

### Productivity Commission misses an opportunity to shake up VET

#### Tom Karmel

The Productivity Commission review of the National Agreement for Skills Workforce and Development, at 532 pages, is a substantial piece of work. However, the review has caused barely a ripple.

The review did not find evidence of a VET system in crisis and a number of its recommendations fundamentally endorse the status quo while tinkering around the edges.

This is hugely disappointing because the VET sector is in desperate need of a shake-up. Unfortunately, VET is increasingly being seen as the provider of second chance education and lower-level qualifications for lower status occupations. The higher education sector is creaming off the higher-level qualifications. This situation threatens the very existence of VET in the long-term existence.

There are five issues threatening the sector.

*A triumph of training over education.* Where is the education in VET? Training packages are constructed as a prescribed set of tasks to enable an individual to be 'work ready'. There is no recognition that the training should provide a foundation, to be supplemented by further training by the employer and experience. Broader based education and training should provide foundation skills for future challenges as well as the ability to undertake specific current tasks. There is already a poor match between the VET qualifications undertaken and the occupations that VET graduates work in.

*The marginalisation of educators.* The creation of training packages has removed the need for VET teaching as a profession. All that is needed to deliver VET training is a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. At the same time as we are trying to improve the professionalism of childcare and community care we have de-professionalised the delivery of VET.

*The unevenness of qualifications.* A Certificate III electrical qualification requires a four-year apprenticeship while a Certificate III in security can be undertaken over a few weekends. There is understandable confusion about the value of VET qualifications.

*Assessment.* Trainers can tick off that their students are competent. There would be much greater confidence in the VET sector if independent assessors had to certify students as meeting the requirements of a qualification. Independent assessment might be expensive but the ramifications of shoddy training are likely to be even more costly.

*The institutional structure of VET.* The VET sector has many thousands of small providers. The relatively large providers are the public TAFEs which have limited autonomy because of the emphasis on training packages and their relationship with their State government departments – unlike public universities which are independent of government and are responsible for their offerings. The VET sector would be appreciably strengthened if we allowed large providers (mostly TAFEs) much greater independence.

The benefits of large, strong institutions are many. First, regulation can be devolved to the institution. Second, bland and homogenised providers do nothing for student choice or innovation.

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Third, large and strong institutions could bridge the divide between school, VET and higher education. TAFEs could go upmarket and become vocational universities (polytechnics) and defend VET as an integral component of post-school education. This strategy would promote vertical integration in areas such as health/community care, building and engineering.

A final issue is *the structure of apprenticeships*. In theory, the apprenticeship system has a lot going for it, with the combination of an income, on the job experience/training and off the job training.

In practice there are drawbacks, with unevenness in the quality of on-the-job training, and no guarantee that sufficient numbers of skilled tradespeople would be produced. Supplementing the current model would be an excellent addition. The clinical placement model used in nursing for both enrolled (VET trained) and registered nurses (University trained) is one model of on the job and off the job training that does not require direct employment. Another possibility is a fully institutional model incorporating sophisticated and substantial simulated workplace experience. This would work well in some areas such as hospitality or health/beauty (where the institution can have working clinics).

The Productivity Commission has largely wasted an opportunity to shake up VET, although it did touch on independent assessment and making apprenticeship pathways more flexible.

Recommendations that would have been game changers for the VET sector include:

- Putting education back into VET
- Advocating the professionalisation of VET teaching
- Addressing the incoherence and unevenness of qualifications
- Introducing independent assessment
- Strengthening the TAFEs (and some large private providers) to allow them to become vocational universities
- Creating alternative models to supplement apprenticeships.

A more extensive version of Tom Karmel's reflections on the Productivity Commission's report can be found at <https://holmesglen.edu.au/Industry/Mackenzie-Research-Institute/Media-releases/Opinion-pieces/>

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