Australian VET Policy: processes, stakeholders and issues

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Some of the sector’s big names and both Minister Andrews and Shadow Minister Cameron attended a VET policy forum held at the VET Development Centre in Melbourne in mid-July this year. About 100 were there.

Its aim was to promote cohesion and harmony in VET and “encourage all providers to work together to build a stronger sector.”

So, why is there a problem?
This Government has made tangible improvements to the VET system, creating a strong and secure platform for students and providers.

But we are looking for innovative ways to improve the system, rather than go back to the drawing board. So we will be building on what we already have in place. In other words, to secure our future, we are building on the legacy of the past and the positive legacy of the past ...

We think, as a government, the best approach is to concentrate on bedding down the many quality and funding reforms that we have introduced and then back this up through a process of continual improvement.”
The unfortunate truth is that Australia’s TAFE and vocational education system is under enormous pressure as a result of poor and incoherent policy development.

The system has been damaged by privatisation, poor regulation, and unhealthy competition. Contrary to all of the hype privatisation and competition policy have failed to improve the quality, reduce the cost and increase access to education and training ...

The current government is incapable developing policies to address these issues. There is an urgent need to deal with the real problems – holistically, across the system and head-on.
“we need a vision, we need a national policy framework and we need to take ideology out of VET”. (Rod Camm, ACPET)

“our national politicians [need to] to provide real vision and leadership in Australia’s VET space, developing bi-partisan approaches to national challenges”. (Don Perlgut, Community Colleges Australia)

And Mary Faraone, President of TAFE Directors Australia spoke of: “policy changes, with the flick of a pen”
“Australia’s lack of policy clarity, inconsistency between States and political parties, chronic under-funding and endless tinkering means our vocational education system is no longer considered world class, even though despite the interference some institutions still meet this benchmark. “

(Schubert, Goedegebuure & Meek 2018)
And so....
How this paper came about

• It was authored by Berywn Clayton and myself
• It is art of a wider collection of papers just published by the L H Martin Institute and available HERE
• Why this initiative? What this set of papers are trying to do?
• Topics covered in addition to this one on Policy include:
  Funding VET
  Navigating disadvantage and VET
  Economics and the training market
  The problematic role of CBT
  Revisioning the VET system
  VET teacher education and training
  Marketisation: The NSW story
  VET FEE-HELP
  VET for the 21st century
What I want to cover in this presentation

- Providing some more context:
  - What is VET? What are its missions?
- Policy:
  - What it is, and
  - How it SHOULD be developed
- Players in the VET policy ‘game’:
  - Who are they?
- Problems and issues with VET policy development at present:
  - Exploring these through a series of propositional statements
  - Drawing some conclusions and proposing some ‘ways forward’
What is VET? What are its missions?

VET helps provide people with the skills, knowledge and personal attributes they need to enter the workforce for the first time, to re-enter the workforce, to train or re-train for a new job or to broaden or upgrade their skills.

Thus, it provides opportunities for the development of second-chance education as well as post-secondary initial training, and further skills development for those well established in their careers.

VET’s charter encompasses workforce training and development on the one hand and the promotion of access, social justice and equality on the other.

VET is probably more defined by what it appears to be to some rather than by what it actually is.
So?

- VET is arguably more complex and less well understood than schools and universities
- Policymakers, politicians and their advisors have generally had little direct experience of vocational education at the sub-degree level.
- It is said to be ‘industry led’. Is it really?
- It is the ‘middle child’ between two powerful education sectors
- It does not enjoy parity of esteem, particularly with HE
- It is caught between national, jurisdictional and local agendas
- Its funding in real terms has gone down, unlike HE and schools
What is policy?

Policy is:

“... the expression of what a government wants to achieve – whether it be about the ‘means’ or the ‘ends’ or both. In other words it provides the rationale or the driver for government initiatives and programs.” (Department of Premier and Cabinet, South Australia, 2015, p. 2)

It is implemented in a number of ways
Terry Moran, the former Head of ANTA and P, M and C, described Australia’s delivery of policy as:

“In palliative care”

His view is that policy development and implementation in Australia is too disconnected, too economically driven, too short term and not bold enough or long-term focused.

Peter Noonan argues that policy fails in development and implementation when it is not properly “war gamed”
“Rightly or wrongly VET policy is often perceived as piecemeal, short-term, disconnected and enacted to ‘put out fires’ that better and more evidence-based approaches would have avoided lighting in the first place.” (Guthrie and Clayton 2018)
Who are the players?

- politicians, policymakers and planners and government departments and agencies
- industry, a broad group with diverse interests that includes peak employer and employee representative bodies
- individual employers, often with far more local and specific interests
- professional and regulatory bodies
- regional development and community bodies
- education and training providers
- teachers and trainers
- students, apprentices, trainees, and their families, carers and other advisors

Don’t be at the bottom of the policy food chain!
Propositions about VET policy development and implementation

- VET policy development and implementation are often too rapid and focused too much on the short-term
- There is a nexus between national policy and initiatives and their jurisdictional implementation.
- VET policy and programs tend not to be developed holistically, compromising their likelihood of successful implementation.
- There is a critical lack of effective policy analysis, program monitoring and evaluation.
And also...

- Policy initiatives and changes come so hard and fast that there is incomplete implementation and change fatigue
- VET policymaking is in the hands of officials and others who lack contextual knowledge, especially of the VET system and how it actually works
- VET policy involves over-consultation for some, but still be under-designed
- VET has become over-regulated
Conclusions

1. The policy development and implementation process needs to be well led, inclusive, analytical and actively managed – including management of risk – to be successful.

2. It also needs to be collaborative, forward and outward-looking, innovative and creative, and learn the lessons of history.

3. It requires continuity of capacity.

4. It really isn’t all doom and gloom, but actual or perceived policy failure conveys a widely held sense of crisis in the policymaking system and in the sector itself.

5. However, some would argue that, at present Olympian detachment and secretiveness appear more common than deep engagement.
Some possible ways forward

Policy makers also need to take the time necessary to do it once and do it right. They need to have ‘carry through’ rather than chopping and changing their policy priorities.

Rebuild policy capability, and enrich government with VET knowledge as well as research and evaluation skills, to set up effective monitoring and evaluation processes from the beginning of the policy cycle.

Undertake a comprehensive review of the sector, but ensure it is independent of political interests.

Most radically, we propose an agency with a role similar to that of ANTA be re-established. If nothing else, this would ensure that there was a national agency devoted exclusively to the VET sector.
Endnote!

Some days you wake up and immediately start to worry. Nothing in particular is wrong. It's just the suspicion that forces are aligning quietly and there will be trouble.
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A copy of the policy paper can be found HERE
Copies of the other papers in the series can be found HERE
Thank you