The place of VET in the education and employment policy landscape

Author: Don Zoellner, University Fellow, Charles Darwin University

Introduction

When analysing how this collection of national landmark documents have described and defined the place of a still aspirational national training system - currently reduced to the acronym VET - one is guided towards adopting a particular approach to the task. Because these reviews, reports and perspectives have been sanctioned by the various Federal Governments either directly or through statutory authorities, the place of vocational education and training (VET) will be conducted by using a discourse analysis of the public policies that have emerged as a result of Australia’s distributed form of governance. It has been common to represent the landmark documents from which this selection is drawn as points on a timeline, a milestone or a snapshot. Rather than being content with a photograph album full of isolated reports, readers are invited to view the place of VET as an account that is best told in the form of a theatrical production that is divided into acts with the landmark documents providing the plots and the scripts (Luetjens, Mintrom and ’t Hart 2019, pp. 4-7). VET has always been inherently complex with many moving parts that have maintained their momentum before, during and after the landmark documents were prepared, accepted/rejected and eventually consigned to history.
This ‘place of VET’ production has three acts. The first describes parts of a broader historical narrative on the provision of the skilled labour force that would give effect to the European understanding of social and economic development of Australia. The second act commences in the early 1970s and describes how a new education and training sector came to be defined and created in a way that rendered it knowable to the Commonwealth Government. This action was required so that the States could access an additional source of public funding in exchange for responding to national labour market and educational imperatives. In this second act the sector is made amenable to federalist policy and program development through the creation of state-owned technical education institutions that were given the remit to offer recurrent and lifelong education. This was facilitated by creating the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes that could be conceptually slotted between schools and universities and the then colleges of advanced education to make a bureaucratically rational educational continuum that aligned with existing government processes and policy-making methods.

The final act commences some fifteen years later with the adoption of an integrated range of public policies aimed at developing a contemporary labour force capable of productively working in a globalised economy driven by relentless technological development. The new national training system would be based upon a utilitarian form of training delivered in a competitive market. This act is characterised by a jurisdictional and political bi-partisanship that has served, until very recently, as the hallmark of VET public policy. Broader economic activities from outside the VET sector, particularly micro-economic competition reform, as well as market-based methods of public management built on contracting out and privatisation moved the sector in this alternative direction.

While each of the acts has its own distinctive story to tell, as scripted by the landmark documents, there are also a range of plots and sub-plots that have remained influential and consistent throughout. These storylines represent a path dependency (Thelen 2004, p. 36) based on positive feedback loops continually reinforcing public policy positions that have existed for many years. Two examples of this lineage include the relatively higher level of government funding that has historically been allocated to schools and universities (Noonan 2016) and public perceptions that VET qualifications are less esteemed than higher education degrees (Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia 1964, p. 165; Joyce 2019, p. 66).

The backdrop

The narrative that integrates the three acts is built upon several theoretical propositions. The first is Foucault’s governmentality; it involves ‘knowing’ an object through the collection of statistics, notated in specific formats, which renders the object in a particular conceptual form and makes it amenable to intervention and regulation (Miller and Rose 2008, p. 30). In act one, the various States that comprise the Australian Commonwealth knew their own idiosyncratic versions of adult, technical and labour force training. This ‘patchwork quilt of diversity’ arose from the opinions and prejudices of particular personalities and State government priorities (Whitelock 1974, p. 265). Miller and Rose (2008, p. 15) describe how the political activity of problematisation ‘is intrinsically linked to devising ways to seek to remedy it. If a particular diagnosis or tool appears to fit a particular problem, this is because
they have been made to fit each other’, thus accounting for the jurisdictional differences.

An essential element of rendering an object knowable to governments is an insatiable demand for more data and information. Virtually every one of the landmark documents on the place of VET refer to the absence of appropriate data. This complaint commences with the [Wright Report (Commonwealth-State Committee of Inquiry Into Apprenticeship 1954, pp. 24-5)] noting the paucity of data on the number of tradesmen and apprentices employed; ‘the lack of such statistical information is, in our view, a serious obstacle to sensible planning’. It is book-ended by Skills Australia’s (2010, p. 51) view that quality in the VET sector is adversely affected by the ‘lack of data to properly assess performance’. Governments have been collecting and reporting on government-funded training since 1994, but lacked information about the private training market. This desire for increased data drove the implementation of Total VET Activity reporting from 2014 (for example, National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2018a) and is also repeated in a number of the proposals contained in the most recent national review of VET (for example, Joyce 2019, p. 125).

The main story line in act two illustrates how the object of technical and further education was made knowable so that the Commonwealth Government could intervene in the educational space between schools and universities. The efforts to achieve greater national consistency, policy responsiveness and financial stability in the sector also exposed the second theoretical proposition - VET is an essentially contested concept (Gallie 1956, p. 211) meaning it is characterised by widespread agreement on the concept, such as adult education, apprenticeships, lifelong learning or even VET itself, but not on how to attain it.

At the start of act two in the early 1970s, the Commonwealth Government was presented with two policy options for increasing youth employment and post-school education and training options which reflected the essentially contested nature of this object. The [Kangan Report (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974, p. xviii)] ‘adopted the educational and social purpose of technical and further education as the more appropriate’ while the [Cochrane Report’s alternative was for ‘one national labour market training scheme’ that would ‘be contained within a single administrative authority’ (Department of Labour 1974, p. 49). The continual switching of ministerial and governance responsibilities for VET that is described in the landmark documents confirms that this contestation between education and employment portfolios for control of the sector remains alive and well as does the debate on the relative merits of national, jurisdictional or shared responsibility for VET policy and funding.

Act two's adoption of the public policy suite that created TAFE institutions was accomplished by a mechanism that has been described as ‘institutional layering’; this involves ‘the grafting of new elements onto an otherwise stable institutional framework’ (Thelen 2004, p. 35). In accepting the points raised in many of the submissions to the [Kangan Review of Technical and Further Education it was assumed that the ‘further’ in TAFE would include ‘adult education’, ‘general education’ and ‘vocational education’ leading to direct employment in some cases or the generic capacity to embrace change more readily (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974, p. xxi). The institutional layering produced TAFE colleges that assumed responsibility for traditional adult education, apprenticeships, recreation/leisure courses, arts colleges, migrant English language programs as well as replacing the more traditional library functions associated with the various colleges of arts,
mechanics institutes and Workers Educational Associations.

The third act relies upon one last theoretical perspective and also reiterates a common theme that is evident throughout the entire performance. Institutional development occurs through ‘ongoing political negotiation’ (Thelen 2004, p. 35). ‘A second mechanism through which institutions evolve is through conversion, as the adoption of new goals or the incorporation of new groups into the coalitions on which the institutions are founded can drive change in the functions these institutions serve or the role they perform’ (Thelen 2004, p. 36).

The broad and bi-partisan political acceptance of competition policy and the importance of opening up the provision of public and human service delivery to competitive market forces converted the TAFE institutions from a broadly-based monopoly provider to being but one of thousands of training providers operating in a fully contestable and regulated market (Wheelahan 2016, p. 188). Many other organisations such as industry associations, employer groups, group training organisations and for-profit corporations also altered their operations in order to participate in the progressively more open VET market and to gain access to public funding. By viewing the performance of VET as an institution and giving it a role in government education bureaucracies, arguments can be made for a joined up tertiary education sector (for example, Bradley et al. 2008). On the other hand, VET cast as an employment program places it in a different ministry and government department in order to deliver ‘a direct pathway in Australia’s labour market’ (Cash 2019).

Finally, the story about the place of VET that unfolds in acts two and three of this play presents two examples of the successful public policy development and implementation. The creation of TAFE institutions is the first achievement, while the introduction of open, contestable markets is the second. Both of these have met the three criteria of policy success:

1. ‘it demonstrably creates widely valued social outcomes, through

2. design, decision-making and delivery processes that enhance both its problem-solving capacity and its political legitimacy; and it

3. sustains this performance for a considerable period even in the face of changing circumstances’ (Luetjens, Mintrom and ’t Hart 2019, p. 8).

**Act one: multiplicity and difference of the pre-1970s**

Thelen (2004, p. 31) proposes that skill formation is a crucial component in the institutional constellations that define the different varieties of capitalism in advanced market democracies. The state plays a crucial role in establishing the power of key actors and in influencing the kinds of coalitions that are likely to come together, thus shaping the landscape in which training institutions are constructed. The development of and growth in human capital is a defining feature of the nation-building experience. In order to impose a European-style of economic and social development onto the Australian landscape, public policy has continually relied upon achieving a balance between setting appropriate levels of skilled labour migration against the capacity of the former English colonies to train their residents.

It has been argued that proposals by South Australia to import labour to develop its Northern Territory in contravention of the racially discriminatory policies of the various colonies made
federation and national control over immigration a political imperative because it was 'the one issue that appealed to the average citizen' (Barnard 1962, p. 452). Indeed, the first substantive legislation enacted by the Commonwealth Parliament, *The Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, symbolically set out the White Australia policy and 'marked the imposition of a southern solution on Northern Australia' (Markus 2003, p. 175). The narrative that was being used to unite the various factional interests into supporting a federated governance model depended upon this certain knowledge of the superiority of white Europeans (Price 1939). One consequence of this urgent federation was that responsibility for education policy remained explicitly in the hands of the newly designated States. Another result was that adult education policy would not be developed from a national perspective; instead it manifested itself through each State always thinking 'it knew best and [preferring] to differ from rather than emulate arrangements over their borders' (Whitelock 1974, p. 13).

At the macro-level of national policy development, the place of VET has always been considered in relation to the levels and specifics of the skilled migration program. From 1905 and the rapid expansion of the railways (and their idiosyncratic gauges determined by each State), public inquiries into skill shortages resulted in the development of assisted immigration schemes that were eventually extended into manufacturing industries as well (Butlin, Barnard and Pincus 1982, p. 64). Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, these programs of assisted immigration became the 'primary technique to enhance skilled human capital' (Butlin, Barnard and Pincus 1982, p. 102).

Increasingly, following World War One, State governments supported technical education by institutionalising the former apprenticeship procedures of unions and employers (Kell 1994). Prior to this, the focus had been on primary education with skeleton provision of elitist secondary and university systems. Alongside the elite high school populations of the 1930s, the States expanded the number and range of technical schools and colleges to cater for an administratively contrived grouping of students that could not gain entry into high schools (Butlin, Barnard and Pincus 1982, p. 103) thus producing a subsidised supply of technically trained workers for private business (Butlin, Barnard and Pincus 1982, p. 187). This need for, and private industry's expectation of, large-scale public action to provide skilled labour was but one manifestation of a particular Australian relationship between public and major private interests that came to be known as 'colonial socialism' (Butlin, Barnard and Pincus 1982, p. 13).

During World War Two, the Australian Government commissioned the Duncan report 'on the post-war future of Australian adult education' (Whitelock 1973, p. iv). It found that 'Australian adult education was a threadbare, inadequate, chronically poverty-stricken affair; very much at the bottom of the educational pecking order and its weakness was compounded by state parochialism' (Whitelock 1973, p. iii). Each State had jealously protected its constitutional right to conduct education policy that had been granted as result of federation in 1901. However, the main recommendations for major interventions into adult education through the provision of federal funding, leadership and policy never saw the light of day. It is reported that Prime Minister Chifley's response was that he did not wish 'to buy into a fight with the States' on the issue of Federal control of the adult educational system as recommended in the report (Whitelock 1973, p. v). During and immediately following World War Two, the Commonwealth Government's foray into education and training began in earnest through its
funding of the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme. This program was delivered through the state-based technical schools and colleges and 'produced some tens of thousands of fully qualified tradesmen' (Commonwealth-State Committee of Inquiry Into Apprenticeship 1954, p. 11).

In response to the large scale migration program into Australia that followed World War Two, the adult education sector was tasked with the responsibility to meet the English language needs of migrants both pre- and post-arrival into the country (Rooth 1973, p. 186). In what would become a familiar model of VET federalism, in 1951 the Commonwealth Government first assumed responsibility for the development, management, financial control and professional advice on the technical aspects of language teaching. The State Governments in turn provided enrolment services for the migrants, appointed the teachers, arranged classroom facilities, corrected correspondence and supervised delivery on a day to day basis (Rooth 1973, p. 186). The Wright Report (Commonwealth-State Committee of Inquiry Into Apprenticeship 1954, p. 25) identified three sources for the supply of skilled tradesmen: apprenticeship, adult entry and migration. The review found that 'apprenticeship is still the most satisfactory method of providing a stream of skilled tradesmen for industry' and was 'opposed to any other method of entry into the skilled trades, except for the admittance of suitable qualified migrant tradesmen' (p. 25).

The VET-immigration nexus was also specifically addressed in the landmark Tregillis Report (1969, p. 80) which found that Australian industry's demands for skilled labour could not be met solely through increased migration and that 'consequently there is a need to take steps in Australia to update our own training methods with a view to meeting a greater part of this demand from within our own country'. At the macro-policy level, the level of domestic supply of human capital still remains attached to considerations about the types and levels of skills that are imported into the country as determined by migration policy priorities. In 2017, two-thirds of the migrants (some 111,000 persons) admitted to Australia came because they were 'targeting national workforce needs' (Doherty 2018). This historic conceptual link has again recently been highlighted by the Australian Government's imposition of a levy on applications for certain classes of skilled migration visas in order to fund the domestic training of apprentices through the Skilling Australians Fund (Department of Education and Training 2018).

Another recurring plot deals with technological change providing a rationale for the provision of post-school education and training. The Wright Committee's (Commonwealth-State Committee of Inquiry Into Apprenticeship 1954, p. 5) terms of reference asked the first national review into Australian apprenticeships to consider 'the development of technical training, technological changes and other relevant circumstances'. Similarly, the Martin Report (Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia 1964, p. 1) concluded that education should be regarded as an investment that would yield 'significant economic benefits through increasing the skills of the population and through accelerating technological changes' and that there is a 'need to retrain those whose occupational skills who have been outmoded by technological advances' (p. 4). The Tregillis Report (1969, p. 69) also found that developments in technology meant that a worker would have to 'acquire new skills' and 'change his occupation' a number of times during their working life.

By the early 1970s, the curtain was falling on act one and the dominance of the chronically
The place of VET in the education and employment policy landscape

disparate provision of VET by the States. Financing adult education in Australia was 'a matter of perennial despair' and 'chronic shortage of money was perhaps the central feature of Australian liberal adult education' (Whitelock 1974, pp. 299-300). In the late 1960s technical and further education received lower per student public funding than schools and universities 'despite industry's long recognised and highly publicised need for skilled workers' (Butlin, Barnard and Pincus 1982, p. 217). The Tregillis Report (1969, pp. 80-4) suggested that this low level of funding precipitated 'a fall in the intake of apprentices in Australia'; that 'in Australia, governments are not providing sufficient funds for industrial training' and 'the amount of money spent by employers on the training of skilled workers in Australia is small compared to their counterparts in Europe'.

Whitelock (1974, p. 301) observed that 'the amount of public money made over to adult education in any society is a crude but effective gauge of the respect in which it is held' thus identifying a plot that prominently features in all three acts. The Wright Review described a group of 'difficult trades' that were 'unattractive' to apprentices (pp. 37-8) and suggested that the trade unions could 'publicise the value of apprenticeship and enhance the prestige of the skilled tradesman' (Commonwealth-State Committee of Inquiry Into Apprenticeship 1954, p. 50). The Martin Report (Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia 1964, pp. 164-5) noted that technical colleges were 'under-valued' and there was a 'need to strengthen the technical college system of education and to emphasise the status of these institutions in the eyes of the community' to counteract 'a snobbish regard for the status symbol of a bachelor degree' (p. 129). Due to path dependency, there is a strong case to be made that the low level of esteem accorded to VET has become a self-fulfilling prophecy (for example, Business Council of Australia 2018, p. 17).

Act two: knowing VET at the national level from the early 1970s

The second act has a very crowded stage with lots of colour and motion in response to the rather dismal scene at the end of the first act. The landmark documents provide, in hindsight, two different yet complementary scripts that were being performed in the period from 1974 to 1987. In order to attract Commonwealth Government funding for VET, it had to be made 'knowable' to its agencies and their ministers. As described in the backdrop, the process of creating a problem that can be solved by governments intrinsically takes place in a way that aligns with a predetermined, path dependent solution. The Kangan Report provided one script that was neatly summarised early in the report. 'The concept central to this report is the provision of unrestricted access to post school education through government maintained or administered institutions' that were not universities or colleges of advanced education (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974, p. xvii).

The problem was presented as any barrier to recurrent/lifelong access to education and the solution was to create a new set of TAFE institutions owned by the States and financially supported by the national government. The creation of organisational structures that sat between schools and the other post-school institutions allowed the bureaucracy to deal with a type of entity that was different yet familiar. This resulted in a 'national identity for TAFE' that finally placed this sector on the national policy agenda (Goozee 2013, p. 127). For many in the audience of the current play, there are fond memories of the period 1975-1982 which was characterised by growth for TAFE brought about by Commonwealth Government capital and recurrent funding.
This ‘golden age’ saw TAFE being ‘held in high esteem by governments’ as it had acquired ‘an identifiable role in the education spectrum’ (Goozee 2001, p. 38). In order for the Federal Government to achieve national policy priorities in return for its financial resourcing, federalist negotiations and indirect influence were required on the part of the various governments. For some, ‘the place of VET’ performance is best remembered as the role played by TAFE institutes (for example, Kinsman 2009; Wheelahan 2016) and a perceived need to revisit the script developed by Kangan (Guthrie and Clayton 2018, p. 8). Regardless of subsequent events, the development of TAFE institutions can be considered a public policy success because they made the sector knowable to the Commonwealth Government and claimed a place for VET on an educational spectrum.

In the opening scenes of act two, there were other actors simultaneously giving quite a different performance from Kangan’s access problem and structured institutional solution by presenting governments with an alternative way of knowing VET. This was presented in the Cochrane Report (Department of Labour 1974). In this script, VET could alternatively be known as an employment-related program, a scheme or a system that could be rationally controlled by Government agencies under ministerial direction. For the Department of Labour (1974, p. 17) the problem was the impact of ‘technological and scientific innovations, poverty and other social problems’ on employment and the solution would be to collapse many different schemes into a single National Employment Training Scheme under this agency’s control (Department of Labour 1974, p. 26).

This script portrayed educational institutions to be ‘inherently difficult’ when it came to making ‘rapid changes’ (Department of Labour 1974, p. 11) and apprenticeship processes as high cost, slow and lacking flexibility (p. 28). Cochrane also revisited the related matter of immigration as a source of skilled employees and found it to be the ‘second best’ option in deference to an ‘adequate labour market training scheme; ‘training should be available to the extent possible as a prophylactic to those who need it’ (Department of Labour 1974, p. 9).

Unlike Kangan’s TAFE, Cochrane’s prophylaxis did not capture widespread support as a way of describing the place of VET but, regardless, the Commonwealth Government utilised both ways of knowing VET and its place in public policy.

For the remainder of act two, the various landmark documents provided scripts that either supported the place of VET understood as an educational institution or as a labour market training scheme. For example, the Fleming Report (Technical and Further Education Council: Staff Development Advisory Committee 1978, p. 147) proposed teacher preparation programs for ‘TAFE teachers’ in order to develop effective education practitioners that would further enhance the educational institution perspective at the expense of labour market standpoints. The extensive Williams Report into the education system (Committee of Inquiry into Education and Training 1979) and its linkages to employment also continued to utilise the institutional understanding of the place of VET.

Williams’s recommendation for the establishment of ‘a National Centre for Research and Development in Technical and Further Education’ (Committee of Inquiry into Education and Training 1979, p. iii) directly addressed another recurring matter in the place of VET story - government’s need for data and information in order to know VET which led to the formation of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. The scripts provided by the four landmark reports from the Tertiary Education Commission covering the period from 1979 to
1987 also rely upon the Kangan-inspired understanding of the place of VET as a series of state-based educational institutions (for example, Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission 1978). The first report notes that ‘technical education, a previously neglected area, has been included in the new Commission and has been given priority in funding’ (Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission 1978, p. 157).

While Kangan was a hard act to overshadow, the alternative performance on the place of VET understood as a series of labour market training schemes was still being played out on stage. The introduction of the Australian Traineeship System as a result of Kirby’s (1985) youth-focused inquiry into labour market programs demonstrated that government could simultaneously know VET in these two different ways. Australia Reconstructed (Department of Trade, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and Trade Development Council (TDC) 1987, p. 109) also made a very strong case to understand VET’s place in terms of a series of integrated programs whose guiding principles were encapsulated by the phrase ‘active labour market policies’. The most striking aspect of active labour market policies is the emphasis placed on skill formation, skill enhancement, skill flexibility and overall training linked to reductions in labour market segmentation and payment of unemployment benefits as a last resort (Department of Trade, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and Trade Development Council (TDC) 1987, p. 107). As a result of this study tour to Europe, the findings from Australia Reconstructed would have a major influence on federal ministers for years to come as they determined the subsequent place of VET that emerges in the next act.

In the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission’s (1987, p. 5) final report before being disbanded in 1987, the national ‘need to upgrade the skill base’ and ‘provide opportunities for workers to obtain new skills associated with technological developments’ carried over from act one and was a major rationale for having the TAFE institutions. Likewise, in spite of knowing the place of VET as an organisational structure, a scheme or both, similar public policy problems to those seen at the end of the previous act were found by the Commission to have persisted:

- ‘TAFE is not able to meet the total demand for its services’ (p. 4)
- ‘the triennium [1985-87] has been marked by a decline in real terms in the level of Commonwealth grants to TAFE’ due to ‘severe problems facing the economy’ (p. 6)
- ‘much of the teaching equipment in TAFE is outdated and in poor condition’ (p. 23)
- ‘unsafe and obsolete accommodation is still a common feature of older colleges’ (p. 22) and
- ‘TAFE courses provide an alternative and more openly vocational route to the labour market, but they have been under-resourced and stigmatised as second class’ (Marginson 1993, p. 148).

**Act three: programs, competition and governance from the mid-1980s**

The current act is scripted through a plethora of landmark documents in which knowing ‘VET as an educational institution’ moves aside, giving centre stage to ‘VET as programs’ in order to deliver a broad suite of micro-economic reforms championed by the Commonwealth Government. The new role for VET was broadly accepted by the States and Territories in exchange for national funding to implement the new agendas aligned to workforce and
industrial award restructuring (Deveson 1990). From the late 1980s, a series of discussion papers, reports and policy documents brought together a holistic set of beliefs about the place of VET. This collection of scripts continues to provide the core VET public policy discourse some 30 years later.

Because VET is an essentially contested concept, different policy options have always been available to stakeholders and decision-makers. Even though the State and Commonwealth Governments had accepted Kangan’s prioritisation of state-owned educational institutions to meet emerging skills needs throughout act one, those who championed ‘an active manpower policy’ also kept an alternative vision alive by advocating for the recommendations of the Cochrane Report (Department of Labour 1974) and the necessity of using ‘training as an instrument of a labour market policy’ (Cameron 1974). The observations and recommendations from Australia Reconstructed (Department of Trade, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and Trade Development Council (TDC) 1987) were widely embraced by both the trade unions and the federal government and were evident in the landmark reports of the late 1980s.

For example, Skills for Australia (Dawkins and Holding 1987, p. 4) positions education and training as a response to ‘technological change’ linked to ‘productivity growth’ by improving the ‘quality, depth and flexibility of our labour force skills’. This report also finds that Australia ‘can no longer rely on one of our traditional responses to meeting skilled labour shortages - ready resort to overseas recruitment’ (Dawkins and Holding 1987, p. 12). By positioning TAFE as but one of dozens of national labour market programs, this landmark document provides a very different script for the actors. It problematises two matters that will come to dominate the VET production throughout the remainder of this act.

The first is the desire to engage a more diverse range of training providers to compete against TAFE in order ‘to broaden the present infrastructure for vocational education and training’; this was to be facilitated by the second matter which mandates changes to governance arrangements in the sector by consolidating ‘administrative responsibility for the new TAFE program within the new Department of Employment, Education and Training’ (Dawkins and Holding 1987, pp. 38-9). As noted in the backdrop, problems are intrinsically represented in a manner that has a particular solution offering a best fit. In the case of VET conceived of as a program, the twin problems of competition were to be resolved through the creation of contestable markets for public funding and governance arrangements that facilitated Commonwealth Government ministerial control over these markets. The federalist approaches associated with ‘VET as educational institutions’ policies were pushed to the background by the now pervasive ‘VET as a program’ paradigm.

One further matter canvassed in Skills for Australia (Dawkins and Holding 1987, p. 13) returns to the perennial problem of funding; ‘there is an urgent need to reverse the long-term trend for the public sector to meet an ever-increasing share of total financial responsibility for training’. The various plots and sub-plots associated with the determination of who pays and who benefits from VET run throughout the entire play. The topic of industry’s contribution was the subject of its own landmark report Industry training in Australia (Dawkins 1988b) which flagged the rather short-lived policy experiment of a training guarantee levy.

While most of this production is about successful public policy development and implementation, governments have been unable to significantly change the colonial socialist
expectation on the part of industry that it is government's responsibility to provide skilled labour. The demand for increased public funding of apprenticeships made by the three national peak employer associations (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, AI Group and Business Council of Australia 2017) and the Business Council of Australia's (2018, pp. 28-9) proposal for a Lifelong Skills Account based on government and individual, but not industry, contributions exemplify the path dependency of this unique Australian relationship between public and private interests that has its origins in the 19th century's colonial socialism.

The main themes that support the dominance of VET as a program policy framing were revisited in A changing workforce (Dawkins 1988a). The impact of technology and global competition (p. 1), the consequent need to retrain workers (p. 2), labour market programs that are flexible and responsive (p. 3); limited public funding to support changed government education and training policies (p. 4), increased competition for TAFE, reform of the sector and diversification of provision (pp. 20-1) and consolidated governance of employment, education and training programs (p. 41) reinforced the preferred script that was sent to the State and Territory Governments. In recognising the rise to policy dominance of positioning VET as one of a series of programs, Dawkins (1989, p. 3) summarised:

reflecting these new realities, Government education and training polices of recent years have emphasised the need for a more active and responsive contribution by the education and training system to the satisfaction of wider economic, social and labour market needs.

Unlike Chifley's 1940s response to the recommendation to take on national responsibility for adult education for fear of antagonising the States (Whitelock 1973), Prime Minister Keating had no such reservations in the early 1990s. The now habitual storyline of VET as a program was reiterated in the major macro-economic policy statement One Nation. In a unilateral offer to the State and Territory Governments, the Commonwealth Government proposed 'to take full funding responsibility for the development of a new and expanded system of institutes of vocational education' supported by arrangements that 'will allow for flexible use of funds through both public and private providers as a more diverse and competitive training market emerges' (Keating, P 1992, p. 55). This action was anticipated to transform underfunded 'TAFE into a new, higher status, better-resourced system of institutes of vocational education' (Keating, P 1992, p. 56).

While this offer appeared to return the focus of policy to institutions, all of the rest of the statement dealt with labour market programs and training providers' role in delivering them. In the end, the various governments could not agree on a suitable funding arrangement and a compromise solution was reached later in 1992; the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) was established through which 'the States and Commonwealth would jointly fund the national training system' (Goozee 2013, pp. 353-4). The stage was now set for an increasingly national governance mechanism to manage a series of economically determined set of VET programs to be delivered in a more contestable training market (Australian National Training Authority 1993, p. 12). VET would be one of 'a set of mutually reinforcing' policies and programs to enable Australia 'to sustain a high rate of economic and employment growth and reduce the unemployment rate' (Keating, P 1994, p. 7). The sub-plot of active labour market policy, first introduced in Australia Reconstructed, resurfaces in Working Nation (Keating, P 1994, p. 6) which outlines a major increase in employment and training programs to be 'partly
offset by savings of $800 million in unemployment allowances’.

The landmark documents from the late 1980s and early 1990s provided a number of increasingly complex scripts that placed VET as part of a broad national economic narrative directed by a series of reforms to policies and programs. One of the early pieces of work commissioned by ANTA resulted in the FitzGerald Report (1994) which sought to determine how well the many reforms had been enacted. The report found an ‘apparent lack of strong business support for the reforms’ (the exception being competency-based training), ‘key elements in the chain of reform not working well together’ and that ‘the current concept of the training market is too limited’ (FitzGerald 1994, p. iii). In order to improve the training market, FitzGerald (1994, p. 81) recommended that the VET sector be subjected to the wider policy agenda of micro-economic reform associated with the national competition policy described in the Hilmer Report (Hilmer, Rayner & Taperell 1993).

In addition, FitzGerald (1994, p. 81) recommended the application of New Public Management principles to the VET sector. This emerging methodology for the way public agencies implement government policies and programs separated central government roles of purchasing, policy-setting and regulation from actual service delivery - a task best done in response to competitive pressures (Hill & Hupe 2002, p. 110). This landmark document finally and explicitly demonstrated the significance of considering VET as a program that delivers a government-funded human service. There was a now clear public policy rationale for VET delivery to be cast in a new light as something that could be outsourced and privatised through the operation of a competitive training market.

The Commonwealth Government widely and enthusiastically adopted New Public Management techniques including the selling of government business enterprises, outsourcing many types of service provision, creating contestable markets for the allocation of public funds and establishing market regulations which encouraged private and for-profit businesses to compete in order to improve efficiency, improve quality, lower costs and increase user choice (Keating, M 2004). For example, the former Commonwealth Employment Service was disbanded and its various programs were contracted out in a world first. Australia is ‘the only OECD country to outsource the entire delivery of its publicly funded employment services’ in a program currently known as Jobactive (The Senate Education and Employment References Committee 2019, p. 31).

In spite of the importance of presenting ‘VET as a labour market program’ so that it could be delivered in a contestable market, the landmark Enterprising Nation (Karpin 1995) demonstrated that the essentially contested conceptual nature of VET because ‘VET as an educational institution’ had not left the stage. In order to address perceived deficiencies on the part of Australian business managers and their capacity to respond to global economic trends and technological changes, the report first evokes the notion of VET as an educational institution. ‘The TAFE system must perform effectively’ in order to raise the skills of Australia’s frontline managers, ‘as it is the only system available throughout the entire nation’ (Karpin 1995, p. 20). Later in the report, VET as a program is utilised because ‘the Task Force’s basic philosophy is that markets are the best mechanisms to achieve optimum allocation of resources and quality outcomes’ (Karpin 1995, p. 53). The influence of colonial socialism but also the desires for contestable markets were evident in proposals to increase the managerial skills of 100,000 managers through ‘training to be funded by the Commonwealth in a manner
which allows the enterprise to select the provider which most suits its requirements’ (Karpin 1995, p. 34).

*The Report of the Review of the ANTA Agreement* (Taylor 1996, p. 14) focused on the governance of the VET system, finding that ‘progress under the agreement has been satisfactory’ and that ANTA should remain as ‘the appropriate organisational structure to manage the national vocational education and training system’. The insatiable desire for more data to help governments know the sector was reinforced. ‘National VET data are inadequate for performance measurement and assessment, public accountability and system management’ (Taylor 1996, p. 8). The *ANTA review* also found that there is a continued role for taxpayer funding of VET on a range of grounds including public benefit, equity and broad social considerations (Taylor 1996, p. 116).

As in the *Karpin report*, it was also considered ‘that there is a clear role for a publicly owned TAFE within the VET system’ in spite of ‘the current tendency for government to purchase rather than provide services’ (Taylor 1996, p. 119). In addition, it was also found that ‘competition has a role to play in an efficient VET system’ and governments should not ‘rely on a single service provider’ but should ‘make selective use of market mechanisms to stimulate competition and efficiency’ (Taylor 1996, p. 121). The recommended resolutions to the contested nature of VET included the development of a national policy on VET competition, efficient market regulation, separating training purchaser and provider functions, putting TAFE on a proper commercial basis and promoting competition and market-like mechanisms (Taylor 1996, p. 128). The position of knowing ‘VET as programs’ was strongly reinforced by Taylor’s review due to the fact that one of the three roles given to ANTA in the national agreement was ‘to take over a range of programs from the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training’ (Taylor 1996, p. 3).

While the main focus of the *Bradley Review* (2008, p. xiii) was on higher education it did so from a more *Kangan*-like positioning of educational institutions as the main performers. It also proposed the repositioning of the VET sector’s institutions as a part of a tertiary education continuum that includes all higher education providers (Bradley et al. 2008, pp. 180-2). In terms of the governance of this joined up system, the review returns to Keating’s *One Nation* suggestion: ‘the panel considers that it is now time for the Australian Government to take responsibility for the broad tertiary education and training system in Australia’ (Bradley et al. 2008, p. 183). As this act continued, repeating the scenario and plot for national control of the VET system still did not achieve a positive response from those in the audience with the capacity to change public policy settings.

The final two landmark reports that provide the scripts used to describe the place of VET are strongly focused upon the problems of governing an envisaged tertiary education system. Unlike the *Bradley Review*’s higher education perspective, *Skills Australia* (2009, 2010) is informed from a VET viewpoint. Instead of the two storylines that have dominated this act so far, educational institutions and labour market programs, these reports set out a managerial rationale for the existence of Skills Australia and its role of being ‘responsible for presenting this advice to the Ministerial Council through the Commonwealth Minister’ on strategic policy, planning and investment decisions for the tertiary sector (Skills Australia 2009, p. 5). Another role for Skills Australia included providing advice to the Australian Government on the selection criteria used in the General Skills Migration program to attract highly skilled
migrants in occupations which cannot be met through training or reskilling Australian residents (Skills Australia 2009, p. 54).

In claiming the governance space left vacant following the Australian Government's decision to abandon the ANTA agreement (Noonan 2016, p. 7), Skills Australia identified a wide range of VET system issues, including the long-standing policy angst associated with TAFE's role in the contestable training markets, funding sources and system responsiveness to technological changes. The proposals discussed and recommended by Skills Australia are particularly administrative in nature and were aimed at resolving mostly operational problems - many of which date back to the start of adult education in Australia.

In reviewing the now long-running act three, it is time to recapitulate what we have witnessed in a performance that has been characterised by much activity and competing narratives. Certainly, the introduction of open and contestable markets for the delivery of VET services brought literally thousands of extra players into the act. Unlike act two which saw a national training system based upon institutional layering of a range of functions onto existing state-owned technical colleges to create TAFE, the more recent development of VET took place through the process of conversion. The creation of the competitive VET markets as a means of allocating public funding saw many organisations that were created for one set of purposes come, in time, to be turned to wholly new ends (Thelen 2004, p. 36). TAFEs were expected to convert from large public sector bureaucracies to being nimble and responsive market-driven providers in a major transformation of their role in this act. Likewise, community and adult education providers, group training organisations, some trade unions and many private companies changed their purpose to incorporate the provision of training.

‘Arguably, the creation of a national training market has been stunningly successful’ (Wheelahan 2016, p. 188). As with the public policy achievement of TAFE described in act two, the introduction of the various contestable training markets in order to increase diversity and choice of provider in order to reap the economic benefits of competition has been another success for public policy development and implementation. While the use of markets for the delivery of public services remains contested (Pusey 1991; Quiggin 2013, 2017), it is clear that the place of VET in open markets has driven the cost of delivery down (Noonan 2016, p. 7) and increased the number and diversity of niche and specialist training providers who are successfully trading (Korbel & Osborne 2019). And it also highlighted the difficulties of creating and regulating markets as exemplified by the VET FEE-HELP program (The Auditor-General 2016) and illegal behaviour by some providers (Australian Securities and Investments Commission 2019).

In spite of the effective achievement of public policy outcomes in the VET sector, the final act has been characterised by the sub-plot that casts federalism as an unsurmountable obstacle to real progress. Many of the policy recommendations contained in these landmark documents resort to a single means of tackling this barrier - giving increased control of VET to the Australian Government (for example, Bradley et al. 2008; Keating, P 1992). The seeming incapacity of the various governments to make federalist approaches work in VET might be the result of path dependency that dates back to the days of State control of adult education, Certainly, federalism can be made to work. Successful Australian examples include the introduction of national competition policy and gun control (Luetjens, Mintrom & ’t Hart 2019). It is also clear that the implementation and consequent alterations to the marketised
Victorian Training Guarantee, provided lessons to the other States and Territories as they implemented their own versions of VET markets (General Purpose Standing Committee No. 6 2015, p. 16).

So, what is the current role for VET? Contemporary influences include some very familiar themes that have appeared numerous times in the production:

- 'Industry is being transformed by technology' and workers will need to acquire new skills and retrain to move into the new jobs that are going to be created as a result of industry 4.0 (Loveder 2017).
- 'VET and HE have a different role to play in Australian education and society, but VET is often seen as the second-class citizen' (Business Council of Australia 2018, p. 59).
- The number of government-funded students in the national training system fell from an all-time high of over 1.5 million in 2012 to just under 1.2 million in 2017 (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2018b, table 10).
- 'VET enrolments have declined to pre-2006 levels' (O'Connell & Torii 2016, p. 7) while 'expenditure in the VET sector has declined dramatically to below levels from 10 years earlier in real terms' in contrast to increased funding for schools and higher education - for universities by 45 per cent over the same period (pp. 3-4).

The most recent review of the VET sector follows a similar plot to that used by Skills Australia. The Joyce Review (2019, p. 30) reiterates the dominance of 'VET as a program' and focuses upon reforms to the management and administration of a marketised system in proposing a 6-point plan to 'strengthen quality assurance, speed up qualification development, simpler funding and skills matching, better careers information, clearer secondary school pathways and greater access for disadvantaged Australians'. Joyce also notes two other long-lived discourses: the first is the interaction with skilled migration programs (Joyce 2019, p. 10) while the second points out the public funding priority accorded to apprenticeships in spite of the relative low numbers of students - about 8 per cent (Joyce 2019, p. 11).

**What next?**

Given the fact that all three acts have produced remarkably similar outcomes characterised by deficiencies in student numbers, resources and esteem, in spite of having very different writers and scripts, suggests that there are a variety of other public policy matters impacting upon the place of VET. With the latest national VET review focused upon the technical performances of the various actors in the system, it seems unlikely that an act four is in the immediate policy future in favour of revisiting some previously enacted scenes in an effort to improve the performances of key actors by giving them slightly modified roles and scripts. Those in the audience should prepare to be treated to an encore and reprises.
References


Australian Securities and Investments Commission 2019, 19-124MR Federal Court finds Vocation Ltd (In Liquidation) and its officers made misleading statements to market, Australian Securities and Investments Commission.

Barnard, M 1962, A history of Australia, Angus and Robertson, Sydney.


Department of Trade, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) & Trade Development Council (TDC) 1987, *Australia reconstructed: ACTU/TDC mission to western Europe: a report by the mission members to the ACTU and the TDC*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.


The Senate Education and Employment References Committee 2019, *Jobactive: failing those it is intended to serve*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.


How to cite this paper