally and the extent to which this is operating in WA. A review of literature examining the impact of competition policy and the national training framework has been completed. Four case studies of private and public Registered Training Organisations in Western Australia who deliver human service education and training have been undertaken. These attempt to describe some of the structural and cultural differences between RTOs. Interviews with staff explored their understandings of the National Training Framework and National Competition Policy and the effects of these reforms on their organisations. Analysis of the research is continuing, but we are able to present preliminary findings which indicate differences within and between public and private RTOs with respect to the background and nature of each organisation, their understanding of national reforms, and their responses to these transformations. More problematic, are our questions relating to the impact of these “reforms” on the quality of education and training. Further analysis and future research will attempt to explore the comparative impact of these reforms nationally, and ways in which quality of product and provider might more usefully be measured.

INTRODUCTION

The headline “Warning on crisis at TAFE” (The Australian, November 17th, 1999) alerted readers to the hard edge of what is now two decades of public sector “reform” in Australia. The article reported a union official, and State and Commonwealth Labour politicians blaming chronic underfunding and excessive competition for the financial crisis facing half of Victoria’s TAFE colleges. The former Victorian’s government’s policies of increasing competitive tendering to private providers and TAFE colleges were specifically alleged to be associated with a drop in the cost per student hour and failure to deliver quality training.

Similar disquiet about the efficacy of market reforms in the VET sector has been expressed anecdotally by TAFE staff, and increasingly by VET researchers (Anderson 1996a; 1998a; 1998b). The processes leading to the current debate began in the 1980s in Australia, with the introduction of “managerialism” – the imposition of private sector management approaches to the operations of government (Considine & Painter 1997). This period was followed by a second wave of micro-economic reform dedicated to the

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removal of impediments to the market in the public sector, and characterised by the
domination of the contract – not simply for goods and services, but increasingly for
relationships between government and citizens (Yeatman 1996). Markets would
preferentially determine resource allocation, and where they did not exist they would be
substituted by evaluation measures such as benchmarking (Davis 1997; see also Cutler
& Waine 1997 on quasi-markets).

Anderson’s (1997a) Competition and market reform in the Australian VET sector
provides a comprehensive analysis of the application of these reforms to the VET sector,
and his analysis informs what follows. In the VET sector these micro-economic reforms
centred on the construction of an open training market, as set out in the Deveson report
(1990), and the implementation of National Competition Policy flowing from the Hilmer
Report (1993), recommendations of which were endorsed by the Council of Australian
Governments (COAG) in 1994, and agreements to implement by all states and territories
in 1995. The Deveson review included a recommendation for the creation of more open
diversified markets with providers from both the public and private sectors.

Deveson’s recommendations were a clear repudiation of the Kangan report (1974) which
had argued for the role of government in the planning, coordination and delivery of
vocational education through publicly-owned and controlled TAFE institutions and
non-profit adult and community education (ACE) institutions. Kangan’s vision of the
VET sector was implemented on a national scale and went virtually unchallenged until
the mid-1980s. Instead, Deveson argued for ‘the establishment of a training
partnership’ between government and industry (1990, p.61) with the government’s role
increasingly constrained to providing a conducive environment for private participation
and investment in VET.

The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) was established in 1992 to develop
and coordinate the national training market and has issued a number of documents
which set out the strategies by which this could be achieved (ANTA 1994c). These
include:

‘opening up the market’; an expansion of competitive funding processes; the
introduction of ‘user choice’ arrangements for apprenticeship/traineeship training;
removal of barriers to market entry for industry and private providers; improving
access to training for small business and disadvantaged groups; and increasing
industry involvement in resource allocation processes (Anderson 1997a, p.6).

Markets in the VET sector
The notion of the market in education and training is highly contested with
respect to the ‘content and meaning of the term’ (Selby Smith 1995, p.9).
While including the VET sector comprising all post-secondary, non-degree
level education and training, the entry of both schools and universities to
this marketplace and the emergence of global and regional markets, blurs
the distinction further (Anderson 1997a; McIntyre and Solomon 1999).

The concept of the training market is sometimes used as a proxy for a more efficient,
responsive, or most importantly, commercial, VET sector (Selby Smith 1995).
Adding to the lack of clarity is the confusion of competition with markets, Foyster
(1997) noting that some markets may not be particularly competitive. In fact, the
pre-conditions of an effective training market - substantial numbers of buyers and
sellers, a standardised market product, and sufficient knowledge pertaining to levels
of supply and demand (Burke et al 1994) –do not appear to have been met in the
VET sector (Anderson 1997a).
Determining the size, structure and composition of the training market has also been difficult, but Anderson (1994; 1996a) identifies a regulated or closed market sector of largely TAFE providers subject to considerable government regulation; a partially or quasi-market sector comprising public and private providers, characterised by competitive tendering and funding submissions and partially regulated in terms of provider registration, course accreditation and the like; and a deregulated or open market sector in which there is direct competition between public and private providers for clients and resources, with minimal government regulation (Anderson 1997a).

The types and level of competition for training has been strongly influenced by priorities set by State and Territory TAFE systems and their respective governments, particularly the extent to which TAFE institutions compete directly with private providers. In the past competition between public and private providers has been within States, although as mentioned above, the training market is increasingly regional and global (Allen Consulting Group 1994a, 1994b; Anderson 1997a).

Various models of competition and market reform operate in the VET sector with Anderson (1997a) distinguishing between supply-side models (performance agreements, competitive tendering, preferred supplier arrangements) and demand-side models (fee-for service, user choice, intermediaries and vouchers). He notes that competitive tendering, which accounted for two per cent of recurrent expenditure on VET in 1995, has been seen as leading to more efficiency because of the increase in direct competition between public and private providers. However, it has also attracted a number of criticisms about its negative impact on access and equity; educational quality; organisational stability and provider planning (Anderson 1994; Fooks 1995; Kell 1993; Lundberg 1994; Yeatman 1994). None of these negative consequences were reported by WADOT in a national study of competitive tendering (1995; 1996a), however. Of more concern to them were reported problems such as increasing provider reliance on government funds, high administrative costs and resource intensiveness (Anderson 1997a). Given the contested nature of the benefits of competition and market models, research which is clearly independent from government seems warranted.

The role of government

Rather than government having the predominant role in the development and delivery of VET, increasing emphasis has been place on the need for government involvement to be limited to “a purchaser of programs and services on behalf of the taxpaying community, a facilitator of market competition, and a regulator of market behaviour “ (Anderson 1997a, p.36). While free market advocates argue that this model still allows too much government interference in the open market, the critics of market reform are concerned that the withdrawal of government has led or will lead to the neglect of VET’s traditional clients, particularly the economically and socially disadvantaged (ACPET 1999, Anderson 1994, 1995c; Selby Smith 1995).

Regulation

For a national market in training to work effectively, a national approach to regulation was required, but one which would satisfy free market advocates suspicious of government involvement. The National Framework for the Recognition of Training (NFROT) was developed in order to provide for equivalent public recognition to TAFE courses of training delivered by registered private and industry provider. However, this is seen by private providers as too TAFEcentric (ACPET 1999) and the National Training Framework, consisting of new recognition arrangements and training packages, devolves more responsibility for curriculum development to non-TAFE
Assessing the impact of market reforms on the VET sector:
Anderson (1997a; 1998a; 1998b) distinguishes between social, economic, educational, and political impacts and consequences of market reforms on the VET sector, citing the NCVER’s claim that ‘at present…there appears to be insufficient empirical evidence either to support or refute claims that increased competition in the training market will produce a wide range of benefits not otherwise possible” (NCVER 1997, p.4 cited in Anderson 1997a, p.55). A number of inquiries are currently examining aspects of these issues (ANTA 1999b; DETYA 1999; NCVER 1999; Schofield 1999a; 1999b; 2000). The current debate in the VET policy community regarding the impact of market reforms is polarised between market and social justice advocates (Anderson 1998a). The former argue that competition will increase “efficiency, responsiveness, quality, flexibility and innovation in VET” (Anderson 1998a, p. 347; see also Moran 1998). The market orientation in the VET sector has been accompanied by an increasing focus on the skill needs of industry and enterprise. A strong lobby group for the market perspective has been the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) who argue that the Australian VET dominated training sector is “over-regulated, too centralised, and bureaucratically top heavy” (ACPET1999, p.14).

Social justice advocates, on the other hand, are concerned that increased competition, which has demonstrably changed the organisation and culture of TAFE providers, may have adverse social, economic and educational effects, identifying access and participation rates, in particular (Anderson 1998; Fooks 1995; Burkhardt & Corben 1996). The focus of our proposed research is on the potential impact of competitive tendering on educational quality, a concern shared by others (Anderson 1994; Gonczi 1998; Yeatman 1994), as research indicates that educational support services such as libraries and study skills support have declined due to competition from lower cost private providers (Anderson 1994). Other issues to do with educational quality include the reduction of choice and diversity in the type and quality of training programs due to the use of standardised training packages (although it is argued that the training packages, because they can be delivered by any industry on site, increase choice and diversity); the difficulty of ensuring the intellectual integrity of VET training now that, according to some, assessing industry competency standards has been divorced from those competent in the relevant disciplines (Gonczi 1998); and the impact of budget restrictions and commercialisation on TAFE’s ability to respond to the educational needs of students (Anderson 1998a).

These claims have particular relevance for our interests in VET training of human service professionals. These people upon graduation may provide face-to-face service delivery for some of society’s most vulnerable citizens, and their professional competence in terms of knowledge and skills, as well as developed ethics and values is crucial (Flynn 1999). Also of concern is the fact that these students may now also be granted advanced standing in university degree courses, upon completion of their TAFE award. The quality and standard of their educational experiences in the VET sector is a matter of considerable interest to universities attempting to facilitate these articulation arrangements (Burns 1997). It also has implications for professional organisations for the service professions, many of which are attempting to raise the professional profile of their industries.
In their defence, governments and free market advocates argue that competitive tendering should enhance quality, through processes such as tender design and selection criteria which include quality considerations (Burkhardt and Corben 1996; WADOT 1995, 1996). However, there is insufficient evidence to assess these claims. Given the symbolic rhetoric of competition and marketisation, it is worth remembering the limits the National Competition Council itself acknowledges.

National Competition Policy...is a means rather than an end in itself. The aim is to use competition to improve productivity, lower prices, improve standards and enhance the community’s living standards and employment opportunities. (National Competition Council 1999, p.95)

The NCC draws attention to the limited awareness of the public interest safeguards, which require governments to consider other social, economic and environmental factors impacting on individuals and the community. This has yet to be tested in the VET context (or indeed in most public sectors).

Research issues for the VET sector
Reflecting upon the more than ten years of market reform in the VET sector, Anderson (1998a, pp.352-3) identifies a number of issues, some of which we are hoping to investigate:

- What constitutes ‘market reform’ in the VET sector? Does this include the competency-based training packages, public sector restructuring, as well as the introduction and effects of competitive funding mechanisms?
- What is the impact of inter-state diversity on the operation of markets and their various impacts?
- Given the inadequacy of appropriate definitions, evaluation criteria and measurement tools, what alternative approaches should be used to measure and evaluate impacts on consequences of market reforms?
- Given the competition for scarce research funds, how can the long-term impact and consequences of market reforms be properly investigated?

With respect to the first we hope to elicit VET participants views of the ‘market’, particularly their understandings of the open training market (with a focus on the National Reform Agenda and the introduction of standardised training packages), and National Competition Policy (with a focus on the competitive tendering of human service courses). VET understandings of these processes are mediated by a multiplicity of policy discourses - corporatisation, commercialisation, internationalisation, marketisation, and the like (McIntyre and Solomon 1999). Attempting to disentangle how different participants understand these terms and the processes they describe will be an important contribution of the study.

In the future we are also interested in exploring the way in which market reform has been approached by different States. There is some evidence that reforms in both Victoria and Queensland have undergone significant changes in response to different political regimes. WADOT claims that Western Australia has been able to reduce costs while maintaining quality because of a funding model recognising the needs of TAFE colleges (Campus Review 1999, June 16-22, p.8). Anecdotal evidence from TAFE staff in Western Australia indicates some scepticism. Our current research was initiated by a chance remark by a senior TAFE manager of an apparently highly successful and competitive college about the detrimental impacts of market reforms on the quality of education and training. Assessing the quality of the VET product requires attention to the provider and the training they deliver, and we want to explore what participants know of quality measures and their perceived appropriateness.
METHODS
Data collection consisted of a three stage process. In the first stage, a reasonably comprehensive literature review of material relating to the impact of the National Reform Agenda and National Competition Policy on the VET sector was undertaken. In the second stage, in-depth interviews were conducted with staff—both managers and lecturers—in four WA RTOs, two private and two public. These explored people’s understanding of the National Training Reform Agenda and National Competition Policy and their perceptions of the impact of these processes. Finally, case studies of each RTO were created in order to illustrate some of the structural and cultural differences between organisations. These were based on ethnographic observations of each RTO, the interviews, and documentary material.

Data analysis, which is continuing, is attempting to identify ways in which the structures, cultures, and staffing of RTOs differentially affect their understanding of and reactions to these national transformations of the VET sector.

Undertaking research of this nature is a rather sensitive issue for some VET participants. This has to do with both the increasing competition between VET RTOs for courses and hence funding, and the uncertainty some staff at different levels have regarding the long-term impact of these changes. One objective of the research was to determine how difficult it might be to explore these issues within the VET sector in WA. This remains an open question. One difficulty we experienced was in the identification of our research assistant with West Coast College of TAFE, and hence a competitor of some of the private RTO staff interviewed. The research assistant believes this may have influenced the responses of some informants.

Limitations of the study are considerable – the research is not complete; not all the material is comparable at this stage; case studies were selected because of their ease of access to the researchers; the qualitative data requires much more analysis.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Table 1: The players

We wanted two public and two private RTOs who were all delivering accredited children services courses.

The two public providers are both relatively large TAFE colleges, one having a long history in the state; the other created more recently. A underwent amalgamation of campuses in the 1990s. B acquired its current status as an autonomous TAFE college at the same time.

The physical settings of the RTOs reflect history and function. Public Provider A has two campuses, both in semi-bush settings, but one with old school architecture, while the other is a newer, modernist building which refutes old TAFE origins. This difference is reflected in the internal office environment, one looking more like an old high school, the other like a new satellite private company, but without much activity yet. Staff at the two campuses dress differently – casually downmarket at the older institution, and more upmarket/business style on the newer campus. Here we see the continuum of TAFE cultures.

Public Provider B has two campuses, one on a crowded metropolitan site, the other more spacious and located in semi-bush. Architecturally the sites are similar with
The metropolitan site is showing its age. The office environment at this campus is cramped, little space or consideration for the reception of visitors. There’s not much money been spent on upgrading in some time. The newer regional campus is more spacious, reception areas, provisions for children, attractive displays for visitors. Looks like it’s been recently refurbished. Staff at these two campuses also dress differently – those at the older metropolitan site very casual, except for those in front reception. Staff at the newer campus dress in smart casual clothes, clearly distinguished from students.

Private provider C’s umbrella organisation was established many years ago and has been a well known pre-school training organisation in the state for more than 50 years. The training college (which is one of five business units of the umbrella organisation) achieved RTO status only a few years ago. Unlike their parent office which is located in a heritage building in a now trendy suburb, the training college occupies a floor in an office building in the centre of Perth. They have a very business-like reception area, upmarket décors, with display objects and memorabilia. Staff dress accordingly, with administrative staff in neat office attire and professional staff in business suits. This has the feel of an organisation in the business of training, an efficient, sleek operation.

Private provider D has been operating as a child-care centre for more than 50 years, and achieved RTO status only a few years ago. They have been delivering professional development for ten years. The child-care centre, located a few kilometres south of the city centre, is a self-contained, fenced enclosure with different sections for each age group. Buildings are reasonably new, with some portables operating as training rooms. This is a site which has been added to continually over the years, without much attention to architectural distinctiveness. The reception area is small, but functional with side rooms for client consultations. Staff were dressed more casually than at the other private provider. Rather than a business orientation, this RTO exudes a more intimate, family-like environment.

We think some of these observations reflect some interesting cultural differences, between, but also within, public and provider RTOs.

Table 2: The marketplace

While all RTOs appeared to have a similar broad understanding of a training market, public provider A and private provider C articulated more specifically the way that market is shaped by the Department of Training.

All could identify a wide range of stakeholders, with Public provider B having the most hierarchical list – ranging from national bodies to potential students. This indicates that even small private RTOs have been enculturated into the language of the training market.

Figure 1: Application of VET governance in Western Australia

Figure 2: Allocation of funding

Table 3: Understanding the National Training Reform Agenda
The public providers could articulate in more detail the language and philosophy of the National Training Framework. However, there was a difference in provider B between the program manager, who had a brief but competent definition and the lecturer who was not familiar with the language:

I am the deliverer, that’s all I see, that’s all I have to understand…

There were differences too between the private providers with A giving a fulsome endorsement for the philosophy of skills recognition, in particular. Provider D has a rather more cynical view – differentiating between the rhetoric about the “wonderful outcomes” and practice.

ARF – there was less understanding of the meaning of this.

Training packages – each RTO identified recognition of competencies as the core of training packages. Private providers, in particular had quite a bit to say about the packages. The larger RTO saw the sense of stability and portability as two key strengths of the packages. Both private RTOs thought the packages were “too thin”, “too generic”.

Table 4: Understanding and impact of User Choice*

Understanding of the term differed somewhat between providers, with private providers focused more on customer/client choice. For the larger private provider, the term was unsuitable – the preferred term was “strategic customer focus” (!). The smaller private provider was cynical about the existence of choice “your choice really is TAFE, TAFE or TAFE, and there might be a small provider if you are lucky”.

Impacts on the RTOs were different. For public provider A, establishing a reputation meant being able to successfully compete for traineeships. Provider B, on the other hand, has lost out in this competition to private RTOs. They were more pessimistic about the impact of user choice on them.

Table 5: Operation of National Competition Policy and Competitive Tendering

What’s interesting with respect to RTO understanding of national competition policy, is the more positive comments about the opening of the market, given by Public Provider A and Private provider C. This contrasts with the neutral statement by B, and the much more cynical view of D. These differences are reflected, too, in responses to questions about competitive tendering. Only A acknowledged the managed nature of tendering in WA (18%). There were similarities in the tendering processes in public A and private C, with Managers responsible for the submissions, but with wider support. Public B required lecturers with subject expertise to take responsibility for tenders, with only costing support from the college. Time spent on writing tenders was articulated in more detail by public A and private C.

Table 6: Knowing your competitors

This section produced a clearer public/private split. Public and private RTOs largely agreed about the advantages private RTOs enjoy – distinct, unique delivery; flexible
because of size; less bureaucracy; more responsive to client needs. However there was little agreement between them on the advantages of the public RTOs – while A and B stressed reputation (including high standards of staff), and their government subsidies, they didn’t cite large size as an advantage. The private RTOs, however, saw size and resources as a significant advantage. This evidence supports that discussed by Anderson (1997a).

Table 1 summarises factors public and private providers see as unfair advantages by their competitors:

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<tr>
<td>• A capacity for monopoly trading</td>
<td>• Greater flexibility and control of resources (particularly human resources)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Ease of access to infrastructure (staff, facilities, curriculum)</td>
<td>• Freedom from government interference (eg restrictions on fee-charging and accountability requirements)</td>
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<td>• Economies-of-scale</td>
<td>• More flexible cost structures</td>
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<td>• A capacity to cross-subsidise commercial activities from recurrent funds</td>
<td>• Non-reciprocal access to accredited curriculum</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Subsidised tuition fees</td>
<td>• Freedom from community service obligations</td>
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<td>• Government recognition and marketing</td>
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<td>• Range of historical factors</td>
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(Adapted from Anderson, 1997a: 50-51)

Table 7: Competitive neutrality and competitively allocated funding

While all RTOs shared similar understandings of the term competitive neutrality, they have very different views of how this operates. As Anderson (1997a) notes, private RTOs believe public RTOs have an unfair advantage due to their size and ability to cross-subsidise. Public RTOs on the other hand see smaller size, and lower cost structures mean private RTOs can tender more cheaply. Public Provider B went further, mentioning a perception that, for ideological purposes, private RTOs are given a minimum quota of tenders.

The impact of competitively allocated funding is being felt intensely by all RTOs, but some are coping better than others. For public RTOs there is a keen sense of the time taken from teaching to write tenders. For the private RTOs there is a need to carefully weigh up the value of tendering.
Table 8: Determining quality of RTOs – qualifications and facilities

Not surprisingly, perhaps, public RTO staff were more likely to have tertiary educated and industry trained staff (though there was considerable difference between A & B), while minimum requirements of level 4 Train the Trainer qualifications were cited by both private RTOs. The private RTOs were more likely to cite the importance of industry training, than tertiary training.

Clear differences in facilities between public and private RTOs have more to do with support staff than physical resources, as least between A, B and C. Their facilities reflect their different missions – the wider education and training functions of the public RTOs compared with the industry-specific focus of the private RTOs.

Table 9: Determining quality of RTOs – quality assurance mechanisms and auditing process

Formal quality assurance (QETO) does not differentiate RTOs, as three are QETO (the only form of QA cites by respondents) approved, and the fourth is undergoing approval. Some differentiation was apparent with internal quality mechanisms, with public A and private C again having similar processes of regular quality meetings. This was true also of their responses to a question about the auditing process, where their descriptions were almost identical. The response by staff at public provider B reflects their lecturer status – although it’s interesting that they were unaware of the external audit process.

Table 10: Perceptions of graduate outcomes

All RTOs were quite positive about preparation of graduates for the workplace, although there is a sting in the tail of public B’s response that “training “packages are more likely to improve articulation nationally, but not the standards of the graduates”.

The means by which they measure graduate outcomes show some interesting differences, with private C, in particular, engaged in a more direct and systematic survey of outcomes from both students and industry.

Table 11: Overall satisfaction with the reform agenda

Comments about overall satisfaction with the training reform agenda again reveal more similarities between public provider A and private provider C – where size, business/industry orientation seem to matter. WADTE support is viewed positively only by C.

DISCUSSION

Much of our analysis so far is underdeveloped and we need to explore it further to differentiate between the “just so” material which is commonplace knowledge of most in the VET sector and material which pinpoints the pressures the transformations in
the VET sector has created. Most of the questions posed by Anderson and others have emerged in this research -

- What constitutes ‘market reform’ in the VET sector? Does this include the competency-based training packages, public sector restructuring, as well as the introduction and effects of competitive funding mechanisms? All of these factors are recognised by RTOs in this study as part of the VET market language and culture, but some are more value-laden to particular RTOs than others. And the culture of the market is not split on public/private lines, but more complexly with entrepreneurial, generally large public and private RTOs sharing a more positive orientation to the potential of the new marketplace, than either the older, education focused TAFEs and some of the smaller, single-area focused RTOs. So the market advocates and social justice advocates seem just as likely to be found in public and private RTOs. How will future VET institutions be distinguished, structurally and culturally?

- What is the impact of inter-state diversity on the operation of markets and their various impacts? How do the experiences of WA RTOs compare to those of other states and territories? WADTE sells its approach as a more “managed” one. Given some of the negative impacts already felt by some public and private RTOs, how much room is there for a less “managed” approach?

- Given the inadequacy of appropriate definitions, evaluation criteria and measurement tools, what alternative approaches should be used to measure and evaluate impacts on consequences of market reforms? This remains a difficult question. Responses to our questions on the market varied considerably, and we need to explore how comparable some of our data is. Those interested in discourse analysis might find a fruitful data site with the large of the market and processes of corporatisation. To some extent that use of that language (or non-use, in some cases) is defining the winners and losers of the VET marketplace.

- Given the competition for scarce research funds, how can the long-term impact and consequences of market reforms be properly investigated? This question is tied to the previous question, and we need to think through how our original aim of measuring the impacts of market reforms on educational quality might be achieved. We can no longer rely on the presence of quality assurance mechanisms which depend upon quality of process, rather than product. The impacts of these reforms on the quality of education and training need some more rigorous measurement.

So, there’s plenty of interesting research to do…

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