

VET sector

Basically much of the TAFE qualification system seems to be broken. It is all very well having industry people deciding TAFE qualification content but when that very same industry refuses to employ people who have that very qualification (ie not a degree), it is just a farce.

When TAFE moved to standard national qualifications that just made the system worse. Many specialised Diplomas disappeared. Yes, there were ways to redesign the old qualification in the new system, but what had defined a good course before now became lost and hidden in a qualification every TAFE offers. There is really no way students or employers can determine which of the national qualifications are a good mix of subjects and thus which Diplomas are good and which were not, without examining every unit covered in every Diploma of the subject offered.

General education outcomes and system

I cannot understand why Australia persists in following the English (or other Anglo)system of education which seems to be failing in every way possible from primary school up, with its emphasis on testing and National Curriculum - better described as National Boredom for students and reduces teachers to delivery machines not educators or designers of good and innovative content. There is no place for teacher creativity under such a national syllabus. Thus neither students nor the teaching staff find the system rewarding.

We have taken TAFE down this route and we have taken University down the road of training which should really be a TAFE role. University should be about education and it is interesting to see that many students are increasingly looking to take a general course such as Arts, so a significant proportion are not looking for training either. However, without further training which industry does not seem prepared to offer, jobs will not be obtained easily. Perhaps we need a system of 2 year General University Diplomas with a 2 year Vocational add on.

Employment and Student Debt

Unmet demand seems to be falling, but seems to be falling not because there are an increased number of places available or a falling population of school leavers. Those studying at university are those who can contemplate a large debt in the future but many cannot see the cost benefit, especially with some current employers attitudes towards hiring at the first level, which seems to be that: if an applicant has done the clone of the job being offered the job is theirs, regardless of their education, performance or their suitability for the job or ability to learn. This is lazy on the part of those Australian employers.

Some employers seem to think that the university is also a training service provided exclusively for them. Most are certainly not willing to offer necessary post education training themselves.

It is ridiculous to quote nursing employment outcomes as evidence of good general employability outcomes from university. Nursing is an occupation in very high demand and most nurses work in the government sector. Nurses are also trained.

Students are not the best deciders of what course will give them good employment prospects, except in those traditionally high demand areas such as medicine, or the health areas, and law. For example, there are a large number of commerce/business graduates who certainly are not being snapped up by employers, and those graduates had not expected to be unemployable. Many of the students in these courses are there because they have not got into what they dreamed of and there is are not a wide choice offered.

There is a ballooning demand for places in practical fine art courses at both TAFE and University. Why are we funding these places when by no stretch of the imagination are any jobs going to be available for all those trained in this field. And we are underfunding places for which we have an unmet need. Perhaps there should be tougher selection for fine arts places and those who still want to do the course for interest only or if they have not met the full selection criteria for a funded place, should be full fee paying. (And future selection should not be undertaken by senior students, as it is in some faculties!!)

Accessibility, Outcomes and Student Aid

Why not have a look at the Finnish or Dutch system of education instead of the generally failing Anglo education systems? Why not include in our process of higher education the same compulsory gap year of army service or social service required in Germany before university study. From what I can see, too many students drift into university without a good sense of what they want to do, and need extra time to decide. They are often just clocking up HECS fees for nothing - unmotivated they don't pass or they realise a year or two into the course that they need to change direction. This gap year would also provide assistance in areas that need it - such as work in retirement homes, environmental work, etc etc.

Student Aid

Australian university fees. Even in the US you get relatively more for your money at a State University than you do in Australia - at least US students

have access to subsidised accommodation and food (plus student grants and a high level of philanthropic gifts).

Why are we not looking at education as an investment in a future of our country instead of looking at it as an investment for individuals to make? No wonder our newly qualified are leaving the country in such droves. They go where education is better appreciated by employers and to avoid being dragged down with such high debt. While the OECD (*Global Higher Education Report 2005*) may class a student loan as aid, it acknowledges the narrow definition it uses in defining "aid". Even in the US the majority of students can and do gain a substantial part of their funding needs from philanthropic organisations (of which Australia has few). Because this is not official funding it is ignored by the OECD Education Studies, but it is very significant aid. The OECD does recognise that when using some measures (but not philanthropy) the US is more affordable.

Student loans only solve an immediate cash flow problem for students - they do not remove barriers to education or remove the high cost of living for students. Interestingly OECD report indicates that because of various factors, eg good part time work availability - a major factor in the US, in relation to student loans, the outcomes can be very diverse:

Certainly, it (*student loan availability*) suggests that the same policy instrument may have very different effects in different countries, and for that reason alone, this phenomenon (*of difference between countries*) is worthy of future study.

The OECD report shows Australia as having the second highest student living costs of any of the 16 Western countries in the study, most of which are in Europe or North America, but even includes Japan. Living costs while studying does not seem to be considered in the equation in Australia.

The experience in our own family, where in order to practice as a registered Landscape Architect a Masters must be completed, reveals our daughter left with a bill of more than \$40,000 fees, for her Masters, on top of the HECS fees for her first degree, and on top of that all her living expenses for 5.5 years of full time study. During the last 2.5 years she could not work part time, because of the extremely heavy work load (in her Masters).

Interestingly at Melbourne University when students, year after year, complain of this heavy workload, staff reply that it is the same in the real world, so that is why they have this level of work. However in the real world you get paid for the work, you don't need to find another independent source of income to allow you to undertake it.

Globalisation and International students

And as for the international education sector. We are just prostituting our higher education system for money. Every teacher in university or TAFE that I know personally, and there are many, has been pressured to pass sub standard international students to the extent of being threatened with non renewal of contract. While there has been a general dumbing down at university, the same standards applied to international students are not applied to local students. There is conflict of interest in the international student education system and it needs to be addressed.

When those international students go back to their own country and gain employment, what do those employers find out about our education system, when we pass the incompetent?? Or worse still, those students gain permanent residency in our country because they have "bought" a qualification in an area deemed to have a skilled shortage. Naturally many don't work in the area of skilled shortage as they cannot get a job in the field. Admittedly part of that comes from discrimination but a good part also comes from a suspicion of incompetence on the part of employers.

Recruitment of staff

While universities are increasingly more interested in employing casual sessional teachers for funding reasons thus providing no tenure, they will continue to attract sub standard or desperate staff in Australia. TAFE teachers are also often employed on short term contracts (better than sessional work) but still with no tenure. Sessional staff work for pathetically low remuneration rates and naturally do not hang around long or show any commitment to their employers and why should they? Sessional work is virtual slavery. Short term contracts are not much better and will not lead to any research outcomes either.

Part time skills upgrading

It is very difficult to find accredited courses offered part time, except in the VET sector. There need to be more possibilities like those offered at certain universities, at the weekend, for teachers.

Summary

While the Discussion paper seems to focus on funding and staffing and so on, Australia needs to restructure its university and VET sector in tandem. While the discussion paper states that approved TAFEs "have been assessed by state and territory government accreditation authorities as meeting the relevant requirements set out in the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes" this is obviously a far too limited criteria to use to assess TAFE outcomes. Ticking boxes to get a course accredited has nothing to do with employment outcomes.

Our system of apprenticeships and training is woefully inadequate and just on that count alone, TAFE needs to be reassessed. TAFE could provide a role where employers will (or cannot) in training of trades. The Federal government should be totally independently assessing the VET system and outcomes needed, in tandem with the university system. Our system of trying to retain people at school to Year 12, also works against the apprentice system, so something new is needed to sort this mess out.

At TAFE it is fairly pointless to offer a Diploma in Information Technology that includes compulsory programming when no-one with a Diploma only, is likely to gain work in Computer Programming.

The whole question of "what is training" and what is education and where and how either should be delivered needs to be looked at from the ground up, not tinkered with around the edges.

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