FROM THE PRESIDENT

At the time of writing this, a great deal of activity is underway in the VET sector. Governments at both state and federal levels are actively pursuing a number of reforms to the sector. Significant gatherings have taken place including the International Network on Innovative Apprenticeship (INAP) conference led by Erica Smith from Federation University, the TAFE Directors Association Annual Conference, the VET Development's Annual Teaching and Learning Conference, the VELG National VET Conference and the ACPET National Conference. The National Reform Summit held by the Federal government called for reform of tertiary education as a means of ensuring that the VET sector is capable of providing people from all walks of life with the qualifications relevant to their current and future career aspirations and the needs of industry. While these gatherings represented a number of different stakeholder groups in the sector, all were concerned with enhancing understandings of the sector and its future trajectory. Funding, accountability regimes, enhancing outcomes for learners, equipping those who work in the VET sector with the knowledge and skills to enhance their capacities to be responsive to the changing landscape, sharing innovation and practice wisdom all featured highly in these gatherings.

A number of these topics have been examined in the research that is showcased in this edition of Research Today. Issues such as enhancing the performance and outcome of the VET sector, understanding skills formation processes across occupations, broadening the reach of the sector to make it more responsive to the needs of a wider range of learner and employer needs, understanding the disruptive impact of technologies on jobs and the provision of vocational education are addressed in this edition. The research speaks to the importance of research impact and the role that individual and groups of researchers, in conjunction with entities such as AVETRA, NCVER and key professional bodies such as VELG, the TAFE Directors Association and ACPET can play in making the connections between policy and practice in the VET sector.

Research impact has become a topic of some note in recent times. The Research Councils UK (RCUK) defines research impact as 'the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy'. It is about understanding and working to evaluate the impact that research outcomes have in terms of their practical application in the lives of individuals, organisations and the wider Australian society. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has identified three different types of impact:

- **Instrumental:** influencing the development of policy, practice or service provision, shaping legislation, altering behaviour

- **Conceptual:** contributing to the understanding of policy issues, reframing debates

- **Capacity building:** through technical and personal skill development

Finding pathways to realise and understand the impact of VET research has long been a goal of the National Vocational Education and Training Research (NVETR) program of research. It is noteworthy that the successful recipients of the recently announced grants from the most current round of funding (see NCVER News #360) were all required to address the issue of research impact in their applications.

AVETRA has made some preliminary steps to take up this challenge with the development of its Educator Hub, and later in this year, we will unveil a new web site which is being developed with the central purpose of contributing to enhancing the impact of VET research by supporting researchers to 'make this impact happen'. While awareness of research, in and of itself, will not be enough to drive this impact agenda, we can no longer rely on the 'name and hope strategy' (i.e. where we name the importance of our research as having impact and then hope that the impact will happen). Research impact is something that must be actively planned for and worked towards across the life cycle of a research project. The debates that are currently taking place about the future of many aspects of the sector can only be enriched by our endeavors in this area. ■

Michele Simons – President, AVETRA

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Vale Ros Brennan-Kemmis

The VET research community was saddened to learn of the death of Associate Professor Ros Brennan Kemmis on Monday 28 July 2015.

Ros commenced her career in the academy in 1993 at Charles Sturt University, where over time she developed a reputation as a VET researcher of national and international standing. Ros was a long-time advocate for vocational education and training; her passion for quality teaching in vocational education and training was well known and one that she pursued across her career. One of her last projects was leading the development of an edited collection with Liz Atkins entitled *Teaching in the VET Sector in Australia*. In 1999 Ros was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM), in particular recognition of her work with the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of NSW, illustrating how the work that Ros undertook had a significance that stretched well into the wider Australian community.

The VET community is a lesser place with the loss of Ros. Her contribution will live on through her writing and the many hundreds of students who benefitted from her teaching across her career. On behalf of all colleagues in the VET community, I extend our deepest condolences to Professor Stephen Kemmis and his family. ■

Contributing to the policy debate: ideas for future research in vocational education

Francesca M. Beddie | Professional Associate | Education Faculty | University of Canberra

Social media encourages abrupt words. So I shouldn't have been hurt by a comment that a synthesis of recent research I undertook for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) 'just looks like research for research sake'. But I was. The synthesis was written to appeal to policy makers and practitioners grappling with some of the 'wicked' problems in education, and to researchers, so that they were aware of what questions have been raised and even answered, and what still needs investigation.

The outcomes of education and training: a summary of what the research is telling us distils messages from the body of research NCVER published over the lifetime of the 2011—14 National Research Priorities. Those messages were presented under the five priorities used to conduct and commission the research. Here I have put in bold the suggestions for directions in future research or the public debate, in the hope that these will capture the imagination of Research Today's readers:

Skills and productivity

- Skills contribute to productivity and individual wellbeing.

- Gaining a qualification matters.

- Investment in increasing Year 12 or certificate III attainment will bring the greatest returns; certificates I and II are best used as stepping stones to further study.

- Boosting the literacy, numeracy and STEM skills of the entire population is an important priority.

  – We still need to develop reliable ways to measure the returns from investment in education and training for both employers and society, a complex task in a global economy.

- Institutional training should not be narrowly focused on today's specific skill requirements. Employers have a crucial role to play in matching skills to jobs, in improving the image of vocational education and training (VET), and in workplace learning.

  – We would benefit from exploring the implications of an international labour market and learning from other countries' experiences in skills development.

Structures in the tertiary education and training system

- Educational structures need to adapt more to the demands of a post-industrial society and changing demographic trends. This adaptation will be strongly influenced by the way governments fund individuals and institutions, but attitudinal shifts are also required in terms of the prestige attached to occupations and the status of vocational education and training.

- We cannot ignore the interconnectedness of the school, VET and higher education sectors.

- Streamlined regulation should strive to achieve diversity and institutional autonomy.

- With reform driving change in the structures of tertiary education, researchers are turning their attention to the impact of these policy shifts.

  – This highlights the need for better evaluation frameworks in the system. Improved data collection through, for example, the unique student identifier will help.

  – Cultural change is needed to underpin the institutional reforms. This could be assisted by more debate about what we need from schools, and vocational and higher education, before policies about regulation and funding are determined.

The contribution of education and training to social inclusion

- Training can't fix everything. The familiar point about the requirement for joined-up solutions needs to be heeded, as does having reasonable expectations about the role of vocational education and its outcomes.

- Nevertheless, investment in training can reduce disadvantage.

  – More investigation into the specific needs of particular groups and their prospects after training is likely to result in improved outcomes for disadvantaged groups.

Learning and teaching

- The use of narrow definitions of competency in training courses is not adequate; learners also need knowledge about the context in which their learning is to be applied.

- In terms of vocational education, the learning and teaching should be tied into the world of work and involve industry in both the setting of occupational training standards and the assessment of the teaching of those standards.

  – The explosion in online delivery as well as other teaching tools, such as simulators, calls for a better understanding of how the system harnesses the power of technology and achieves good outcomes.

The place and role of VET

- Although vocational education constitutes one element of the tertiary sector, it can also be undertaken as part of secondary schooling, which means that its aims may be open to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. In fact, much of Australia's tertiary education is vocational in purpose, as are some school subjects. This complicates the place of the formal vocational education and training sector within the education system.

  – Clarifying VET's role and funding it accordingly might help to produce smoother transitions between the various sectors and build trust and confidence in the value of vocational education qualifications. Furthermore, a full appreciation of its role will assist in refining funding allocations.

  – The VET sector must look beyond the competencies currently required by industry. More emphasis should be placed on foundational

knowledge and building the capacity to learn.

– The sector has a role to play, in partnership with employers, to re-imagine the nature of vocations/ occupational groupings. That partnership should extend to improving the workplace as a site of learning — for school students, apprentices and trainees, and existing workers.

▪ The VET workforce is under strain to meet the many and various requirements of the job. For example, it must maintain industry currency, improve assessment practices, adopt good online pedagogy and engage in scholarly practice.

– These are all areas in which AVETRA can play an important role, both in uncovering best practice and encouraging its adoption in the VET workforce. ▪

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Socioeconomic status of high schools and students' performance at university

Ian Li, University of Western Australia and Michael Dockery, Curtin Business School

A recent study undertaken for the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) has provided new insights into how schools shape their students' performance at university. In a collaborative project by Ian Li of the University of Western Australia and Mike Dockery of Curtin University, the researchers linked Australian schools data to first-year undergraduate records from 2011 to 2013 at an Australian university. The key focus of the study was to determine if there are links between schools' socioeconomic status (SES) and university performance, and if certain schools provide better platforms for university study. In total, the researchers had data on around 8,400 first year students who entered the university on the basis of their Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) from 186 different schools. The matched data on schools provided by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) included a well-established measure of the socioeconomic background of the schools, the Index of Community Socioeconomic Advantage.

The key finding was that schools' socioeconomic status did have a moderate impact on university performance, but it was students from schools with lower socioeconomic status who were found to perform better in first year university. Previous Australian research has shown that students from Catholic and Independent schools are more likely to gain entry to university, but do not perform as well at university given their Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) scores. This new research now suggests that these previous findings actually reflected a socioeconomic status effect rather than school sector effect, and that Catholic and Independent schools having, on average, students of a higher socioeconomic background. After socioeconomic status of schools is controlled for, school sector was not found to influence university performance.

This suggests that higher SES schools inflate their students' ATAR scores and improve their access to university. From an equity perspective, however, it is encouraging that the university system appears to level the playing field in terms of academic achievement for students entering from more privileged and less privileged schools. Furthermore, the individual students' SES background had no discernible impact on university performance. This means that participation in higher education for under-represented students from lower SES backgrounds could be further encouraged without compromising academic standards. University admission regimes could take into account the relatively good performance of students from schools of lower SES, and restructure their admission regimes to advantage them accordingly.

The results also show that students from same-sex schools fare worse at university than their peers from co-educational schools; girls markedly outperform boys; and the ATAR is a relatively robust predictor of performance at university. Another important finding is that school resourcing measures do not appear to have any substantial impact on students' performance in university. While some may find this surprising, it is actually consistent with previous international and Australian findings of limited school effects on high school leaving grades (see Marks 2010). This has implications for strategies to achieve equity in higher education participation and on school resourcing.

The full report can be downloaded from the NCSEHE website (www.ncsehe.edu. au) and a shorter version will be published in an upcoming Special Issue of the Australian Journal of Labour Economics honouring the life and work of the late Paul Miller, who was a highly valued colleague and mentor to both the authors. ▪

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Lessons from VET providers delivering degrees

Victor J Callan, University of Queensland and Kaye Bowman, Kaye Bowman Consulting

> **Providers generally felt that a strong student-centric culture and adequate HE-specific student support is required to assist students with their HE studies.**

During the last half of 2013, we set out to learn about Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers' experiences and the lessons learned in delivering higher education (HE) qualifications (see Callan & Bowman 2015). We had noted the recent growth in the number of VET providers delivering associate degrees and bachelor degrees, as well as VET qualification. However, little was known about these VET providers. We aimed to identify why these organisations have made this transition, what support is being provided to their staff and students, and how the associated operational issues are being managed. The case institutions were Canberra Institute of Technology, Holmesglen Institute, Polytechnic West, TAFE SA, Tabor Adelaide and Think Education.

This diverse group of VET providers were chosen to determine what effect, if any, various features might have on their success. They differ in size, type, the length of time they have delivered degrees, the fields of study in which the degrees are being delivered, and the jurisdictions in which they operate. They have in common that they are trail blazer VET providers in making the transition to delivering degrees in their own right. We applaud their agreement to be identified and their openness and frankness about what they have managed well, and where challenges continue to exist.

Context

The Bradley Review (2008) recommended the need for government to establish targets for increasing the number of higher level qualifications in the Australian workforce. In response to this the Council of Australian Governments (COAG 2008) established a number of targets, one of which was to double the number of people holding diploma and advanced diploma qualifications by 2020. Another Bradley Review recommendation was to strengthen the links between VET and HE. This was based on the observation that some people use VET diplomas as a stepping stone into HE bachelor degrees.

Many strategies are currently being implemented to achieve the required growth, including:

- VET and HE providers partnering to develop VET to HE qualification pathways through improved articulation and credit transfer arrangements (Phillips KPA 2006; Wheelahan et al. 2009);

- VET providers partnering with HE providers to deliver the early years of HE programs via contracted delivery; and

- VET and HE providers becoming a provider of both VET and HE in their own right, achieving vertical integration of their tertiary education in their own institution.

Drivers: why VET organisations choose to deliver degrees

The case study VET organisations chose to deliver associate and bachelor degrees as a means of providing pathways into higher education for their VET graduates. They generally were delivering degrees in niche markets, where it was a natural extension of the special strengths of individual institutes. They saw their competitive points of advantage as the highly applied and field-based nature of their degrees and their smaller classes which enabled them to provide more personalised support for students than was provided by traditional higher education providers.

These organisations were not passive or accidental players in the HE market. They had entered into HE delivery with considerable experience in coming up with innovative ways to promote greater flexibility in HE programs, and to achieve better public profile and status.

They were seeking to maintain or expand their provision given greater competition from both above and below. For example, universities have been extending into VET provision in their own right as registered training organisations (RTOs) (Wheelahan et al. 2012) and or increasing delivery of their HE diplomas and advanced diplomas after decades of diminishing enrolments in these qualifications (Moodie & Fredman 2013). VET-in-Schools programs have also been expanding, with schools becoming RTOs (Nguyen 2010).

These VET providers also revealed that strategy and positioning relating to the delivery of degrees is constantly under review. They had clear short-term HE goals but their longer-term goals were open to change.

Capability issues – Staff and student support

Locating suitably qualified staff to deliver their degrees was not reported as a major challenge by any of the case organisations. The organisations did highlight, however, challenges associated with moving VET staff to teaching in HE and the effort involved in providing opportunities for scholarship for staff teaching in HE. Views on what is appropriate scholarship were still emerging and tended to be more aligned to the applied nature of the HE programs offered by their organisations.

Providers generally felt that a strong student-centric culture and adequate HE-specific student support is required to assist students with their HE studies. To this end the student support services provided to HE students had evolved and increased over time to include:

- smaller classes with ready access to teaching staff;

- the use of multiple mechanisms up-front to test student readiness for HE study;

- extra tutorial support in some more theoretical and academic core courses;

- literacy, numeracy and computer skills support programs;

- use of individual learning plans for at-risk students;

- the redesign of HE qualifications to promote the more applied orientation of the qualifications as a balance to the academic focus; and

- support for more gifted students.

Operational structures and challenges

The cases revealed strong and evolving governance structures to support the development and delivery of their HE qualifications. In the initial years, the

operational arrangements for HE are often managed as exceptions to existing VET arrangements. Over time, supporting units, governance structures, policies and procedures have become more differentiated, with the formation of a HE support leader and unit being a key milestone in this differentiation.

Also reported were numerous operational challenges in offering HE degrees, including the need to constantly review rates of student engagement and attrition. The cases revealed the burden of responding to two substantially different but overlapping regulatory systems: the VET (ASQA) regulatory system and the HE (TEQSA) regulatory system. The financial cost, as well as staff time, required to seek and to maintain accreditation of HE degree courses and HE provider registration was a major challenge. All organisations reported that meeting TEQSA's early expectations have been costly in terms of direct financial costs, lost opportunity costs and staff time, including staff time to rework submissions. One view was that a single regulatory body for both VET and HE would greatly decrease this burden. This is a Bradley Review recommendation that has not been taken up, as yet.

The cost of seeking and meeting TESQA's requirements is one factor in the recent decisions by some of the case study institutions to reduce their delivery of HE qualifications in their own right. Another factor was recent changes in VET funding policies in some states. However, rather than dropping HE, some were still delivering their HE qualifications, but in partnerships with universities or other providers. All six case organisations planned to maintain their HE capacity as far as possible and to increase their HE involvement when there was a sound business case to do so.

We note that since the case studies were conducted, and from 2014 onwards, there have been new developments in funding arrangements for tertiary education (diplomas and above), which may potentially change further the position of VET providers in aspects of this market.

> **The financial cost, as well as staff time, required to seek and to maintain accreditation of HE degree courses and HE provider registration was a major challenge.**

Advice for VET providers considering delivering degrees

The case study VET providers passed on useful information for any VET provider considering adding HE qualifications to its current suite of qualifications. A 'good practice' guide has been recently developed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) based on our research (see NCVER 2015). The key messages expanded upon in the guide are:

Be strategic: build on existing skills and relationships

Build upon the relationships you already have with industry. It is vital to involve industry in the design, development and implementation of applied HE qualifications to the professional level required to meet industry needs and to attract students to a VET provider of HE qualifications. Best practice also includes providing placements and industry projects for students once the degrees are in place.

Develop a business case and review it regularly

A strong business case for any new HE qualification is vital. Elements to consider include, but are not limited to: potential impacts upon revenue and institution status; costs in setting up the required governance structures, accreditation and re-accreditation processes; the costs of additional supports for HE students; and your experience in HE.

A strong work up to delivering higher education in your own right

Don't jump into the deep end. Take a step-by-step approach to allow the institution to build solid organisational and staff capability. Start by expanding your VET-HE credit articulation arrangements and offering dual VET/HE qualifications, then move to contracted HE delivery and finally, become a HE provider in your own right, and deliver HE qualifications.

Develop appropriate academic governance arrangements

In the initial stages include external HE experts in your governance arrangements. They can add a depth of understanding on HE issues including accreditation. As time progresses a key step is the recruitment of a HE support leader and the establishment of a HE unit.

Promote scholarship

Academic scholarship is an important feature underpinning the delivery of degrees in universities. VET providers need to develop their own appropriate model for HE scholarship to underpin their HE provision. One strategy is to leverage off partnerships with local universities and other VET providers offering HE to access networks, communities of practice, forums and shared professional development opportunities for staff.

Provide additional student support

Student engagement and attrition are issues that require constant management by VET providers delivering degrees. VET graduates attracted to VET provider degrees can require extra supports to help them adapt to the different features of HE courses.

Adopt continuous improvement

Expect HE operations to evolve over time and with experience. Setting up in HE is a long-term venture requiring concerted effort on several fronts within a continuous improvement framework. ∎

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Recognising skill in jobs traditionally considered unskilled 2011–14

Erica Smith and Andy Smith, Federation University Australia I Ian Hampson and Anne Junor, University of NSW

This national research project investigated unidentified and undervalued skill in people's jobs through research in nine occupations in service and manufacturing industries.

Our research aims were:

1. To achieve better recognition of skill and skill levels in occupations and work processes which are labelled 'low level' or 'low skill' but which may contain unrecognised or under-recognised skills.

2. To examine the effects on policy and practice, at national and company level, of labelling as 'low skilled' work that contains under-recognised and under-valued skill.

3. To investigate the potential outcomes of the findings about under-recognised skill for occupational qualifications as expressed in national Training Packages, the major basis for curricula for the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector.

We hoped that the impact of our study might help to provide individuals with better life chances and improved self-efficacy in the labour market.

The project was funded through the Australian Research Council Linkage program. Our industry partners were two Industry Skills Councils: Service Skills Australia, Manufacturing Skills Australia, and also the trade union United Voice. The Construction and Property Services Industry Skills Council also assisted us.

The nine occupations that we researched were: Hotel reception worker (Guest service agent), Cleaner, Security operator, Metal fitter & machinist, Concrete products operator, Sewing machinist, Waiter, Chef, Retail (non-supermarket) assistant.

The project web site is at: http://federation.edu.au/faculties-and-schools/faculty-of-education-and-arts/research/fea-research-groups/rave-researching-adult-and-vocational-education/folder2/recognising-skills.

> 66 **Feminist literature (eg Healy, Hansen & Ledwith, 2006) argues that 'male' jobs have gained the reputation of being skilled at the expense of 'female' jobs.** 99

Literature

In the international literature on skill, the skill requirements of particular jobs[1] has been long contested. Roughly speaking, there are four major schools of thought. These are explained below. For reasons of space, the cited references are not included in this paper but can be sent on request.

1. Positivist/technicist approaches view skill as an unproblematic, measurable 'quantity' (Attewell, 1990; Felstead et al., 2005) based on indicators such as complexity and autonomy (Adler, 2007).

2. Proxy measures of skill, such as length of training, wage rates (Spenner, 1990) or, in Australia, the Australian Bureau of Statistics ASCO (occupational) classifications, are often used to measure skill (Esposto, 2008).

3. Social construction theory explains how beliefs about skill and the job hierarchies are operationalised through institutions such as industrial relations arrangements and requirements for qualifications (Steinberg, 1990: 455). Feminist literature (eg Healy, Hansen & Ledwith, 2006) argues that 'male' jobs have gained the reputation of being skilled at the expense of 'female' jobs.

4. Soft or generic skills have received an increasing emphasis internationally over the last thirty years (Gatta, Boushey & Appelbaum, 2007). Soft skills have been operationalised in various lists of 'generic skills' (e.g. BCA/ACCI, 2002). The issue of 'soft skills' has become a further problematic in the debate around skill (Grugulis and Lloyd, 2010).

Vallas (1990), an American writer, notes that different views about what skills there are in work has very real and significant effects in terms of policy and practice. As he puts it, 'More than academic nuances are at stake'. Hence our project set out to uncover more information about skill in jobs covered by the VET sector, with a view to more effective and evidence-based policy formation.

Research method

Table 1 provides a snapshot of the research. More detail can be seen on the project web site. The 'Spotlight' tool (developed by Anne Junor and Ian Hampson in previous projects) is designed to bring out less visible skills in jobs.

Table 1: Project phases and participants

Phase	Activity	Number of participants
1	Telephone and face to face interviews with senior officials and stakeholders in VET and industrial relations	19
2	Telephone and face to face interviews with targeted senior stakeholders in each of the nine occupational areas	44
3	19 company case studies (two per occupation – three in retail), involving interviews with managers, workers, trainers;	115
	'Spotlight' interviews in 8 companies (workers only)	31
4	Analysis to produce occupational summaries and specific analysis of 'Spotlight skills	Project team
5	Eight industry forums to validate findings to date through guided discussion of occupational summaries. Here occupations for waiter and chef were combined.	53*
6	Training Package comparison ('desk-top audit' against specified criteria with preliminary advice from Industry Skills Council staff)	8
7	National validation (policy/practice) via stakeholder forum	22
	International validation via discussions with overseas academics	6

Around 250 people in total were involved as direct research participants; some participated in more than one phase.

Findings

For clarity and brevity we have confined our analysis here to seven occupations that are traditionally regarded as unskilled and low-skilled. We have not included Fitter/Machinist and Chef occupations.

Perceptions of skill

In all seven occupations there was a great deal of skill in the work that is not generally understood, seen or acknowledged. Perceptions of skill were diverse, both within the occupation (i.e. perceptions varied among different research participants), and between occupations.

It was clear that, as might be expected but is rarely acknowledged, the closer interviewees were to the job, the more the skill was recognised. Thus, among managers or stakeholders that had done the job the skill was well recognised. However among, for example, HR managers or line managers coming from a different industry, it was less well recognised. Generally the actual workers in the job tended to underestimate the skills required, or could not easily articulate the different sorts of skill without prompting. However the use of tools like 'Spotlight' quickly uncovered the richness of the skills involved in the job.

Perceptions of skill were influenced by a number of factors. Those mentioned by the participants, or inferred from the interviews, included: internalisation of public perceptions, the reputation of the industry (not just the occupation), the amount of risk in the job (e.g. WH&S and/ or effects on profits), and the visibility of the job to the public. Visibility worked in two ways. In retail and cleaning, the everydayness of the job made it appear less skilled; but the jobs of concrete product workers were so invisible that the public had no idea what was contained in the occupation.

What is the skill in the job?

For ease of reference, we refer to skills as 'technical' or 'non-technical'. The latter term is inclusive of employability

> **In all seven occupations there was a great deal of skill in the work that is not generally understood, seen or acknowledged.**

skills, generic skills, soft skills etc. We acknowledge the debates around these terms, and also whether attributes should be referred to as skills, however, it was not helpful to the analysis to pursue them. We also acknowledge that in many service sector occupations, many of the 'non-technical' skills in the job are in fact the 'technical' skills.

Skills and knowledge in the jobs that are easily recognisable as 'technical' included: Product knowledge, systems operations (computer or other systems), properties of materials being worked with, market knowledge (suppliers, customers), and other knowledge relating to the external environment.

Skills and knowledge in the jobs that are easily recognisable as 'non-technical' included: Communicating with colleagues and customers, managing and organising own work, self-managing, multi-tasking, detecting unexpressed customer needs, and co-ordinating workflow among customers and co-workers.

Respondents, especially workers themselves, found it hard to articulate many of these skills. In particular, non-technical skills were often seen as 'innate', i.e. personal attributes, although they were also described (somewhat illogically) as growing with experience on the job - in other words, they were also learned.

The most important conclusion from this is that every job contains two 'bundles' of skills and knowledge – 'technical' and 'non-technical' – and that both sets of skills in these occupations have under-recognised elements. Moreover, the sizes of the 'bundles' varies among workers doing the same jobs, as some choose to bring more to, and put more into, their work. However, the importance of motivation was not a topic explicitly explored in the research.

How are career paths, training, and job prospects influenced by perceptions of skill?

Career paths are stronger in these occupations than might be expected or understood by potential applicants. In all cases, except possibly waiter, there is quite a strong career path, however, the paths are often within organisations, in higher-level jobs, rather than within the specific occupation. In some cases the career paths are clear within the organisation, while in other cases they are somewhat nebulous.

Qualifications are not required for any of the seven jobs except for security officer.

For the others, there seems to be a vicious cycle: the qualification is not required, therefore receives little or no funding. As a consequence the qualification is regarded as (and may also be) inadequate, and subsequently the job is is not recognised as skilled. In some cases, people in the industry did not even know that qualifications were available.

Some of the occupations are characterised by cohorts of workers that are disadvantaged or disempowered in some way – e.g. sewing machinists (often mature women who are culturally and linguistically diverse) and concrete workers (often mature men with irregular labour market records). Four out of seven of the occupations are jobs commonly undertaken by students. These factors seem to work (unfairly) to reduce people's respect for the occupations and also to poor policy outcomes.

How do our findings about skill in these jobs compare with the relevant Training Package qualifications?

In general our examination of the Training Package qualifications found that most of the skills we identified were covered in the qualifications. This might be expected given the wide consultation that takes place in Training Package development and review. There were, however, some issues that arose across all or most of the qualifications in our study.

Qualification-based/structural issues

- In some cases the relative emphasis on the skills described in the Training Package qualification did not reflect the relative emphasis shown in our research.

- The presence of large numbers of electives in some qualifications prevented a straightforward analysis of what skills the graduates of the qualification might possess.

- The nature of the allocation of 'technical' and 'non-technical' skills across core and elective units meant that a worker's qualification may contain little in the way of the 'technical' skills that we found were required in the occupation.

- It was hard to get a sense of what a good worker should be doing from the qualifications. Yet the validation sessions came up with examples (e.g. waiter) where the performance of a good worker was very well described.

> **Generally the actual workers in the job tended to underestimate the skills required, or could not easily articulate the different sorts of skill without prompting.**

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Unit-based issues

- 'Non-technical' skills were often described in the units in rather general terms, seeming to pass a great deal of responsibility onto the assessor to interpret what was acceptable.

- 'Attitude' did not surface well in the units in the qualifications, at odds with our findings about its importance. The 'Spotlight' tool we used helped to elaborate these behaviours.

- Integration of skills including issues of work flow is not consistently present in the units in the qualifications. Concrete batching was one example of this.

In conclusion

The findings of the project can thus be summed up in the following way:

> **Hidden skills
> Hidden career paths
> Hidden qualifications
> Hidden workforces**

The stakeholder forum provided insight into our findings and their implications from a range of viewpoints and areas of expertise. This is proving valuable for further analysis, as are the comments which are now coming in from our panel of international experts. ■

Care leavers and higher education

Andrew Harvey, Patricia McNamara and Lisa Andrewartha I La Trobe University

Young people up to 18 years of age who cannot live with their birth families are placed in out-of-home care, including kinship care, foster care and residential care. Approximately 40,000 children live in out-of-home care in Australia and this number has risen every year over the past decade. People who spent time in care before the age of 18 are subsequently referred to as care leavers when they transition out of the system. Care leavers often experience a dramatic reduction in formal support and an accelerated transition to independence. Care leavers rarely enter higher education, leaving them largely excluded from the level of education that brings the highest wage premiums and lifetime rewards. Despite this inequity, there is a paucity of Australian research into the experience of care leavers in higher education.

La Trobe University led a national research project to explore why care leavers rarely transition to higher education, and how universities and governments might work to raise their participation rates. The project was funded by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education at Curtin University. A mixed methods approach was adopted which included: a global literature review; analysis of national data sources; an online survey of universities; and interviews with community service organisations.

Our findings reveal that the educational needs of care leavers are too often overlooked, and their academic potential is consistently underestimated. There is no national data collection of the higher education outcomes of care leavers, leaving us unable to obtain a precise measure of their university participation rate. Nevertheless, this rate has been estimated to be as low as one per cent compared to 26 per cent of young people in the general population. While the rate of transition into TAFE appears to be slightly higher, care leavers are often not ready to make these transitions until later in life.

National policy is slowly being developed at school level to provide individualised, comparable data across states and territories on the educational achievement levels of children in out-of-home care. However, much less attention is being given to monitoring achievement and outcomes at post-secondary level. The existing higher education equity framework is shown as limited in its capacity to support care leavers. Universities rarely collect data on care leaver status and there are few specific policies, support structures, or procedures in place for this group.

The voices of the community service sector highlight the lack of formal support for care leavers beyond the age of 18, and the inadequacy of university outreach and promotion. Carers and associated workers are often unfamiliar with higher education themselves, and the initial educational aspirations of children in out-of-home care may be modified to meet the relatively low expectations of those around them.

Major reforms are required to improve the higher education access and achievement of care leavers. The collection of nationally consistent data on higher education outcomes is essential. A strong evidence base will help promote policy implementation and action. Universities could be more active in developing targeted practices and policies for care leavers. Financial and accommodation assistance is particularly important for this group. Community service organisations require support to better monitor the educational progress of children in care, and further work is required to increase the educational expectations and aspirations of care leavers. ■

Further reading

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Transparency: Who scrutinises what?

Dr Don Zoellner **I** **Northern Institute** **I** **Charles Darwin University**

The desirability of making governments accountable to the public can be traced back to the eighteenth century when Jeremy Bentham proposed that 'the people should be able to trace the cause of their suffering' (Rosenblum 1978, p. 146). This openness was progressively extended to Australian governments throughout the late twentieth century through the introduction of ombudsman offices, legislated reporting requirements and estimates hearings in various parliaments (Verspaandook 2000). As most vocational training in the early 1990s was delivered through state government-owned TAFE institutions, operations were subject to increased levels of scrutiny and reporting upon about their impact upon citizens. Terms like transparency increasingly came to be associated with good governance, consumer choice, ethical behaviour, normality, high standards and efficiency (Garsten & Lindh de Montoya 2008). Marshall (1995, pp. 191-2) argues that the easy acceptance of this 'busnocratic' word has brought with it unstated and increasingly uncontested implications that emphasise information and its retrieval over its understanding.

Vocational education and training (VET) was introduced to transparency (courtesy of the Australian National Training Authority) as a key mechanism for obtaining greater national consistency and increased availability of useable information about the sector (Zoellner, pp. 138-9). Taylor's Report of the review of the ANTA Agreement (Australian National Training Authority 1996) recommended greater transparency as the solution to every problem standing in the way of a national training system. The ability of transparency initiatives to solve such problems was heavily mitigated by the complexity of the VET system itself, due to Australia's federalist political arrangement between the States and Commonwealth, high levels of regulation, sheer diversity of the VET sector and the system's usefulness as a tool of public policy.

In order to ensure appropriate levels of value and quality from the public's investment in training, the initial targets of transparency were the complicated activities of the state and federal governments. In other words, the public was watching the political. However, the introduction of a large group of non-government training providers changed both the object of the gaze and the subject of who is doing the looking. Training organisations and their students have been required to provide ever increasing amounts of information to government agencies through mechanisms such as the unique student identifier, total VET activity reporting, Australian Bureau of Statistics surveys and enhancements to the Australian VET Management Information Statistical Standard (Council of Australian Governments 2012).

The now long-standing bi-partisan application of transparency to VET supports the assumption that citizens are acting as economically rational choice-makers who self-regulate in a society measured through audits and calculations; 'it involves a specific relationship between the one who is seeing and the one who is being seen' (Garsten & Lindh de Montoya 2008, p. 6). The current version of VET transparency relies upon the design and introduction of expert information systems that, in turn, reward particular types of behaviours and decisions such as investing in administrative computing applications rather than teaching and learning platforms.

In a neat reversal, government decisions have become more opaque rather than more transparent. It is not clear how decisions are made about such things as the length and membership of advisory board appointments, the nature of the advice given to ministers, and reasons for limiting access to the minutes of publicly funded meetings to do with VET. As noted by Bennis et al, (2008, p. 16) it is easy to say 'you believe in transparency without practising it or even aspiring to it'. On the other hand, private individuals and contracted organisations that comprise the national training system must now report to government centres of calculation, providing the information required to manage the population using this unremarkably simple and non-coercive form of disciplinary power (Foucault 1979, pp. 170-1). After all, the major outcome expected of public policy is to change the population's behaviour (Australian Public Service Commission 2007).

In addition, the continuing demands for greater transparency in VET have taken on a new dimension that moves past the more direct relationship that formerly existed between governments and citizens. The fate of Vocation Limited's massive destruction of shareholder value is currently the subject of class action law suits which allege that the company should have provided more timely information to the market (Loussikian 2015). The VET Transparency Agenda has now evolved to incorporate financial and risk dimensions, which only serve to further enhance its the seemingly unquestionable acceptance of transparency as being a good thing and the need for governments to require for even more of it.

Australia's contemporary national training system has readily embraced a symbolic range of words that frequently serve as proxies for much larger social and economic policies aimed at improving the nation. Terms like competence, contestability, quality and transparency have become so commonly used, they have assumed a mantle of 'common sense'; making it all but impossible to speak against them, even when the exact agendas they represent are built upon unstated ideological positions and assumptions about how people should live and behave. Our current application of transparency, where citizens must report to governments instead of the other way around, would be unfamiliar to Jeremy Bentham. ■

> **The now long-standing bi-partisan application of transparency to VET supports the assumption that citizens are acting as economically rational choice-makers who self-regulate in a society measured through audits and calculations.**

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NCVER RESEARCH FORUM
18 November 2015
Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre

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When one door closes:
VET's role in re-skilling displaced workers

Research Forum: VET's role in re-skilling displaced workers

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