Competing priorities in vocational education
Teachers adapting to reforms

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Context of the study

Hunter TAFE teachers ‘buckling’ under stress and battling for basics including toilet paper

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Federal government should take over Tafe and vocational education, KPMG says

Advisory firm unveils proposal to restore demand-driven tertiary education system

Australian universities

Revealed: how Treasury clawed back $210m from floundering TAFE

The NSW Treasury clawed back $210 million in cash from TAFE while the public vocational educator was struggling on multiple fronts with a disastrous enrolment system, massive job cuts and the chaotic implementation of a raft of government reforms.

Documents released under freedom of information by here the chaos within TAFE since July 2014, and show that Treasury took back millions at a time TAFE was making hundreds of staff redundant and IT system problems meant it could not even accurately report its revenues.
My research

- Neoliberalism & the public service
- Marketization in Education – clash of values
- How this effects workers in the sector – particularly long term workers
- Australian vocational education as a great case study of this
Details of the study

Mixture of interview and survey data – different areas in TAFE. 25 interviews so far.

Wide variety of subject areas – nursing, hospitality, visual merchandising, carpentry and joinery, allied health, electrical engineering.

I’ve pulled out a number of examples which illustrate an overall trend – will need to use further survey data to be able to generalise further.
The sociology – Autonomy codes

• Good way of examining change in a sector – break it down into two different dimensions of change – positional autonomy and relational autonomy

• **Positional autonomy (PA)** – relations between constituents within a context or category and those from elsewhere – how well insulated – within the field, not within the field

• **Relational autonomy (RA)** - or relations between principles from within a context or category and those emanating from other contexts or categories – does it use ‘rules’ from within the field or from elsewhere (anywhere else)? What’s given primacy? What’s valued?
Education

PA+ (are they in the educational field?)

MIT paid summer courses

Oxbridge

Sydney Uni

RA+

(Wine appreciation club)

(Are their goals educational?)
Teacher interviews - PA

– ‘I would rather describe myself as an educator because training I think is too narrow... I don’t think I just go in and train people and then walk out. It’s more looking at people holistically.’

– ‘Management is trying to force them into thinking that they are delivering products... teachers are no longer teachers they are trainers or assessors, we are no longer teaching we are training, our students are not students they’re learners, our courses are not courses they’re products and it’s all commercial. TAFE has tried to change the way we think, but we don’t, we see ourselves as teachers and we actually hate the idea of seeing themselves as trainers, we’re actually educators’
Teacher interviews - RA

‘We are a public education provider, our ethos should be about providing a fair and equitable education to all members of society. Rather we are turning into a business focused on the bottom dollar rather than the social good of education.’

‘the courses we are delivering here are not just about training packages and the skills, it’s actually education which encompasses a much broader view of learning... I feel as if that is being subverted’

‘Well the teachers who do the business and are out there and have a high profile, they are the ones who get the most rewards in terms of recognition, whereas those who are more... educationally focused don’t get as much kudos.’
PA+ (are they in the educational field?)

RA+

(Are their goals educational?)
Commercial areas counterpoint - PA

• ‘You’re like a salesperson you just sit and have a coffee with them and have a chat with them and tell them about your programs… you’re borderline recruiters…isn’t really teaching, it’s a pretty different role, but you have to do that if you want these industry-focused initiatives going’

• ‘… you do all these different things and you have to, the ones who stayed on board are the ones who can sometimes be a salesperson, sometimes be a recruiter, sometimes be just a teacher, sometimes be a disabilities consultant almost’

• ‘Now actually I don't do much, actually I don't do any teaching face to face with the students anymore. I do a lot more project work and at the moment, I actually work here two days a week with [TAFE manager] and two days a week at [a training location].’
Commercial areas - RA

• ‘When I first started here I found that what was being taught here had no relation to what was being done in industry at all… the change has been all about making sure what we deliver in that training package has immediate reference to what’s being done in store… we need to be training our students so that they can walk straight into jobs.’

• ‘For us it’s not that hard to address as retailers are really commercial and [subject area] is really commercial area of work anyway, it’s not like we’re in the trade areas, so the mindset of anyone working in [subject area] is all about the commercial side of things… so that’s our mindset anyway, so relating that to education, it’s not that dissimilar.’

• ‘And look I get it, I used to be it should all be about making the educational experience for the student as enriching as possible and I do get it you have to make money. Or otherwise there won’t be anywhere for the students to come’
Education

PA+ (are they in the educational field?)

RA+ (Are their goals educational?)
Conclusion

• General teaching staff did not adapt as successful or accept the contents of the reforms.
• However, teachers from commercial areas did successfully (and rather happily) adopt to the business-oriented reforms, embracing many of the practices encouraged by the reforms.
PA+ (are they in the educational field?)

RA+

(Are their goals educational?)
Conclusions

• Code clash for teachers – the bigger the gap between themselves and reforms the more skeptical

• Tendency for different areas to be more oriented to reforms
  • More commercially oriented areas more likely to embrace reforms
  • Could impact how changes are managed – what sort of terms to couch reforms in

• Understanding the values your teachers hold