Towards a new vision for TAFE: Integrating social and economic goals

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Introduction: Social service or economic utility?

Current debate about the role of TAFE in Australia, and vocational education and training (VET) in general, is surrounded by considerable confusion and conflict. Much of the confusion arises from the lack of a clear and coherent mission for TAFE that recognises its diverse and multi-faceted role in national social and economic development. In large part, this lack of vision is directly attributable to policy makers who, for the past decade or more, have been transfixed by the illusion of competition and market ‘solutions’ as a panacea for our many social and economic ills. Far from solving problems, competition and markets have instead become an end in themselves and a source of uncertainty, disorientation and instability in TAFE. Any sense of, or concern about, where markets in VET are leading us seems to have been lost.

Quite apart from its implications for TAFE as an educational sector, the preparedness of our policy makers to defer to the new orthodoxy of market economics represents an abrogation of their responsibility towards the whole community. At best, competitive markets are short-sighted, alienating and blind to social inequality. At worst, they are chaotic, divisive and unjust. Reliance on market theory also reflects a profound absence of political will and social imagination on the part of policy makers to confront, and develop innovative responses to, some of the major social problems of our time. Although competitive markets may work well for standard commodity production, they are no substitute for a social vision and rational planning and delivery of human services such as VET.

The market reform agenda in VET is hotly contested and is by no means the product of general consensus. Although views are diverse, debate about TAFE’s role is essentially polarised around two divergent ideological perspectives, simply characterised as the ‘economic utility’ and ‘social service’ views.

At one end of the spectrum are those who ascribe to the new orthodoxy of neo-liberal economics and corporatism. In the interests of economic growth and dynamism, they contend that the principal role of TAFE is to satisfy the needs of business and industry for a highly skilled and flexible workforce. By extension, they argue that such an approach will enhance the ‘employability’ of TAFE graduates, thereby meeting the social obligation to promote access and equity. Hence much weight is placed on the purported convergence of employer and student/apprentice needs. This perspective has been the dominant framework within which the role of TAFE has been reconstructed over the past decade or so.
At the other end of the spectrum are those who consider that TAFE’s primary responsibility is to respond to the needs of the wider community, with employers being only one of many stakeholders. This group argues that an imbalance has emerged in the VET policy agenda between the goals of economic efficiency and social equity with adverse consequences for social cohesion, cultural inclusiveness and democratic accountability. Consequently they argue that the role of TAFE should be conceived within a broad frame of social service rather than just economic utility.

Equally TAFE has an obligation to equip its students and apprentices with knowledge, skills and attitudes to enable them to realise their vocational goals. And it has a responsibility to ensure that the knowledge, skills and attitudes that it imparts are those required by industry and the wider community. This includes small business and the not-for-profit community sector whose needs have generally been submerged by those of big business.

Research on VET tends to support the central contention of the ‘social service’ adherents. Namely that the current drive to harness TAFE to the economic objectives of industrial productivity and international competitiveness has compromised, if not seriously attenuated, TAFE’s capacity to respond to the full range of social, cultural and economic needs in the Australian community. In short, the social service mission of TAFE has been largely sacrificed to the narrow dictates of economic utility (eg. Anderson 1997; Powles & Anderson 1996).

The challenge is to develop a new vision for TAFE that is cast within a broader and more sophisticated understanding of its many roles and responsibilities as a public provider. Such a vision should endeavour to integrate the goal of economic development with other equally important national concerns. To do so, it must also move beyond the current fixation with market solutions and revalue cooperation over competition as the organising principle of TAFE and VET in general. In the light of this analysis, I shall then outline a set of principles that may provide a starting point for envisioning a new role for TAFE. Before this can happen, two central myths underpinning the current VET policy agenda must be challenged.

**Myths of VET reform**

The first myth is that the needs of employers and students/apprentices are converging. On the strength of this myth, current policy asserts that VET should be concerned primarily (if not exclusively) with work preparation and equipping students/apprentices with the skills required by employers. This myth is erroneous for several reasons. In the context of structural unemployment, a significant proportion of TAFE graduates (especially those who suffer from socio-economic disadvantage or gender and racial discrimination) are destined never to enter paid employment - either in the short or long term. A significant number of those TAFE graduates who do succeed in gaining initial employment are likely to experience unemployment or under-employment at some stage of their lives.
Increasing the ‘employability’ of TAFE students does nothing to address the underlying lack of employment opportunities. It simply reshuffles the job queue, fuels credentialism, and intensifies competition in the labour market. The only winners are employers who gain access to a growing pool of qualified job applicants without any commensurate investment in job creation and workforce training. The losers are the growing numbers of unemployed and the wider community which must support them.

Moreover, such an approach fails to prepare students and apprentices for vocational destinies beyond paid employment and their chosen occupations. The unemployed require skills to survive on limited income and the confidence and personal resources to cope with adversity. Many TAFE graduates will move through a series of different occupations, often in industries outside those for which they were initially trained. Another significant proportion of TAFE graduates are seeking the knowledge and skills to perform socially useful roles in the family and other community settings.

In effect, preparation for paid employment is only one of many different roles and responsibilities that TAFE must fulfil in the wider community. And for growing numbers of people it is of diminishing relevance. But due to the overriding emphasis on the need for TAFE to respond to industry needs and increase the ‘employability’ of individuals, much of what now passes for vocational education is often just a narrow form of job training. Consequently TAFE is not effectively responding to the full range of needs and aspirations among its students and the wider community.

The clear implication is that TAFE should be concerned with developing not only economic but also social and cultural competence for life beyond the workplace. This means equipping students/apprentices with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to cope with periods of unemployment/under-employment, rapid technological change, cultural diversity and social dislocation. Students/apprentices need broad-based transferable skills for a range of occupations, together with the personal and social skills to enable them to adapt to change and contribute to community development.

Secondly, the current VET policy agenda is based on the fallacious myth of permanent economic growth and development. In a world of rising population and finite natural resources, the goal of limitless economic expansion is no longer tenable, let alone desirable. Yet to the best of my knowledge, ecological sustainability has never been identified as a priority in national policy statements on VET. Few if any nationally accredited courses adequately address the long-term ecological consequences of uncontrolled economic growth.

Given the imperative to promote ecologically sustainable development, it is essential for TAFE to begin imparting the skills and awareness to conserve and regenerate (rather than simply exploit) our natural resources. This applies to all TAFE programs in fields such as agriculture, forestry, fishing, tourism, mining, manufacturing, business services and so on. In short, TAFE must facilitate the acquisition of ecological competence in combination with economic and social skills.
The prevalence of these related myths suggests that VET policy makers have to date lacked the social commitment and political will to address two of the major problems of our time. Cast within the ideological framework of economic rationalism, the current VET policy agenda is based on a restricted and instrumental view of lifeworlds that reduces people and nature to the status of human and natural resources for economic exploitation.

Such a perspective ignores the complex and inter-dependent reality of human existence, the source and meaning of which is inextricably linked to social relations, cultural practices and material conditions. As the vast majority of TAFE students/apprentices are of adult age, they are also citizens with a wide range of duties and interests beyond work, in the family, the local community and the global environment. They vote, consume, experience unemployment, raise families, are legally accountable and ultimately survive on the fruits of nature. Yet at present they are trained only to labour and consume.

Nor can it be taken for granted that all the necessary personal and social skills are acquired at school. For many TAFE students, schooling has been an interrupted and negative experience, often marked by failure and alienation. Recognition of gaps and deficiencies in their prior education is often why people later enter TAFE. To ignore this reality and shift responsibility to schools simply aggravates the problem.

Towards a new vision for TAFE

If TAFE is to adequately prepare its students and apprentices for the 21st century, it must equip them with the knowledge, skills and dispositions to participate actively, effectively and equitably in civic life. It must also recognise that students/apprentices are part of a global community in which acceptance of cultural diversity and environmental responsibility is essential. This requires students/apprentices to become literate in political, social, economic, cultural and ecological affairs.

If this latter premise is accepted, then it is incumbent on our policy makers to ensure that TAFE is recast within a framework of policy and resource priorities that enables it to develop a socially critical and environmentally responsible curriculum. In addition to contributing towards national economic development, TAFE must promote the following set of broad principles that underpin active citizenship:

- democratic participation;
- social equity;
- cultural inclusiveness; and
- ecological sustainability.

In doing so, policy makers must acknowledge that there are many legitimate stakeholders in TAFE besides business and industry. Students, teachers and community members should also be actively encouraged and supported to participate in decisions that affect the governance and curriculum of their TAFE institutes. A set of principles for stimulating debate about the future role of TAFE is outlined in the accompanying table.
Rather than simply perpetuate prevailing myths and reinforce lopsided economic goals and corporate priorities, the Victorian community has a unique opportunity to envision a new role for TAFE. It should encourage TAFE to start from the needs of individual students as citizen-workers and build upwards on the foundation of shared interests and cooperation. By integrating economic with social, cultural and ecological competence, TAFE will contribute more effectively to the balanced development and regeneration of our social and ecological resources.

References


Principles to guide the development of TAFE in Australia:

The role of TAFE is to:

- facilitate the development of autonomous, adaptable and socially responsible learners, workers and citizens capable of enlightened self-management and cooperation;

- promote the development of a democratic, inclusive and equitable learning environment, workplace and society;

- promote a balanced and integrated approach to skills formation for social, economic and cultural development within a framework of ecological sustainability; and

- provide industry and the wider community with access to highly skilled and flexible individuals capable of contributing to economic productivity, technological innovation, community development and environmental preservation.

To realise these goals, TAFE should aim to:

- promote equitable access to, and outcomes from, lifelong learning and recurrent education;

- equip students/apprentices with generic skills for participation in work and other forms of socially useful activity;

- promote the development of social, economic, cultural and ecological competence in a balanced and integrated manner;

- develop policies, programs and services which are relevant and responsive to the diverse needs, aspirations and backgrounds of students/apprentices and other clients, including industry;

- equip students/apprentices with personal, social and vocational skills to enable them to respond to change and take control of their individual and collective destinies;

- facilitate participation in decisions about TAFE governance and curriculum by key stakeholders including students/apprentices, teachers, industry and the wider community;

- develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes to enable students/apprentices to participate in decision making in TAFE, the workplace and the wider community;

- assist students/apprentices to develop confidence, self-esteem and shared responsibility for decisions which affect their learning, work, community and natural environment; and

- utilise public funds in an efficient, effective and ethical manner to promote the above goals.