

A policy framework to support a new social settlement in
TAFE:
A paper commissioned by the John Cain Foundation

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Report summary

TAFE was established as a national sector of tertiary education by the Whitlam Labor Government, following a report by the Kangan Committee in 1974. The Whitlam Government's policies for TAFE were visionary and TAFE became part of our social infrastructure. TAFE contributed to regional social and economic development, and it supported social inclusion by providing individuals with access to vocationally oriented education that supported their individual development, helped them access good jobs, and helped them to contribute to their families, communities and society.

However, TAFE has been decimated by the failed experiment of the last 30 years in marketisation and through the imposition of narrow competency-based education qualifications. A new Federal Labor government will inherit a low trust vocational education system in which there has been a loss of confidence in vocational education qualifications, TAFE has been decimated, there has been a precipitous decline in publicly funded enrolments, fragmentation of the system, and ever increasing regulation to stamp out bad behaviour after it has occurred.

The vocational education market has comprehensively failed and cannot be fixed through adjusting settings. A for profit market results in a race for profits and a race to the bottom in quality. The competency-based training model of curriculum has also failed. It has facilitated the vocational education market through specifying fragmented competencies that can be bought and sold and through a narrow focus on specific skills needed for particular jobs. This model closes students' possibilities and options through being too narrow, and it is pointless because most graduates do not work in the intended occupation associated with their qualification, apart from regulated occupations such as nursing or the traditional trades.

A new model is needed which builds on a modernised Kangan vision, so that TAFE can once again contribute to sustainable regional social and economic development, to individual development and choice, and to building tolerant, socially inclusive communities. This paper, commissioned by the John Cain Foundation, offers elements of a new policy framework to rebuild TAFE and to build a high trusted vocational education system with trusted qualifications.

It argues that TAFE institutes are the local anchor institutions of the vocational education system and of their communities. They are the anchor of the vocational education system because they are *the* public institutions entrusted with fulfilling public policy objectives. They are the anchors of their communities because they build close links with employers and support the development of a high-skilled workforce; because of their close connections with local economic, social and cultural institutions; and, because of their ability to support and work with local disadvantaged communities.

The elements of a new policy framework include:

- The capabilities approach,¹ as the conceptual foundation for the vocational education system and qualifications. This emphasises the importance of TAFE as the local ‘mediating actor’ that links national and state policy with regional and local enactment. It also provides a framework for resourcing and funding, which emphasises resources for those who experience high levels of disadvantage so that they have similar opportunities to the rest of the community. In this report, we have used the term **productive capabilities** to link the capabilities approach to vocational education;
- **A new model for qualifications** that has three goals: 1. to support entry to and progression in the labour market; 2. to support educational pathways and lifelong learning; and 3. to widen access to education and support social inclusion by supporting disadvantaged students to enter higher-level studies and occupations, and by preparing citizens to live and work in their communities and in society. Using productive capabilities, vocational education qualifications would take the individual in their broad intended occupation as their starting point, rather than disaggregated units of competency;
- **Vocational streams**, which consist of linked occupations that share similar requirements and serve related purposes (for example, care occupations), and **vocations** which refers to shared knowledge and skills in occupations, to better link vocational education and the labour market;
- An enabling policy framework that seeks to build **communities of trust** based on partnerships between TAFE, local communities, and industry. An enabling policy framework needs to support institutional quality and teacher quality, and build intermediary bodies that link TAFE and regions and TAFE and industry;
- Rebuilding TAFE as the **anchor institutions** of the vocational education system, and of their regions and communities. TAFEs need to offer students a sufficiently comprehensive range of programs that enable them to realise their aspirations; develop qualifications that meet the needs of students, communities, local industries and regions; and, undertake research into the changing nature of work and develop curriculum and qualifications that will meet the needs of tomorrow as well as today. TAFEs need to be trusted to undertake these roles and funded appropriately to do so. This requires **block grants** that allow TAFEs discretion in how they meet these goals, rather than funding for specific programs which usually do not result in graduates working in their intended occupations; and,
- Investment in teacher development and teacher education qualifications so that teachers are supported to become **dual-professionals**, who are both industry experts and expert teachers, able to work with industry partners to anticipate future needs and to teach and support the most disadvantaged students to become successful learners, workers and citizens.

¹ Also referred to as the capability approach, or the human development approach. See the United Nations Development Programme (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/humandev>) and Stewart (2013).

Introduction – the Kangan legacy

TAFE was established as a national sector of tertiary education by the Whitlam Labor government following the report of the Kangan Committee in 1974 (Goozee, 2001). In tabling the report of the Kangan Committee to Parliament, then Education Minister Kim Beazley Sr. stated that:

The report envisages a major shift of emphasis. It abandons the narrow and rigid concept that technical colleges exist simply to meet the manpower needs of industry, and adopts a broader concept that they exist to meet the needs of people as individuals. (cited in Goozee, 2001: 27)

Two guidelines shaped the Kangan Committee's report: the first was that TAFE should support all individuals, regardless of their prior educational achievement, employment status or age, to develop as a member of society; and, the second was that a broad approach to technical and further education was more likely to create an environment to support individuals to achieve their vocational goals (Kangan, 1974: xvii).

The Whitlam government's policies for TAFE were visionary. TAFE developed as a national sector of tertiary education with a network of institutes and campuses throughout Australia that contributed to the Whitlam government's strategies for social inclusion and regional social and economic development, such as the Australian Assistance Plan. It became part of our social infrastructure.

45 years later

Some 45 years later, governments' vision for TAFE has diminished, and we have returned to ill-conceived rigid and narrow labour-force planning where governments seek to tie funding to programs for specific occupations, usually deemed to be 'in demand'. Unlike university students who have choice and can undertake publicly funded programs that meet their aspirations, vocational education students can get public funding only for a narrowly defined range of qualifications. TAFE is reeling from 30 years of changes to create a vocational education market and system in which it is forced to deliver low quality, fragmented competency-based qualifications in competition with for-profit providers. The scorched earth marketisation policies of the last 10 years in particular have resulted in a low trust, scandal plagued, fragmented system, and the decimation of TAFE.

About 29% of government funded vocational education graduates worked in the occupation associated with their qualification in 2018, and the low match between qualifications and jobs

has been persistent over many years (NCVER 2018a: Table 13).² In most fields, graduates do not work in the job associated with their qualification, apart from the highly regulated occupations such as nursing and the traditional trades. This reflects the way occupations and labour markets are constructed in liberal market economies such as Australia's, and no amount of further specifying the supply of qualifications will change the way the labour market constructs the demand for qualified workers.

Publicly funded training hours in vocational education rose by 6.3% in Australia from 2008 to 2017, but they declined by almost 26% for TAFE during this time, while they rose by 199% in private providers. TAFE's share of publicly funded enrolments in Australia in 2008 was almost 82%; by 2017 this had declined to 57%, after reaching a nadir of 50% in 2015 (NCVER 2018b: Derived from Table 12).³ Government funding per training hour declined by almost 13% between 2008 to 2016 (Wheelahan et al., 2018: 39).

Perhaps the most extreme example of the decimation of TAFE is in Queensland, where TAFE's share of publicly funded hours in 2017 was 32%, down from 82% in 2008, and the number of hours of publicly funded training it delivered declined by 48% in that time. In contrast, private providers share of publicly funded enrolments in Queensland rose from 16% in 2008 to 65% in 2017, and the number of publicly funded hours that they delivered rose by 431% in that time (NCVER 2018b: Derived from Table 12).

In 2008 in Victoria, TAFE's share of publicly funded hours in Victoria was 76%, and this collapsed to 36% in 2015 before recovering to 50% in 2017. Private providers' share of publicly funded hours in Victoria in 2008 was 14% before rising to 57% in 2014 and 2015, and then falling to 42% in 2017. The number of publicly funded hours delivered by TAFE in Victoria declined by 18% from 2008 to 2017, while they rose in private providers by 276% (NCVER 2018b: Derived from Table 12).⁴

TAFE's publicly funded hours in New South Wales declined by 27% from 2008 to 2017, and its vocational education system is smaller than that of Victoria's and has been since 2011, even though it is the most populous state (NCVER 2018b: Derived from Table 12). South Australia has experienced churn and chaos in its vocational education policies which has arguably brought TAFE in that state to its knees (Wheelahan, 2018).

Across Australia, thousands of teachers and education support staff have been sacked, and campuses closed (Manning, 2016). As teachers are sacked, expertise is lost and can't be renewed overnight. Under the VET-Fee HELP scheme students took out billions of dollars in

² The percentage for all VET graduates working in the intended occupation group as their training course was about 27% in 2018 (NCVER 2018c: Table 13). This includes all graduates who paid fees as well as government funded graduates.

³ In contrast, equivalent full-time student load in higher education rose by 34% (Wheelahan, Moodie, Lavigne, & Samji, 2018: 41).

⁴ Using 2008 as the base year in Victoria, private providers' number of publicly funded enrolments rose by 706% between 2008 and 2014.

loans for worthless qualifications. A new loans scheme replaced the corrupted VET-Fee HELP scheme but this restricts loans to a limited number of diplomas, deemed to be for 'in demand' occupations with putative skill shortages. Students can no longer get public support to do qualifications in many areas, such as journalism, performing or fine arts, fitness coaching to name a few (Medhora, 2018). Upfront fees have been increased dramatically. Enrolments have collapsed.

Labor's commitment

Labor has committed itself to reinvesting in and rebuilding TAFE if it wins the next federal election. A new Federal Labor government will inherit a low trust vocational education system in which there has been a loss of confidence in vocational education qualifications, TAFE has been decimated, there has been a precipitous decline in publicly funded enrolments, fragmentation of the system, and ever increasing regulation to stamp out bad behaviour after it has occurred.

If a new Labor government is to rebuild TAFE, like the Whitlam government, it will need a visionary approach in which TAFE is the local anchor institution that supports sustainable and socially inclusive regional social and economic development. The challenge will be to move from the current broken system to a high trust system with trusted qualifications that individuals, communities, employers, unions, and governments have reason to value, underpinned by TAFE as the anchor of the system, and supported by enabling institutions and frameworks that link TAFE and the labour market and communities.

Labor has promised that it will establish a 'once in a generation' review of tertiary education in Australia if it is elected. This review offers an opportunity to develop a coherent post-secondary education system in which vocational education and higher education play complementary roles, while supporting lifelong learning, occupational progression and social inclusion. However, if we are to develop a coherent tertiary education system, it is essential that we revisit and develop consensus about TAFE's role and purposes.

TAFE has a role that complements, but is different from, schools and universities. As a 'place-based' locally oriented institution, TAFE's role is to: meet the needs of its students, communities and industries; provide opportunities for individuals to realise their aspirations; anticipate how work is changing over the next 10 years; and, develop curriculum and qualifications that respond to these changes while meeting students' learning needs and aspirations so they can support their families and participate as full and contributing members of their communities and occupations.

The review will need to result in a new social settlement based on broad agreement about the purposes of vocational education to replace the current broken one. It will need to go beyond the tinkering that has characterised policy since the current system was implemented in the 1980s in futile efforts to get the current system to work. There have been many reviews, particularly in the last few years, to address problems in qualifications, system design, the

market, funding, and so forth, but each review has been conducted independently of the other and ignored the interdependencies between these components.

This aim of this paper is to contribute to the discussion about what a new social settlement in vocational education would look like. It has been commissioned by the John Cain Foundation as a contribution to the discussion about the future of TAFE and vocational education, its place within Australia's education system, and its contribution to society and the economy.

We have used the capabilities approach as the conceptual foundation of the paper. The capabilities approach is now a very influential approach in policy to evaluate the outcomes of policies and the extent to which they support human development and social justice. For example, it underpins the United Nations' Human Development Index (Stanton, 2007: 3). We have developed the concept of *productive capabilities* to apply the capabilities approach to TAFE and vocational education (Wheelahan, Buchanan, & Yu, 2015; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011, 2016).⁵ Productive capabilities are helpful in thinking about the aims and purposes of vocational education, funding and governance of vocational education, the role, purpose and design of qualifications, the implications for the sorts of institutions that TAFEs should be to achieve these purposes (Moodie, 2012; Moodie & Fredman, 2013; Wheelahan et al., 2015; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2016).

The next section of this paper outlines the capabilities approach and explains the implications for vocational education and TAFE. Following this, the paper discusses the elements of a new policy framework for vocational education. This includes discussion of the purpose of qualifications; vocational streams, vocations and productive capabilities; communities of trust; and, the role of TAFE as an anchor institution.

⁵ A fuller discussion of the capabilities approach and the way we have applied it to vocational education is in a conceptual paper commissioned by the John Cain Foundation in 2017 entitled: *Vocational education in crisis: why we need a new social settlement*.

Capabilities

The capabilities approach allows us to reimagine vocational education and the role of TAFE. It was first developed by the economist and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (1999) and the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2000).⁶ It is used to evaluate the outcomes of policies, the extent to which they support human development and social justice, and proposals for social change (Robeyns, 2005: 94). It is concerned with human flourishing and the broad social, economic, cultural and technological resources that are needed to support that. Its primary concern is the augmentation of human freedom, rather than the augmentation of human capital, although the latter may be one of the means necessary to support the former (Sen, 2007). However, Sen (2007: 99) explains that “the yardstick of assessment concentrates on different achievements.” Human capital focuses on the agency of individuals in augmenting production, whereas human capability focuses on “the ability – the substantive freedom- of people to lead the lives they have reason to value and to enhance the real choices they have” (Sen, 2007: 99). UNESCO (2002: 33) explains that the assessment of policies depends “not on the basis of their impact on incomes, but on whether or not they expand the real freedoms that people value” and that education is central to this process.

There are three main aspects to the capabilities approach. They are capabilities, functionings and agency (Bryson, 2015). Capabilities refers to the resources, capacities and abilities that individuals can draw upon to make choices about how they will live and love and what they value. Capabilities are relational; they refer to the *combination* of resources that individuals have access to that *together* make it possible for an individual to make choices. For example, a person who relies on a wheelchair for mobility is denied this if they live in an environment that has only stairs and not ramps and elevators as well. The capabilities approach was first taken up by the disabilities movement to argue that individuals may need different levels of resources if they were to have the same choices as people without disabilities (Burchardt, 2004). This is why the focus is not on equal access to resources, because “different people need different amounts and different kinds of goods to reach the same levels of well-being or advantage” (Robeyns, 2005: 97).

While capabilities are about *potential* and *choice*, functionings are about *outcomes* and achievement. They refer to the outcomes that ensue when individuals have deployed their capabilities in particular ways. Two people with the same set of capabilities may have different functionings or outcomes and achievements because of the choices they make (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Agency is fundamental to the capabilities approach. Bryson (2015: 557) explains that agency:

⁶ There are differences in Sen and Nussbaum’s approaches (see Wells, 2018), but in broad terms, both are concerned with human flourishing, and each is concerned with capabilities, functionings and agency.

“is an important addition because people do have choices to make between different combinations of functionings (or possible lives) in which they must therefore exercise agency. That is, people must not only have opportunity freedom (capability) but also agency to pursue those opportunities or not.”

Because capability is about freedom to choose, it means that agency can't be traded off against well-being. If choice is constrained, so too is agency. This means that there must be real options available that individuals can choose. This has particular implications for vocational education because it means that if students cannot follow their aspirations because they can't undertake an appropriate program, they are denied choice.

There are two more concepts that are key to the capabilities approach. The first refers to the *goods or services or resources* which provide the means to achieve functionings. The enabling factors that enable individuals to participate in vocational education need to be considered. This includes living in communities that are inclusive and safe, with adequate housing, health and education and access to the kinds of support that make participation in education possible, such as policies regarding fees or income support. The second refers to *conversion factors*, which refers to the characteristics of the society and environment in which people live (Bryson, 2015). These are the personal, social, economic, cultural and environmental factors that make it possible, for example, for people to get good jobs in which they can use the knowledge and skills they have developed in vocational education (Kjeldsen & Bonvin, 2015).

Productive capabilities

We have used the term *productive capabilities* to refer to the application of the capabilities approach to vocational education (Wheelahan et al., 2015; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2016). The capabilities approach has implications for vocational education for system design, governance, funding and qualifications. It means, as Kjeldsen and Bonvin (2015) explain, that the emphasis in policy will move to focus on capabilities rather than functionings. The aim is to enlarge choice to enable individuals to fulfil their aspirations. A focus on functionings implies that someone other than the student has determined what is good for them, and what outcomes they should have access to.

Because capabilities are fundamentally concerned about augmenting human freedoms, it is useful to consider what we mean by that in vocational education, and then consider issues of system design. This means we need to consider the individual student (and their communities) and the qualifications they undertake and then think about the kind of system and institutions that are needed to achieve those outcomes.

The individual in vocational education

Kjeldsen and Bonvin (2015: 25) argue that it makes a big difference for policy (as well as research) if the emphasis is on capabilities rather than functionings. They explain that “The objective will not be to adequately equip young people in terms of resources or skills and

competences but to provide them with capabilities, i.e. with as much real freedom to choose their way of living as possible.” Schröer (2015) distinguishes between employability and capability in considering the aims of vocational education in supporting disenfranchised young people in Europe. She argues that three categories of capabilities support young people to make real choices in their lives:

- Capability for *education*, which refers to “the real freedom to choose a training program or a curriculum one has reason to value.”
- Capability for *work*, which refers to “the real freedom of making the choice to undertake the job or activity one has reason to value.” And,
- Capability for *voice*, which refers to “the real freedom to express one’s wishes, expectations, desires etc. and make them count when decisions concerning oneself are made.” (Schröer, 2015: 369)

The implications for policy are that vocational education students should be able to make real choices about the types of programs that they undertake, just as university students do. Providing public funding for programs in areas deemed ‘in demand’ in the labour market restricts students’ choices to a narrow range of occupations and does not include any consideration of whether this reflects their choices.⁷ Apart the patronising character of such policies, it is also pointless and bad policy because most vocational education students do not end up working in the occupation associated with their qualification, with the exception of highly regulated occupations such as nursing or the regulated trades (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2017).

The role and purpose of qualifications

The capabilities approach has implications for the purpose of qualifications and for the nature of curriculum. Qualifications need to open up possibilities for students rather than narrow them. This requires a return to the Kangan vision in which the role and purpose of qualifications was to support individual development through vocationally oriented qualifications that supported students to engage in the kind of work they have reason to value. If qualifications are to achieve these goals then they need to provide students with access to or progression in the labour market; support them to undertake further studies in a related field within lifelong learning policy frameworks; and, support social inclusion and social justice by supporting students to contribute to their communities and to the development of their occupational field of practice. We elaborate this later in this paper.

The implications for curriculum are that students should have access to a rich curriculum that supports them in their vocational aspirations rather than the current rigid, narrow and fragmented competency-based model of curriculum. Currently, vocational education

⁷ As is explained by the Stop the TAFE Cuts Team (2018), such policies perpetuate: “an idea that working class students who undertake vocational education should only be able to access government funding in a narrow range of employer-determined courses, and should not have the same choices that their middle class cousins have at university.”

qualifications comprise units of competency that focus on workplace practices as they are now, which results in a:

[a] rigid backward mapping approach, in which the state of the art on the shop floor is the untouchable starting point for the definition of occupational competencies, leading to routinised job descriptions, in which the proactive and reflective worker is left out. (Biemans et al. cited in Brockmann, Clarke, Méhaut, & Winch, 2008: 237)

The result is that qualifications emphasise procedural knowledge and not theoretical knowledge, which results in the ‘supervised worker’ rather than the autonomous worker characteristic of the professions (Buchanan, Yu, Marginson, & Wheelahan, 2009). Vocational education students are excluded from access to the theoretical knowledge they need to make choices at work, support their occupational progression, and participate in debates and controversies in their occupation and in society (Wheelahan, 2015). In addition, as explained above, vocational education graduates do not, for the most part, work in the occupations associated with their qualifications (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2017), so it is pointless restricting them to units of competency related to occupations that they won’t work in. Narrowly defined qualifications restricts students’ choices rather than opening them up.

Productive capabilities

Vocational education needs to anticipate what work will look like in the future and not only the present, and to help students develop the knowledge and skills they need to be proactive autonomous workers who can exercise judgement. *Productive capabilities* is a broader notion that starts with the individual in the context of a broad field of practice. Rather than focus on individual workplace tasks and roles, curriculum needs to focus on the theoretical, technical and procedural knowledge that individuals need to engage in work in their broad field rather than a narrowly defined occupation, and to ensure they can contribute to their communities and participate in civic life in society.

Productive capabilities links the capabilities approach to vocations and vocational streams (Wheelahan et al., 2015; Wheelahan, Moodie, & Buchanan, 2012). A vocational stream refers to linked occupations that share knowledge and skills and practices, whereas vocations refers to the nature of practice. The ‘solution’ to the narrowness of current CBT qualifications is not generic skills or employability skills. Vocational qualifications based on generic skills or employability skills are arguably a watered down (and ultimately lower status) version of academic qualifications, and do not orient individuals to the fields of practice in which they will work. Rather, the concept of vocational streams and vocations has the potential to improve connections between vocational education and the labour market by providing students with the knowledge and skills they need to enter, move and progress in related occupations. We return to this point later in considering the institutional frameworks needed to mediate relations between vocational education and the labour market.

The importance of local actors: TAFE as the anchor of vocational education systems

The capabilities approach has implications for broader vocational education policies, governance, funding and the type of institutions that are needed to support individuals, communities and industries. It allows for an expanded view of vocational education to support “the development of human capabilities and functionings that individuals, communities and society at large have reason to value” (Tikly, 2013: 20). Tikly (2013: 25) explains that the capabilities approach “implies a focus on the institutional and cultural barriers that prevent inclusion of different groups”. It has implications for resourcing because it recognises that some groups will need higher levels of resources to achieve comparable capabilities as the basis for exercising choice in their lives. And, consequently, this has implications for policy, funding and governance.

Institutional frameworks and social partnerships underpin the development of capabilities. As capabilities are embedded in their social context and manifest differently in different contexts, they require local engagement with social partners, educational institutions and a nuanced understanding “of the different kinds and levels of resource input required by different groups of learners” (Tikly, 2013: 29). Bonvin and Farvaque (2006: 123) argue that the development of capabilities depends on contextually appropriate approaches in which local institutional actors are fundamental in supporting the development of capabilities. Without the ability to implement locally and contextually appropriate approaches, the capacity for agency is diminished. They argue “it is of the utmost importance to leave as much autonomy as possible to local actors...” They explain that top-down approaches make it difficult to engage in reflexive regulation in creating the conditions to support the development of contextually appropriate capabilities. However, they explain that this doesn’t mean the end of all forms of central intervention; rather, that local actors are consulted in the policy process (Bonvin & Farvaque, 2006: 136).

Supporting sustainable and inclusive social and economic development requires the development of strong local institutions that are *trusted* and *funded* to engage with their communities and employers. In turn, this requires the development of a system predicated on trust, rather than the current system which is based on increasing regulation in efforts to elicit compliance. High levels of surveillance and monitoring are needed at present, because in the for-profit market as it has developed in Australia, the point has been to make profits by lowering costs, standards and quality. It is time to return to a high trust system with TAFE as a trusted institution that has a responsibility to serve its local students, communities and industries, and the autonomy it needs to make decisions about the types of qualifications that are needed, the areas in which they are needed, and the means that are necessary to fulfil these goals.

Caveats in using the capabilities approach

The capabilities approach provides a framework to discuss the aims and purposes of vocational education, and to evaluate the policies and frameworks that are implemented to achieve these aims and purposes. However, it does not provide policy prescriptions on system design, policy and funding (Tikly, 2013). The development of substantive policies requires an understanding of the nature of the links between vocational education and the labour market, how students use their qualifications, and how students' transitions between vocational education and the labour market are mediated. It requires an analysis of the nature of inequality, disadvantage and discrimination and the kinds of programs and support frameworks that are needed to support students to succeed in vocational education.

Sayer (2011) explains that capabilities must be developed in context-sensitive and dependent ways, because without this there is a lack of attention to the social conditions and social arrangements that are needed to realise capabilities. This again points to the need for local TAFEs that have a deep understanding of their communities.

Moreover, it is important to resist moves to focus only on *internal* capabilities within individuals without also considering the conditions that are needed for their realisation. Capabilities are not just an individual attribute: they include the resources available to a person and their personal, social and environmental circumstances that make it possible for them to realise what they reasonably value. And, a focus on internal capabilities at the expense of external capabilities is likely to lead to victim-blaming if individuals are not able to realise their internal capabilities, by, for example, finding an appropriate job. For example, Sayer (2012: 583) explains that:

The tendency to imagine that training skilled workers produces skilled jobs for them to fill is a common, though scarcely innocent, delusion in the discourse of the 'knowledge based economy'. Thus the tendency to elaborate internal conditions but not external conditions of their achievement easily becomes complicit in neoliberal discourses that attempt to shift responsibility from the state to individuals and from welfare to workfare..."

While the capabilities approach can help renovate vocational education qualifications so they are more holistic and developmental, it cannot on its own 'fix' the problems of the labour market. To do this would require a focus on the labour market itself, and not just vocational education qualifications (Bryson, 2015). For example, while vocational education may provide education that helps students develop capabilities, these capabilities may not be able to be realised in workplaces that resist change, are discriminatory, or provide few opportunities for discretionary learning or for the development of autonomous practice.

Finally, capabilities can't be 'taught' directly as a set of generic skills. They can provide the starting point for thinking about curriculum, but curriculum must be underpinned by the knowledge and skills required for the field of practice or vocational stream. That is why we

emphasise *productive* capabilities to focus on the knowledge and skills that are needed as the basis of a vocation and for meaningful engagement in a broad field of practice or vocational stream.

Elements of a policy framework

This section discusses the implications of using the capabilities approach as the basis of a new social settlement. A renewed social settlement is needed to develop a new basis for vocational education in Australia, with TAFE at the centre to support sustainable and socially inclusive regional social and economic development. It discusses vocational streams, vocations and communities of trust (Wheelahan et al., 2015), before concluding with a discussion of the specific role of TAFE as the publicly funded anchor institution to underpin the VET system. This analysis argues that we can improve the links between qualifications and the labour market, but only if we have broader conception of the fields of practice for which individuals are being prepared, and the purpose of qualifications.

Developing good policy in vocational education requires an understanding of the context in which such education operates, the links between vocational education and the labour market, and the different ways in which qualifications are used to mediate access to the labour market, the role and purpose of qualifications, and how these are shaped by the nature of vocational streams and vocations.

Purpose of qualifications

The purpose of vocational education is to support individuals to live lives they have reason to value, to get good jobs and progress in their careers, and also to exercise agency in their lives and in work. The implications for qualifications are that they serve three purposes:

1. *In the labour market:* qualifications help guide entry into and progression in the workforce.
2. *In education:* qualifications are a transition to higher-level studies. All qualifications should provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to study at a higher level in their broad field or a complementary field.
3. *In society:* qualifications widen access to education and support social inclusion by supporting disadvantaged students to enter higher-level studies and occupations, and by preparing citizens to live and work in their communities and in society.

Vocational streams, vocations and productive capabilities

The way in which qualifications will play these roles will depend to a great extent on the nature of the field of practice for which they are preparing students. Fields of practice differ in the way qualifications are used to enter and progress in the labour market; some fields, such as in regulated occupations, have tighter connections between qualifications and occupations, whereas the links between occupations and qualifications are very loose in others, particularly

in unregulated occupations. Qualifications are used to mediate access to the labour market differently in regulated and unregulated occupations (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2017).

The links between qualifications and occupations are tightest for regulated occupations where the regulatory body specifies the conditions for entry to and progression within the occupation including the qualification required to practice the occupation, and where the professional and occupational bodies have had input into developing the knowledge base of practice. In these cases, qualifications are used as a signal to specify that the individual has the specific knowledge and skills and attributes required by the occupation or profession.

In contrast, in unregulated occupations, which is the largest section of the labour market in liberal market economies such as Australia's, qualifications are used in a different way to mediate access to the labour market. In these cases, occupations are used as a screen or a sieve. Rather than requiring a specific qualification with specific specifications, employers use the *level* of the qualification to indicate prospective employees' *potential*. Employers may require employees to have a qualification in a broad area, but employers are less likely to require specific qualifications (in contrast, for example, all nurses require a nursing qualification). This is one reason why the degree has become the default qualification, with labour market outcomes that are higher than those with VET qualifications.⁸

The implications of this argument are twofold. First, one model of qualifications does not reflect the links between qualifications and the labour market, and the different ways in which qualifications mediate graduates' access to jobs. Nor does having one model reflect the different needs of regions and communities or different industries. Second, trying to make qualifications more useful by developing so called generic skills, employability skills or future work skills will not solve the problems arising from the weak link between qualifications and occupations. This is because individuals need systematic access to the theoretical basis of practice in broad fields, and to the applied academic disciplines that underpin practice in those fields. It is through deep engagement with such knowledge that individuals will be able to act in agential ways in their occupations and in their lives, because they will be provided with access to principled knowledge, and not mainly procedural knowledge (Buchanan et al., 2009).

It may be possible to improve links between qualifications and the labour market by focusing on vocational streams, which link occupations that share common practices, knowledge, skills and person attributes. Vocational streams refer to the structure of occupations, and link occupations horizontally and vertically. Preparing students for vocational streams means that vocational education would focus on broader fields of practice, for example, by preparing care workers rather than specific aged care, disability care, or mental health care workers, at least in

⁸ See Karmel (2014) for a discussion of the contribution of education to economic growth and labour market outcomes. Arguably, while increasing education levels are in part associated with credentialism, they are also associated with changing requirements of the labour market. The key point is that it is pointless to wish credentialism away. In unregulated labour markets, people will seek to gain degrees to support their social and occupational progression (Marginson, 2016a, 2016b), and this is one reason why all qualifications must provide students with the knowledge they need to study at the next level in their field or a complementary field.

the first instance. This would increase the relevance of students' qualifications for a broader range of occupations, and provide vocational education with the opportunity to work with social partners to develop qualifications that prepare students for these broader fields of practice.

As discussed earlier, vocations refer to the nature of practice, that is, what people do in occupations and the knowledge, skills and attributes they need to work in those fields. For example, while there may be some commonalities, the knowledge and skills required of individuals in accounting, early childhood and tourism will be quite different, and their realisation will depend on the nature of the field and the way it is organised. An emphasis on vocations and productive capabilities would result in a curriculum that emphasised the theoretical knowledge base of practice for these broader fields, the skills needed to work in these fields, and the attributes that graduates require. This is in contrast to generic skills or employability skills, or even future work skills. A focus on vocations and productive capabilities is premised on helping students develop agency, which will require consideration of the way in which students' broad fields of practice and the occupations within them are developing.

Communities of trust

Realising this approach requires that we move away from a system premised on regulation of external standards to one based on building communities of trust. More and better standards will not solve the problems of the existing system; rather, it will lead to more regulation. The notion that better standards will solve the problem rests on the assumption that standards can be understood in one way by all who use them, evaluate them and examine them. However, this does not happen because meaning cannot be tied down in this way (Hodge, 2014). There will always be variation in the interpretation of standards, and the proliferation of new regulations which seeks to tie meaning more firmly to the elusive goal of objectivity does not work. Moreover, qualifications will only ever be used to the extent that they are trusted, regardless of what they say a person can do. We need to move from a system that is exclusively focused on evaluating standards, to developing communities of trust and to the exercise of professional judgement.

A key problem in supporting occupational pathways in Australia is that the labour market is even more segmented than are the structures of VET and higher education. The labour market has changed, particularly with the reduction of the number of industrial awards from over 5500 awards to 122 awards at the federal level, and a reduction in the number of awards that are occupationally based. However, the connection between industrial awards and qualifications are very weak, and most connections, where they exist at all, are at the trade-level certificate III qualifications (Oliver & Walpole, 2015).

There is no framework at present for supporting the collaboration of professional and occupational bodies. A first step in building communities of trust within vocational streams would be to support collaborative frameworks between professional bodies and occupational bodies to develop shared understandings of the nature of their vocational stream, the nature of

qualifications that can best support occupational progression and careers, and the potential for occupational pathways to develop. The state and territory governments may be an important ‘first mover’ in building communities of trust, given their closer connections to the various constituencies and communities and knowledge of skills ecosystems within their jurisdictions. Collaborative frameworks can also be used to accredit VET qualifications to ensure they meet the requirements of the labour market and the broader purposes of citizenship. This does not preclude standards altogether; rather, parsimonious standards would be based on the judgement of recognised experts as representing the best understanding at present for the needs of practice now and in the future in that broad occupational field.

The model being proposed here is accreditation of qualifications developed by individual TAFEs using minimal national standards, with accreditation processes based on the professional judgement of communities of trust that comprise occupational and professional bodies in the field. Such processes would need to be supported by appropriate national bodies which are seeking to build and support vocational education and build communities of trust in different industries and regions, in contrast to the current almost exclusive focus on regulating vocational education. This would support national consistency and portability while allowing for the development of locally responsive programs and it would support innovation. It would also give industry bodies far more involvement than is currently the case into the inputs of learning, such as syllabi, assessment and the qualifications of teachers. It may be possible to develop a quality assurance framework with local program advisory committees and an accreditation body responsible to both governments and colleges that oversees quality assurance and accreditation, but which involves communities of trust in the process.⁹

TAFE’s role as anchor institutions

TAFE’s role in underpinning vocational education is fundamental, and the key to building a new social settlement. It is the ‘local actor’ which can link social partners (particularly those that support the most disadvantaged communities) and develop locally responsive approaches that meet the needs of their students, communities, and industries. TAFE’s role would need to be supported and underpinned by appropriate national bodies that seek to develop vocational education, support and nurture communities of trust, and build links between TAFE and key industry bodies while supporting TAFE’s involvement with its local industries. Any national body would need to have as a key principle that TAFE is a valued and important part of the national governance and quality assurance frameworks rather than a problem to be policed.

It is important that any new policy articulate a positive mission for TAFE (Moodie, 2002). TAFE is an institution, it isn’t a provider. The notion of a provider implies one among many, and it doesn’t much matter if it is this or that provider which is providing the ‘service’. Providers come and go, and wax and wane in response to market demand. In this vision, the invisible hand of the market results in the provision of training for skills when and where as needed, with no

⁹ Such an approach would be similar to the system in Ontario, Canada.

need to invest in institutions, institutional capacity or teacher development. Except that, as we have seen in Australia, it doesn't work.

A positive mission for TAFE as the anchor institution of VET and of the communities and industries it serves would entail:

- Proactively working with other key social partners in the region and nationally (where appropriate) to support sustainable social and economic development;
- Anticipating, elaborating, codifying and institutionalising the knowledge base of practice for the future as well as the present and in considering the way work is changing and the implications that this has for a curriculum for the future. This is a crucial role that would support innovation (Moodie, 2008), and requires appropriately qualified teachers who engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning and in research on the way their field is changing;
- Offering students a sufficiently comprehensive range of programs that enable them to realise their aspirations and providing students with the broad range of services and supports that are needed to successfully achieve their goals; and,
- Developing qualifications that meet the needs of students, communities, local industries and regions.

To fulfil these goals TAFEs need to be strong, trusted institutions. This has two implications. First, governments need to invest in *institutions* rather than funding specific programs. Grant-based funding is needed to enable TAFEs to rebuild their infrastructure – not only in buildings (although this is important), but in the kinds of support services that students need, and to develop strong partnerships with local disadvantaged and under-represented communities, and with industry partners. TAFE institutes are not only employers' and communities' local physical educational capital, they are also the accumulation of teachers' expertise, and their accumulated interaction with employers and local communities. They institutionalise knowledge and skills needed in their regions through vocational education programs. TAFEs are the community's skills capital and skills capital needs time and consistent investment to build.

Second, governments need to invest in *teachers*. The quality of TAFE will depend on the quality of its teachers, and teachers need to be industry experts who are also expert teachers. This is particularly important in supporting the most disadvantaged students to ensure they have access to programs and support that helps them to succeed in learning. Moreover, becoming an expert teacher in TAFE also means engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning in their field. For example, the teacher of electrical trades apprentices should be able to consider what new developments in engineering mean for the way in which the work of electrical trades apprentices will change in the future. Or, the teacher of aged care support workers will need to consider the implications of insights from research into dementia for how aged care workers' practices will need to change to work with those with dementia in respectful ways. In both cases, teachers will need to think about how curriculum should change to reflect these new developments and understandings.

Conclusion

Vocational education is about much more than a competitive 'VET' offering for those who do not make it to university or do not like the academic curriculum at school. A quality vocational education system can lift the quality of human capability in the best sense noted above. The thirty-year experiment of VET competencies packaged for sale in training markets has failed. It is time to revitalise vocational education for the benefits not just of an economy that needs more adaptability than ever – but for the communities and students who support as well as are supported by it.

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