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AUTHOR Chappell, Clive
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ABSTRACT

The vocational education and training (VET) profession in Australia is confronted with a radical reconstruction, not only in terms of the new work VET professionals are expected to perform but also in terms of the new culture and professional roles that have emerged out of the diversifying sites of professional practice. Reasons for the shift in the conceptualization of professional work in VET must include the changes brought about by over a decade of training reform and the establishment of a competitive market in VET provision. The VET market is characterized by an increasing variety of providers. The VET sector is exhibiting quite radically changed employment patterns, particularly non-standard employment. Today, VET delivery increasingly relies on casual and part-time staff. The changes reflect quite fundamental shifts in the way knowledge, learning, skills, and work are conceptualized in contemporary societies. A future is predicted in which the VET professional is either a VET consultant working across a number of VET sites or a learning manager employed to manage learning activities of large VET providers. The new VET professional must in some senses not only be capable of spanning the cultural divide that distinguishes the world of work from the world of education but also that which distinguishes the world of private enterprise from the world of public service. (Contains 16 references.) (YLB)

The new VET professional: culture, roles & competence

*Clive Chappell
Senior Research Fellow
UTS Research Centre Vocational Education & Training*

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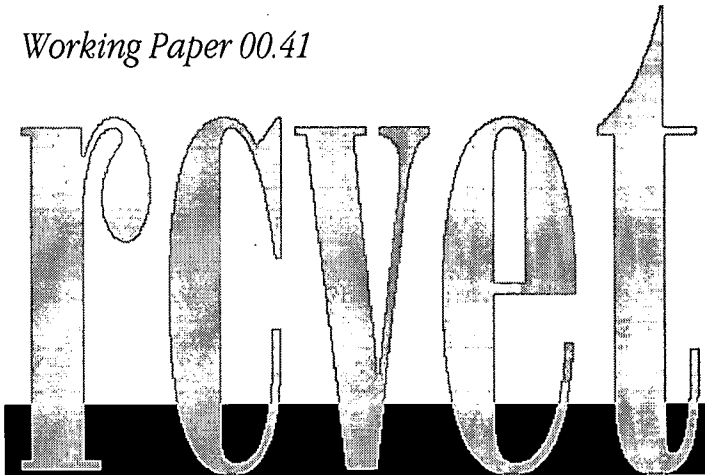
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The new VET professional: culture, roles & competence

Clive Chappell

Australian education and training has experienced unprecedented levels of change in recent times. Government educational policies are dominated by economic discourses that point to the need for all education and training systems to contribute to economic development, by increasing the knowledge and skill levels of the present and future workforce. The contemporary discourses of new vocationalism and new economics have transformed Australian educational systems. Furthermore, the emergence of new knowledge discourses has also problematised traditional views on what counts as knowledge in education and training. However, the effects of this transformation on Vocational Education and Training (VET) practitioners, working in this rapidly changing environment, have not been adequately examined. This paper examines this issue and proposes that the VET profession is confronted with a radical reconstruction, not only in terms of the new work VET professionals are expected to perform but also in terms of the new culture and professional roles that have emerged out of the diversifying sites of profession practice.

INTRODUCTION

One of the first things requiring explanation is what is meant by the term 'new VET professional' as used in this paper. Firstly, I am not using the term to construct a new occupational title. No Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teacher, workplace trainer, Human Resource Development (HRD) specialist, workplace assessor, facilitator, tutor, training package writer or indeed VET researcher would identify themselves as VET professionals. Generally these groups of practitioners identify either with their employer or with the institutional site in which they work.

Rather, I use the 'new VET professional', as a general term, that refers to the group of professionals who are engaged in education and training activities that focus on preparing and developing workplace capability but which extend beyond traditional teaching or training roles. The term would for example include full-time TAFE teachers who undertake a variety of activities beyond the classroom, laboratory or workshop. It would include people in organisations whose primary function is to enhance individual, group and organisational learning within an enterprise. It would include people in the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector who manage the vocational side of ACE's business. It would include HRD specialists and people who manage Registered Training

Organisation (RTO) activities and it would include those that act as independent education and training consultants involved in developing workplace capability. In short it is a term that encompasses the diversity of roles and contexts found across the various sectors of the contemporary VET system.

The term is also used here to suggest that there are matters of common interest, including questions about what capabilities are demanded and what kind of adaptabilities expected of people undertaking this kind of contemporary educational work; work that is currently undergoing quite radical change.

Finally, the term is also useful because it focuses research attention on questions about the changing nature of educational work and the challenges facing VET in coming to terms with quite fundamental changes in the increasingly uncertain world of the contemporary labour market.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF VET

If we now turn to the reasons for this shift in the conceptualisation of professional work in VET, we cannot escape turning to the changes brought about by over a decade of training reform and in particular the establishment of a competitive market in VET provision. By this I do not wish to imply that these reforms are the only reason for the emergence of the new VET professional. Indeed, I will argue later, that there are more fundamental reasons for this shift in the conceptualisation of VET work. Nevertheless, the formation of a competitive market in VET brings about significant changes in the ways various stakeholders conceptualise and undertake their activities as the new diversified VET sector emerges, characterised by ill-defined borders, which straddle public, private and non-government agencies.

The ABS Report Education and Training Experience Australia -1997 provides us with some data on which to construct a picture of this contemporary VET market. (Dumbrell, 1998)

In 1997 over 70% of the working population in Australia had undertaken some form of training during that year. In coming to this figure the ABS identifies two categories of VET provision. The first category, the ABS recognises for statistical purposes, is VET provision that leads to a formal award. The second category is 'training' that is structured but does not lead to an award. In 1997, VET award-course provision consisted of 300 million contact hours Australia wide while the second category consisted of 213 million contact hours (71% of formal VET effort). This indicates a 58.5%-41.5% split in terms of structured VET provision in Australia

However it is important to note that the 513 million contact hours reported by the ABS does not include all of the unstructured and informal learning that takes place in Australian workplaces.

VET award courses

In terms of VET award courses (58.5%) the majority of participants used government-administered TAFE colleges. However the ABS also notes that VET award courses are also provided, to a lesser extent, by some higher education institutions, schools and agricultural colleges, by adult and community education authorities and enterprises, and by private providers of education such as business colleges (ABS). Therefore, while TAFE remains a dominant player in the formal award sector of the VET market, it faces increasing competitive pressures from other organisations. TAFE has lost its position as a near monopoly provider of formal award courses. Indeed according to the recently commissioned report *Training to Compete: The training needs of industry*, there is every reason to believe that competitive pressures will increase for TAFE.

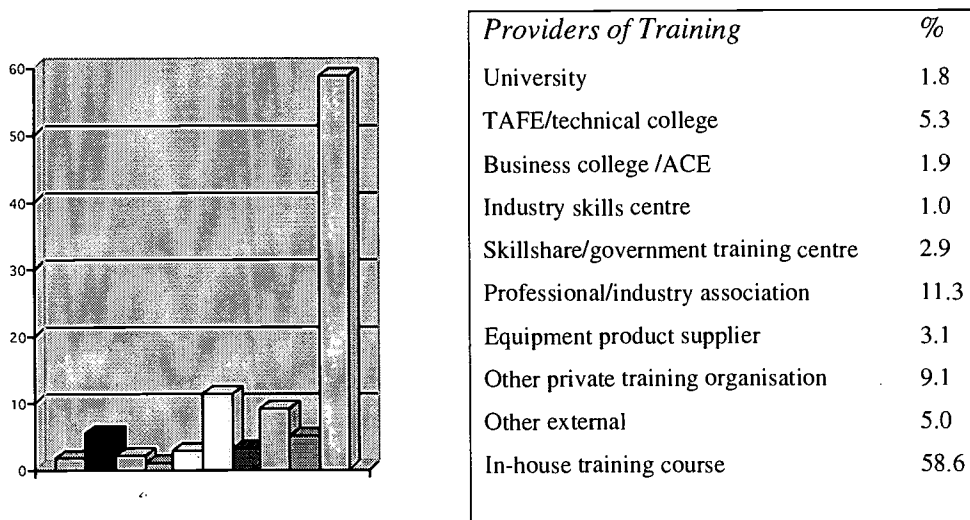
The report, commissioned by the Australian Industry Group indicated that after a decade of reform in VET, many in business still perceive the VET system as 'overly complex', 'difficult to access' and often not relevant to industry needs. (AIG 1999:xii-xv). Furthermore the businesses that were surveyed indicated that in terms of their future use of the VET system 37% expected to use private providers more in the future while 25% expected to use TAFE. (AIG 1999:59).

The picture becomes even more complex if, as is predicted, many more formal vocational courses are offered by the schools sector. The Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET), for example, is reported as estimating an 80% overall increase in VET courses in Schools over the next 4 years (Campus Review 2000)

Non-award VET courses

The figures for the second ABS category non-award courses (41.5%) reveal an even more complex picture in terms of VET provision (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Non-award training courses



It shows for example that almost 60% of structured non-award training occurs in-house. At the same time 20% of this market is covered by professional/industry associations and other private providers of training. TAFE's contribution to this sector of the VET market is relatively small, coming in at a little over 5%, thus TAFE, at least in 1997, was a minor player in non-award structured training.

The ABS also provides some data concerning the health of the VET market. In the award category of VET provision in 1993 22.8% of wage and salary earners held a vocational qualification. By 1997 this had increased to 24.4%. However this was not so large an increase as that occurring in Higher Education qualifications which over the same period increased from 24.2% to 27.8%.

In the non-award category there are mixed signals. In 1997, 74% of workers had received some on-the-job training. This was close to 1989 levels (72%) but significantly lower than in 1993 (82%). However in this category training provision was skewed toward highly skilled professional and managerial work, with these groups much more likely to receive training (90%) than those working in less skilled occupations (58%)

In summary then the VET market is characterised by an increasing variety of providers. In formal award courses TAFE remains the dominant provider but is under pressure from other players with RTO status, including private providers, group training centres, ACE colleges and more recently schools. Indeed it seems likely that the schools sector will become TAFE's major competitor in initial VET award provision with private providers dominating structured but non-award training in industries and enterprises.

THE VET WORKFORCE

A central platform of government policy over the last 12 years has been to integrate all forms of work related learning into a coherent, national and unified VET system. Competency-based Training, the recognition of prior learning, the extension of public accreditation and regulation processes to industry, enterprises and non-government providers, the development of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and the more recent production of training packages have all been designed to facilitate this integration. These changes are in addition to the establishment of a competitive VET market.

However less attention has been given to the impact of these changes on the VET workforce. Nevertheless we do know certain things about this workforce.

We know for example that in 1997 there were 31400 VET teachers working in the TAFE system. (NCVER 1998, p. 317) We also know, at that time, 56% of these teachers were working full-time (ABS 1998). While we have no definitive figures we also know that the full-time/part-time mix has changed significantly since the arrival of the competitive VET market with all Australian states recording a decline in full-time teaching positions. For example, a recent research report on employment trends in the Victorian TAFE workforce from 1993-1998 indicates that there had been a 10% increase in vocational teaching hours

over that period (Office of Post Compulsory Education Training & Employment, 2000 pp. 35-38).

However, this growth has not resulted in more full-time tenured staff being appointed indeed there had been an 18% decrease in this employment group. At the same time the study reports a 22% increase in payment for sessional teaching staff and a 94% increase in average monthly hours of part time teaching. Recruitment of full time TAFE teaching staff is now at historically low levels and there is some evidence to suggest that the percentage of full-time TAFE teachers within the system will continue to fall. (Mathers, 1997)

The figures for other VET providers are more speculative in that at present no specific figures are collected by the ABS. However the ABS Labour Force Study (Catalogue#6230.0) reports that there are 57,000 extra systemic teachers and instructors on top of the 31,400 TAFE teachers and it would be reasonable to assume that many of these are teachers and trainers in the private and non-government VET sector. The NCVER (1998, 317) commenting on these figures also suggest that they do not indicate the number of VET staff employed on a casual or part-time basis and whose primary employment is elsewhere. The work of Johnston (1999) also suggests that those working in organisational settings in the broad field of Human Resource Development (HRD) often do not identify themselves in this category.

From these figures the VET sector is exhibiting quite radically changed employment patterns. Moreover these patterns are consistent with general employment patterns emerging in many economies worldwide, The rise of 'non-standard' employment (Curtain 1996) or what Marginson (2000) refers to as 'flexible' or 'contingent' work in contemporary economies is now a common feature of the international labour market. Briefly, this pattern of employment suggests that the standard full time job, characterised by a clearly defined role, stable employment and set working conditions is in decline in the labour market. At the same time 'non-standard' employment is on the increase.

Non-standard work consists of two distinctive work patterns. The first involves work that is usually casual, part time, often less skilled or more narrowly skilled and generally involves working for more than one employer in order to earn a full-time equivalent wage. The second non-standard employment pattern is quite different in that it is highly skilled work, usually highly paid, undertaken for one employer, with the employee undertaking multiple job roles within the organisation and often working considerably longer hours than in standard employment.

We know that today VET delivery increasingly relies on casual and part staff. We know that companies outsource much of their training using private providers who often employ casual, sessional or contract staff. We also know that this trend is in part an outcome of the economic pressures brought on by the competitive VET market. But it is also a contemporary strategy used to facilitate rapid responses to changing market conditions, training requirements and emerging skills deficits.

This contingent VET workforce is employed to deliver specific courses and requires qualifications of a lower order than their full-time counterparts. Indeed since its

introduction in 1990, the Cat 2 Certificate 1V qualification and the more recent Certificate 1V in Assessment and Workplace Training has become the standard qualification for this sector of the workforce. While this development is often interpreted as a process of de-professionalization, it could also be argued that it is equally a process of differentiating roles within VET. It is also a harbinger of a radical re-organisation of VET work.

This development is consistent with employment predictions that suggest a future in which there is a substantial growth in 'non-standard' employment outlined earlier. (Access Economics 1998, Centre for Policy Studies 1998)

The 'new VET professional' emerges as a likely candidate for this latter employment category and if this thesis is correct there are significant consequences in terms of conceptualising the future VET workforce. It suggests that the eponymous 'technical teacher' and 'workplace trainer' is an endangered species at least in terms of professional status. The professionalization of TAFE teachers, beginning with Kangan in 1974, is now clearly in danger and despite the elevation of workplace trainers in recent years they have never received, even fleetingly, professional status. Technical teaching or workplace training, per se, is increasingly undertaken by casual and part-time staff who are required by employers to have certificate level qualifications. It is therefore unlikely that in the competitive VET market, a provider such as TAFE or any other provider for that matter could sustain an undifferentiated teaching and training workforce all with degree level qualifications.

NEW KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS AT WORK

However it is a mistake, I believe, to view these changes as merely reflecting the impact of government policy, in particular the establishment of a competitive VET market. Instead I would argue that these changes reflect quite fundamental shifts in the way knowledge, learning, skills and work are conceptualised in contemporary societies.

New work

Technological advances and the changing organisation of work suggest that vocationally relevant knowledge and skills are, now more than ever, transient, often context specific and cross-occupational. Given this, it is unlikely that teachers and trainers will be in a position to claim currency over vocational expertise embedded in the new forms of work that are emerging. Moreover, the very idea of a stable career trajectory has become an anachronistic concept in the contemporary labour market. Increasingly, the pressures of technological innovation, changes to the organisation of work, rapidly shifting markets and new information systems (Castells 1995) undermine any idea of a stable and universally applicable trade or occupation into which an individual is inducted through an initial and extended training program. Rather the new work is characterised as indeterminate and ephemeral (Hetrick & Boje 1992) based on rapidly changing technologies, new knowledge production and its speedy application in flexible and rapidly changing markets (Hammer & Champy 1993).

Given these changes the idea that the role of the full-time VET teacher or trainer is to pass on their technical and vocational expertise becomes highly problematic. Their full-time status often precludes them from maintaining their vocational expertise, particularly in a climate of rapid technological change. However, as full-time educators they possess a different but equally valuable expertise in terms of learning. The learning expert may well become the central role of the 'new VET professional'.

New learning technologies

Information technology is now only beginning to impact on education and training and it seems inevitable that these new technologies will reduce the reliance on teachers and trainers to deliver VET programs. Learning on-line creates quite different relationships between learners and learning providers (Romiszowski 1997). These technologies eliminate time and space restrictions that have until now constrained access to expertise, learning resources and vocational knowledge. At the same time IT technologies also intensify competitive pressures by opening the VET market to both national and international providers of on-line learning. However they also bring with them new pedagogical questions and new management issues for VET providers.

The IT revolution presents the VET sector with many challenges and opportunities. Perhaps one of its greatest challenges is in the area of developing professional expertise in the design, implementation and management of e-Learning and this in itself suggests another role for the VET professional.

A new learning paradigm

Perhaps most significantly there has been a paradigm shift in education. A new emphasis on learning has resulted in education and training escaping the established walls of educational institutions. Today, for example, learning that takes place at work has a high status, in terms of its relevance, authenticity and utility (Senge 1991). RPL mechanisms are used to quantify and legitimise this learning that takes place outside of educational institutions. Furthermore, the focus on the learner in the new learning paradigm constructs learning more as an individual achievement than a public good. It also leads to the individual learner taking more responsibility for the content and cost of their learning activities.

Finally, this new emphasis on learning at work has seen a shift from conceptualising vocational programs as sets of pre-determined and standardised contents suitable for everyone working in a particular occupation. To one which recognises the specific nature of the relationship between the worker-learner, the specific work-site and the particular needs and requirements of employers. This promotes, albeit uneasily, a new coalition of interests that include those of learners, VET providers and employers. This in turn suggests a third role for the VET professional – the learning broker.

The new VET professional

A recent report published by the Office of Post Compulsory Education Training and Employment, in Victoria (OPCETE)(2000; 72) provides us with some empirical data on which to construct the new VET professional, at least in terms of TAFE. The study reports the:

- increasing use of sessional staff (with current industry skills) to meet shifting course demand and areas of growth.
- emergence of 'new recruit' sessional teachers who see their role as business consultants, with a portfolio of jobs across several Institutes and in industry.

TAFE managers also report that full time teaching staff are ' increasingly expected to undertake administrative functions associated with maintaining and organising learning environments serviced by the comings and goings of sessional and short term contract teachers'. The study suggests that this indicated 'an emerging role for the experienced teacher as a learning environment manager.' (p. 73)

The study also points out that there is a need for TAFE staff to have 'marketing skills, entrepreneurial and client-focused approaches to instructional delivery, general management and leadership, team-based management, project management and VET in schools provision.'

Finally the report, citing the work of Handy, (2000: 84) argues that modern organisations, such as TAFE Victoria, are moving towards 'a workforce constructed around competencies that focus on the central tasks of the organisation.'(p.85) It goes on to suggest that 'such workforces are increasingly being structured on a core/periphery model; a small group of committed career staff manages the business of the organisation, building short to medium-term, project-based teams with specialised consultant workers drawn from outside the organisation.'

This scenario indicates a future in which the VET professional is either a VET consultant working across a number of VET sites or a learning manager employed to manage the learning activities of large VET providers. The VET consultant finds employment in TAFE, industry, the ACE sector, schools, Industry Training Groups or other Registered Training Organisations (RTO's) either to undertake specific VET related projects or to teach specific courses and programs. The learning manager on the other hand is employed as a full-time employee either in a VET institution, other VET provider or a medium to large company involved in VET delivery. In this position they manage all aspects of the organisations learning related activities, including working with other organisations and industry clients.

In this scenario we could predict that both types of VET professionals would act as learning brokers to learners, employers and providers. Their work would involve sourcing, evaluating and producing solutions to particular learning needs. They would liaise with

VET clients, act as project managers, develop learning support infrastructure and act as learning consultants, offering various solutions that drive individual and organisational development and change. They may be involved in the knowledge management activities of either their own organisation or another. Others would develop and manage the new pedagogies associated with on-line learning. They would need to understand and be accountable for the quality and financial costs of learning. Many would be responsible for analysing future skills needs and plan related recruitment, re-training and re-deployment strategies. Almost all would be involved in identifying, negotiating and constructing learning partnerships between and across VET sectors. While others would manage the work of growing numbers of casual and sessional staff employed by VET providers.

CHANGING CULTURES

While it is possible to conceptualise the new VET professional having the knowledge and skills to perform these multiple roles in the new VET environment, there is another issue that is likely to be more problematic. The 'new VET professional' will be required to work across organisational boundaries and be able to work productively in the different organisational cultures that characterise the newly diversified VET sector.

VET now encompasses public, private and not-for-profit providers and the competitive market has brought with it the need for all providers to insert commercial business practices into their operations. In a real sense all providers are now in the 'business' of VET. VET providers also increasingly work under a common regulated framework, consequently they are governed by the same accreditation, articulation and other requirements of governments at both State and Federal levels. All providers are now influenced by government policy and must now negotiate the administrative and policy demands of governments.

These changes, among other things, disturb the different norms, values and modes of conduct that have provided public and private sector organisations with distinct and separate organisational identities. They also disturb the distinctive organisational cultures that have been constructed by these differences.

For example, TAFE as a public sector organisation has an identity built around public service. It has therefore constructed an organisational culture that values vocational education and training built around concepts of 'social good'. The discourses of equity, impartiality and adherence to the rules and regulations designed to increase public confidence and political accountability have been central to the construction of a shared organisational culture. Now the 'businessing' of VET has disturbed this construction, with 'new' TAFE constructed as an organisation with norms, values and modes of conduct that are largely indistinguishable from those found in the private sector.

The changes to VET provision have also disturbed the organisational culture of the private sector. Criticisms of the new VET system are directed toward its continued 'inflexibility', complexity and difficulty of access (AIG 1999). The national approach to industry competency standards is seen as not meeting the specific needs of enterprises (p.63). The

overlap and confusion brought about by inter-governmental and inter-sectoral involvement in VET is criticised, as is the complexity of the VET system. Indeed the Report, (AIG 1999: 64-65) observes 'the scepticism with which companies often regard government-sponsored advisory services' (in VET).

Thus the new VET professional must in some senses not only be capable of spanning the cultural divide that distinguishes the world of work from the world of education but also that which distinguishes the world of private enterprise from the world of public service. This requires them to negotiate different values, norms and modes of conduct that those currently found in either the public or private sector. How this might be achieved may well be the greatest challenge in the development of the new VET professional.

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