# New management in VET: Working commerce and community together?

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## Abstract

The roles and responsibilities of VET managers have changed considerably as VET providers endeavour to operate in a highly competitive and commercial environment. Increasingly, these providers are assuming the form of business organizations with VET managers constituted as business managers responsible for delivering a certain level of activity against certain targets. Drawing on questionnaire, interview and case data collected from senior and frontline VET managers in five Australian states, the claim is made that a particular philosophy and practice of management has become popular in these providers: strategic management has been adopted as an adaptive response to the changing character of work within VET organizations. VET managers are required to design change agendas, produce enhanced outcomes, grow market share and generally, act as educational entrepreneurs. This action is not necessarily the sum total of managerial activity, however. The press to practise commercially can coincide with a commitment to traditional educational values such as providing a second chance for 'reluctant' learners or ensuring access to education by certain communities and social groups (eg. regional communities, minority groups). What might be called innovative VET management is directed to creating conditions for the convergence of commercial *and* social/community values. Presenting a different vision for VET and different identity alternatives for VET providers, this management is exceedingly difficult to enact. It requires a radically different kind of manager, one who aims to set a broad agenda for VET activities and lead as well as manage.

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## Introduction

An increasing interest in management and leadership within the VET sector has been taken over the last few years. A number of research projects have been sponsored recently by various bodies, chiefly the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, as part of the National VET Research and Evaluation Program. This paper reports on the findings of one of these projects, a year 2000 research priority project 'Management and leadership in VET organisations'. Commencing in 2001, the objective of the project was to 'capture' and interpret the main features of the new kind of leader and manager now emerging in the VET sector. More specifically, it aimed to identify the expertise that VET leaders and managers now need in order to perform their leadership and management roles and how this expertise might be best developed. A key assumption underpinning the research was that the roles of managers and leaders within VET organisations are expanding, consequently, new 'know-how' is required in the performance of these roles.

The research was undertaken by a consortium comprising five universities, two TAFEs and a Community College. Led by the University of Melbourne, the project team consisted of pairs of researchers in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia.[1]

## Data and methods: Survey, interviews, case studies

The first empirical component of the research consisted of a postal survey. Questionnaires were mailed to executive/senior managers in 1551 provider locations, in each of the five major states.[2] In total, 365 questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 23.5 percent. Useable questionnaires were returned for 355 sites. A sample of 355 is a sufficient number for analyses. The largest group of respondents (127 altogether) were from public sector providers, principally TAFE institutes. The next largest group of respondents were from the private sector. Of this group, 83 were from private commercial providers and 51 from Group Training Companies (GTCs). The data were analysed using the SPSS 10.0 package of statistical procedures.

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[1] The project team included: Dr Dianne Mulcahy (University of Melbourne) & Dr Carole Hooper (University of Melbourne); Mrs Gaye Follington (Central Coast Community College) & Dr David Beckett (University of Melbourne); Mr Llandis Barratt-Pugh (Edith Cowan University) & Ms Judith Uren (Central TAFE Perth); A/Professor Colin Sharp (Flinders University) & Mr Gary Crilley (University of South Australia); and A/Professor Trevor Williams (Queensland University of Technology) & Mr Bernard Stringer (North Point Institute of TAFE).

[2] A 'provider location is a specific training site (e.g., institute, campus, or annex) administered by a training organization for the purpose of providing clients with programs of training' (NCVER 2001, p.115).

Comparative analyses were undertaken of 'key respondent groups': TAFE managers, managers in private commercial providers and in GTCs.

Secondly, telephone interviews (147 altogether) with senior and frontline managers were conducted in the five major states - approximately 30 interviews in each state. A preliminary analysis of the qualitative data was conducted using manual thematic techniques whereby categories were developed from a process of open coding (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Subsequently, data for all 147 interviews were analysed using the ATLAS.ti 4.1 package of qualitative procedures.

The third empirical component of the research involved 10 intensive case studies of organisational practices of managing and leading in VET providers, in each of the five major states (2 in each state). A multi-case study approach was chosen to explore the potentially different perspectives of participants in public VET providers and private VET providers, including non-profit providers. The case studies involved observation of organisational practices; and in-depth, semi-structured interviews (50 altogether). Interviews were conducted with two individuals at each case site, namely, an executive or senior manager, frontline manager, manager developer eg. HR manager, staff development manager, and staff members. The interviews were intended to provide a 'thick description' of the conditions that enable effective leadership and management in VET organizations and the skills required to operate in these conditions.

## Reading the scene: A critical framework

A poststructural approach to understanding 'new management' in VET will be adopted in this paper. This approach requires that we understand reality as real-ised through discourse. Adapting the work of various socially-critical commentators (for example, Law 2001, 1994; Prichard 2000; Gee 1999; Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999; Knights & Morgan 1991), and taking organisational management into account, I use the term *discourse* as shorthand for a whole set of *power/knowledge relations* which are embedded in and circulated through working practices such as planning, teamwork, quality assurance, project management, change management, marketing and development, learning and development, and so on.

For Prichard (2000, pp.34-5), discourses are 'politically active knowledge practices and formations'. They are 'not simply the discursive practices of talk and text, but are, rather, *modes of ordering* or *organising* which recursively realise and constitute the 'real'' (my emphasis).

As I go on to argue, *strategy* – the strategy concepts that underpin practices of strategic management and strategic leadership – is the main 'mode of organising' management and organization in VET providers. Strategy is performed as a set of techniques for managing and leading increasingly complex businesses in a competitive environment. As a frontline manager in TAFE comments: 'If it doesn't get built in at the strategic level, there is a good chance it won't happen'.

Discourses provide ways of being (identities), ways of relating to others (relations), and ways of understanding the world (knowledges) (Fairclough 1992, cited in Pritchard 2000, p.35). Thus, strategy as discourse constitutes managers as *strategic managers* and VET organizations as *strategic*

*organizations*. It encourages the creation of strategic alliances between providers and the formation of knowledge and skill of a strategic kind (ie. entrepreneurship, enterprise, 'working knowledge').[3]

The expanded form of the term 'strategy' is 'corporate strategy'. It was very clear from the data that the discourse of strategy had a specific relation to *corporate business* (see Knights & Morgan 1991, for genealogical analysis of corporate strategy). Thus, terms such as 'corporate status', 'corporate focus', 'corporate budget', 'corporate system', 'corporate level' and 'incorporated entity' were commonly used by both managers and staff. The discourse of corporate strategy is characterized by the 'planned relationship between the market and the internal characteristics of the organization' (Knights & Morgan 1991, p.257; see also Marginson 1993, pp.56-57, for discussion of 'corporate managerialism'). In the data collected, the terms 'external environment' and 'market' tended to be used interchangeably, indicating the power and influence of the market approach in VET.

## New management in VET: The salience of strategy

VET managers were found to be practising a particular philosophy of management. It would appear that *strategic management* has been adopted as an adaptive response to managing (and leading) complex businesses in the market environment. In a formal sense, strategic management may be described as: 'The process of identifying, choosing and implementing activities that will enhance the long-term performance of an organization by setting direction and by creating ongoing compatibility between the internal skills and resources of the organization, and the changing external environment within which it operates' (Viljoen & Dann 2000, p.5).

Strategy emerged as the overarching element in prescriptions for successful management and leadership in VET. Not only organizational management, but also organizational leadership, was defined in strategic terms.[4] Thus, in answer to the question: "What makes for a "good" VET leader?' some typical responses were:

> Providing vision and strategic directions for staff. A strong visionary and strategic planner. Providing a framework for others to work in. Good understanding of the external environment and the context of the internal environment in which they need to work and meet compliance *(Senior TAFE manager, Western Australia)*.

> A strategic focus and long term planning; the ability to manage change and meet with staff to share the organizational vision *(Senior TAFE manager, New South Wales)*.

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[3] In the context of the globalised information economy, we are witnessing the power of a new form of knowledge which some call 'working knowledge': knowledge that is designed for use or 'applied knowledge' (Symes 2001, p.8). See *Studies in Continuing Education*, Special Issue: Working Knowledge, vol.23, no.2, November 2001; Symes, C 2001, 'With doing in mind: The UTS Working Knowledge conference', *Training Agenda*, vol.9, no.1; and Symes, C & McIntyre, J (eds) 2000, *Working knowledge: The new vocationalism and higher education*, SRHE & Open University Press, Buckingham.
[4] Caldwell, writing in the context of school leadership, defines strategic leadership as: 'seeing "the big picture", discerning the "megatrends", understanding the implications, ensuring that others can do the same, establishing structures and processes to bring vision to realisation, and monitoring the outcomes' (2001, p.10).

Among many others, terms such as 'strategic planning', 'strategic focus', 'strategic framework', 'strategic perspective', 'strategic priorities', 'strategic vision', 'strategic role', 'strategic goals', 'strategic boundaries', 'strategic directions', 'strategic opportunities' 'strategic thinking', and 'strategic action', permeated the talk of managers and staff in providers. Strategy, it appears, is common currency in VET:

> You need to have a very good strategic focus. So you've got to be a strategic thinker and you've got to have planning skills. ... You've got to have the capacity to develop and run the organisation from a strategic perspective and then use that strategic framework to establish the contributions the various parts of the organisation are going to make to achieving that *(Senior manager, TAFE provider, Victoria).*

Strategy is not merely a matter of strategic planning. Strategic thinking and strategic action must be taken into account:

> It is more than planning, it is strategic thinking and strategic action. Bureaucracies are very good at strategic planning but they are not very good at strategic thinking sometimes and strategic action. That is part of the leadership skills that we really need and we are trying to develop in (this region), strategic thinking and strategic action. Industry now wants people who have leadership and project management skills *(Manager, Professional Development, TAFE, New South Wales).*

Staff and managers at all levels are involved in strategic action, although not necessarily strategic planning:

> The things that we look to (our line manager) for are suggestions of tactics of how we are going to achieve strategies that have been put in place as an institute goal, and to help us keep our focus on those *(Staff member, TAFE, South Australia).*

> There is strategic planning. (It) happens at upper management level. … Very few lecturing staff would be included in strategic planning *(Principal lecturer, TAFE, Western Australia).*

Strategy shapes the ways VET organizations are understood. When asked about the kinds of management development that might benefit senior managers in VET, one senior TAFE manager responded in this way:

> The issues of measurement, performance measurement, areas of planning or developing I think are areas we can all develop in and understand more. (TAFEs) are quite large organisations and you can get bogged down in operational stuff and make the operational stuff consume all of your time and you cannot become a strategic organisation. I think these organisations could fall into that trap very easily because of the way they're funded and there's a bit of sameness in there every year. So unless you've got a strong strategy about where you're going you could just become an 'also ran' organisation – you don't want to be that *(Senior manager, TAFE provider, Victoria).*

Having a 'strong strategy' means that an organization can become more than an 'also ran' organization. This may involve reconstituting the image of the organization. TAFE managers are under particular pressure to change the way industry and the community view TAFE. The discourse of strategy can serve to legitimise TAFEs:

We are an organisation that, I'm talking qualitatively, aims to surprise and delight. We're changing our culture to go for a reputation of excellence, innovation and dynamism. We're doing that because we feel that people have had various fixed ideas about TAFE and in fact everyone calls us 'the TAFE' or attempts to make every TAFE synonymous with every other TAFE. We're wanting to differentiate ourselves *(Executive TAFE manager, New South Wales)*.

## Conducting commerce: The strategic organization at work

Managers and leaders are constituted as certain kinds of managers and leaders, through the discursive practices of corporate strategy. Thus, a good VET leader is 'someone who really understands the market − the external environment − and really understands the internal workings of the organization and who can lead in that' *(Senior TAFE manager, Queensland)*. The sense in which VET providers now function as business organisations was very strong in the data. The resonances and tensions between business goals and educational purposes were also very clear:

Funding is linked to performance, the performance of us as operators in the organisation is linked to performance, we have our targets to meet *(Field Officer, Group Training Company, Victoria)*.

People are actually given incentive bonuses according to the targets that they meet *(Frontline manager, private provider, Queensland)*.

Because of the funding and the fact that we are having more pressure placed on us to develop our own business, therefore create a lot of our own income with fee-for-service and that sort of thing, there ends up being a lot more tension between how you are going to make money and how well you are going to deliver *(Staff member, TAFE, South Australia)*.

The press to practice commercially can provide a certain excitement in public VET providers. Many managers, mainly executive and senior managers, commented on 'the high level of autonomy' they have in their jobs:

At the moment, it is quite exciting. I find it quite exciting. I like that things are changing, things are moving more to the way I'm comfortable with operating. There is a lot happening at the moment. I think it is going to be a bit of a period of rebirth in vocational education and training. We're trying to find where we fit in the new world *(Cluster manager, TAFE, New South Wales)*.

We are also looking for breakthrough stuff, innovative and creative ways of doing things. I have the luxury of being able to do that and identifying program areas to do it! *(Senior manager, TAFE, Western Australia)*.

I have a high level of autonomy *(Executive manager, TAFE, South Australia)*.

I am delighted by the degree of autonomy that is allowed to an institute Director. … In school education, my counterparts who are District Superintendents, have got no authority whatsoever. They operate on the basis of whether the Principals will agree or not and if they don't, they can't do anything. We find that absolutely extraordinary. ... From a personal point of view, TAFE Directors take a great deal of responsibility and accountability for the success or

failure of their organisation and they are given a great deal of freedom to be able to operate. Although we are in a large bureaucracy, effectively you can do anything that you choose to do. The world is literally your oyster *(Executive manager, TAFE, New South Wales).*

## Communal relations: 'Moving from the competitive model'

Despite widespread evidence of the growth of business management practices where one provider competes with another for an ever-decreasing pool of public funds, many VET managers supported the development of more collaborative models of management where different providers 'work(ed) together on a range of activities':

> I think there's some challenges about increased collaboration between institutes and moving from the competitive model that we were in, and forced into by governments, to now go back to something far more collaborative and work together on a range of activities and a lot more resource sharing and information sharing. If someone's doing something well at (X institute), well we need to utilise some of that stuff. That's coming back – a lot of us went thorough that very competitive period – whilst I quite enjoy that, I don't mind that, it does keep you on your toes and does give you energy – from a public TAFE perspective, it's not a system perspective, you're just talking about a (particular institute) perspective. So if we succeed, I think it's our whole sector that succeeds – I think that's the way the philosophy needs to go in the future *(Senior manager, TAFE provider, Victoria).*

A senior TAFE manager in Western Australia stated that 'there has been a shift (in Western Australia) towards co-operation rather than direct competition':

> The whole sector is currently in a state of flux. The new government has ordered a review of TAFE colleges and this could/will mean a more collaborative approach to education and training, using a shared services model. There may also be amalgamations of TAFE colleges.

Senior managers in various states are considering, or are initiating, co-operative arrangements as a basis for producing an alternative approach to the provision of VET. These managers supported a sectoral or systemic approach, rather than competitive individual institutional provision:

> Sharing resources across the sector is an important one. You can share ideas and all that sort of thing. When it comes down to sharing intellectual property, sharing resources, some people get a little bit 'Oh, you know, that's what gives us our cutting edge' is often what they say. In other words, that gives them their competitive edge *(Executive manager, TAFE, Western Australia).*

> VET leadership in the past has … been very much focussed around pitch (one institution against another) institution, (make them) scared of each other, competitive with each other. … (F)rom a public TAFE perspective, it's not a system perspective *(Senior manager, TAFE provider, Victoria).*

The emerging interest in 'a more collaborative approach to education and training' may have as much to do with strategy and pragmatism – 'building

up business' – as with the development of a new form of governance in the VET sector or a new vision for VET.[5]

Strategic alliances and strategic partnerships are identified as a possible 'new business model' for the delivery of vocational education (TAFE Frontiers 2001). Alliances between firms are 'becoming increasingly important to the way in which business is conducted' (AIG 1999, p.11). Among other things, they provide organisations with ways to expand their market reach and grow, locally and globally:

> The stuff that I think is more beneficial in building up business for my unit is out there, talking to people and networking. I mean tomorrow we are off to (x region) and all over the country … We will end up with probably fifteen traineeships out of that trip *(Frontline manager, TAFE, Western Australia)*.

These developments suggest that we can expect to see more and more of a different kind of provider taking shape in the VET sector, one that is reconstituting its power at the center of alliances formed both within and outside the organization.

## Collaboration within competition: Strategic links and alliances

Gleeson (2001), commenting on the impact of reforms in the Further Education sector in the UK, argues for the emergence of a culture of 'collaboration within competition' at college level. The principals and senior managers involved in his study *mediated* changing education policy agendas by creating co-operative ventures and links. 'The danger is one of treating principals and senior managers as victims of funding led or managerialist reform, rather than strategic interpreters of policy in the reconstruction of FE practices at college level' (2001, p.194).

Data gathered through the case studies and the telephone interviews would suggest that a similar cultural change is taking place in Australia, within both public training organisations and private training organisations:

> Some TAFEs don't talk to each other, but I see TAFE as a whole rather than as a geographical delivery unit. I've done a number of co-operatives with TAFEs that are joining our area. So a leader needs to be able to think, 'If I can't do it myself, how can I do it, to meet a market need?' Sometimes you can't do it by yourself but you can do it in co-operatives *(Senior TAFE manager, Queensland)*.

> I have gathered 3 or 4 smaller RTOs (together). We share the work we have to do and standardize it amongst ourselves, except change the names and so forth. That's the only way that I have seen to break this enormous (administrative) burden that we have. We have a local education and training network which is geared towards marketing the region as an education hub. Now, we are trying to use that network to help the smaller RTOs *(Senior manager, private provider, Queensland)*.

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5  According to Marginson and Considine (2000, p.7), governance embraces 'leadership', 'management' and 'strategy'. 'Governance is concerned with the determination of value inside (institutions), their systems of decision-making and resource allocation, their mission and purposes, the patterns of authority and hierarchy, and the relationship of … institutions to the different … worlds within and the worlds of government, business and community without'.

## The shadow side of strategy: Articulating non-strategic voices in VET

'Commerce' and 'community' can be considered different versions of strategy that subsist within an overarching structure or approach. The market approach to VET is being mediated in different and interesting ways, but to all intents and purposes, remains the dominant approach to delivering vocational education. Thus, we might note how the meaning of market 'nets' other meanings in the following:

> Some TAFEs don't talk to each other, but I see TAFE as a whole rather than as a geographical delivery unit. I've done a number of co-operatives with TAFEs that are joining our area. So a leader needs to be able to think, 'If I can't do it myself, how can I do it, to meet a market need?'

> I have gathered 3 or 4 smaller RTOs (together). We share the work we have to do and standardize it amongst ourselves, except change the names and so forth. … We have a local education and training network which is geared towards marketing the region as an education hub. Now, we are trying to use that network to help the smaller RTOs.

Still, the resonances and tensions between terms such as 'co-operatives' and 'market need' are clear. Notions of 'talking together', 'sharing' and 'hub' provide evidence of relations unlike competitive market relations. Given the interest in 'a more collaborative approach to education and training', a model of management and leadership that goes beyond the market approach may emerge in VET. The currently established strategic model may well be challenged by a different logic within which 'non-strategic voices' speak. The British sociologist, John Law, has it that:

> We work and write within strategy, within the logic of the return. … [W]e therefore collude in disarticulation of possibly non-strategic voices – a collusion that is almost impossible to resist, given the productivity of strategy in its modern disciplinary form' (2001, p.8).

'The logic of the return' *is* the logic of the market. 'Like a capitalist firm, it "profits" … because it secures a return' (ibid., p.7). Classically, educational activity is activity that is not solely about securing a return (providing a competitive advantage).

Commitment to the concept and practice of education was evident in all providers:

> A good manager knows all the stuff of normal business processes. (However), it is important to keep a link with teaching. The system breeds the notion that this isn't important. You have to live within the system but it is hard to. I still consider you can fight the good fight *(Senior manager, TAFE, Victoria)*.

> I think ultimately there is a need for greater educational leadership (Frontline manager, private commercial provider, Queensland).

> We have to sell the company as a business, a provider of labour, but I think the true sense of it, it's still an education provider *(Staff member, Group Training Company, Queensland)*.

Both managers (most particularly, frontline managers) and staff are carrying an increasing burden trying to juggle competing impulses and activities:

> I guess the biggest issue … at the moment is probably the competing demands of some of these high priority objectives that come down *(Program manager, TAFE, Western Australia).*

> One minute you wear the hat of the deliverer in charge of the teachers and the next minute you are out in industry representing the college and trying to win contracts and tenders *(Principal lecturer, TAFE, Western Australia).*

> Most sections run on a high level of part-time staff. (Teachers) just go around with a crate, you know, with all their stuff in it or a basket or a box and that is their mobile office *(Staff member, TAFE, New South Wales).*

Should we be looking for a space in which 'non-strategic voices' speak, it might well be found in the teachers who 'just go around with a crate … with all their stuff in it'.

> We all still teach our full load and then we have to go and do our site visits. I have a colleague who is in the bush five days per week travelling between 2000 to 3000 km a week. If you are on the road and still teaching a full load, that leaves very little time to do your preparation and research. It also makes it very hard for the students to contact you *(Staff member, TAFE, Western Australia).*

The reality that bites in the future may have less to do with growing market share and more to do with maintaining educational standards. 'People are working very hard. Staff turnover is very high (33%)' (TAFE, Queensland).

VET managers well understand the intricate interrelationship between these activities: 'The core business is delivery, training and education. … If we don't get the training and delivery in education right, we don't have any services to offer, we don't have any customers, we don't have a business' (Executive manager, TAFE, Western Australia). The press to practise commercially can coincide with a commitment to traditional educational values such as providing a second chance for 'reluctant' learners or ensuring access to education by certain communities and social groups: 'From a rural perspective, our centre grew from competitive purchasing funds. … I'm looking to see where the growth profiles are to keep the rural sites open'.

What might be called innovative VET management is directed to creating conditions for the convergence of commercial *and* social/community values. Presenting a different vision for VET and different identity alternatives for VET providers, this management is exceedingly difficult to enact. It requires a radically different kind of manager, one who strives to set a broad agenda for VET activities and lead as well as manage. This leadership and management is of a multiple kind (strategic leadership, educational leadership). Such leaders and managers are 'there' in the data. Strategy and beyond may become the mantra of new management in VET?

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