



Keynote address to the Australian Council of
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INTRODUCTION

As I stand here ,having accepted the invitation some six months ago to speak today, I wonder at the events that have passed in the world of vocational education and training in Australia.

One term comes to mind. *Annus Horibilis*.

I am sure you also wonder where the once mighty vocational education and training sector in Australia is heading.

The fact that the training sector has become a political football tells me that it is time that we stand-up and set the direction for the sector ourselves.

There's also another term that describes the situation, although somewhat more crude - *Coitus Interruptus*.

You see, we've been hoping for a happy conclusion to negotiations for a new national partnership between the Commonwealth and the states and territories.

But alas it's not yet complete, and now with the situation in South Australia, I can't see it, or any other jurisdiction, signing up to Commonwealth conditions at the risk of later being kicked in the teeth.

While there is not much money at stake, the partnership is important as it sets the roadmap for agreed national purpose for vocational education and training and clarification of responsibilities between the levels of government. I fear this a long way off.

I could spend my time with you today lamenting the state-of-affairs in the sector.

But I'm not going to because I want to take the opportunity to share with you what I believe can be a bright future for vocational education and training in Australia.

The bright future rides on building a professional TAFE workforce and a resurgence of the teaching and learning practice as a key to quality outcomes for individuals.

This resurgence is built off our faith in the core of vocational education – that is - a legitimate form of learning exercised in a social context which is accessible to all, regardless of someone's educational background.

THE BUCK STOPS HERE

But first a diversion.

The first real and decent biography I read was by David McCullough on Harry S Truman.

Truman was the 33rd President of the United States, thrust into the position following the sudden death of Franklyn D Roosevelt in the final days of the World War II.

Truman was a humble but brave man. Having been a hero in the trenches of the first world war he returned to Missouri as a menswear salesman.

Wanting to contribute to his local community he stood for election, won office and over many years made his way to be elected as Vice President.

As a compromise candidate for FDR he was left to oversight the Senate and had little interaction with the President even during the heights of the war.

Following the untimely death of FDR, Truman took the reins, with little prior exposure to the issues of the day or the processes of governing.

He wrestled with the hard decisions such as dropping nuclear bombs on Japan to bring the war to a close. In the aftermath of the war he

prosecuted the Truman doctrine and established NATO to counter the influence of communist Russia.

He took the tough decision to sack field marshal Douglas MacArthur during the war on the Korean peninsula.

What I remember most though is the plaque that sat on his desk – the most powerful desk in the world – The Bucks Stops Here.

Here is a man who knew about accountability in the power that he exercised.

We need this back in our political discourse.

The VET sector faces tit-for-tat political one-upmanship. The fact that the future of Australians is on the line appears not to matter

We need leadership in this sector and leaders who readily take account.

HOW MANY VET FEE-HELP STUDENTS LEFT WITH A DEBT

A case in point is the Commonwealth Government's refusal to come clean over the number of students left high-and-dry from the VET FEE-HELP disaster.

We estimate that there are over 100,000 students with an average tax debt of \$10,000 which they are probably not aware of, and all the Government suggests is for students to make a call to the Ombudsman's office.

This is not restitution.

This is not accountability.

And it certainly is not leadership.

A BRIGHT FUTURE

But this is not what I have come here today to talk about.

The brighter future for the sector rides off the back of the VET workforce and practitioners.

And I want today to outline three reasons why this is the case.

TRAINING AS AN INDUSTRY ITSELF

The first is that vocational education and training is an industry in itself and should be allowed to grow and adapt like any other sector.

Whilst educationalist might balk at this notion, VET is a key factor of production for the Australian economy. Even in the broadest of terms citizens with basic and applied skills and knowledge build the capability and resilience of any labour market, and ultimately society.

If we treat Education and Training as an industry, we can analyse the issues differently and look for different solutions.

Let's get some context.

Education and Training is the fourth largest growing industry in Australia behind health care, professional services and construction. Employment in the sector is forecast to grow by 11.6 percent in the five years to 2022.

While the bulk of this growth is in schooling due to healthy population growth it follows that growth will come to tertiary education.

All industries in Australia are growing in sophistication, spurred by increased global and technology connectedness and demanding consumers. All industries are adapting in order to survive. Labour is being organised differently, capital investment is replacing human input as automation spreads and new skills are being demanded of workers.

So, it beggars belief that the VET sector regards a Certificate IV course as adequate entry level for the sector.

It's a bit like saying we'll put the Year 6s in charge of Year 5s because they've experienced what it's like and know what to do!

When we put the industry lens over the issue we may come to some different conclusions.

All industries seek out new markets and new areas of service. This includes meeting increasing consumer demands and uncovering latent demand. After all, this is the mantra of the Government's innovation agenda.

The same should be the case the VET sector. Our workforce needs to be armed with new approaches to dealing with the demands of the consumer. The compliance approach against training packages which at best defines tasks for today's role couldn't be further from what we require.

THE DEMAND FOR SKILLS WILL EVENTUALLY WIN OUT

The second reason there's a bright future is that labour markets rarely bow to government fiat.

Even though the number of students coming through colleges is on the decline, the demand from the economy is not. The policy responses are warped, not the labour market.

The BCA is the first to signal concern in this area. Jennifer Westacott is warning that by the time Australia realises it has dropped the ball on skilling workers, it will be too late.

On broad indicators we know there is demand for graduates in key occupations in the high priority industries of health and care and construction, just for a start.

Even if we take broad targets set by the council of Australian Governments it is easy to see that not enough is being done.

COAG set targets for skill levels in the economy several years ago.

They aimed that the proportion of the working age population without a Certificate III would be halved by 2020 and that the number of graduates with a diploma or advanced diploma be doubled by 2020.

In 2009 the percentage of working age Australians without at least a Certificate III was 47.1% and in 2014 it was down less than 5 percentage points to 42.5, when the target is 24 per cent by 2020, or another 18.5 percentage points in three years!

And for doubling completion levels of diplomas the target effectively means getting to 108,000 completions by 2020 and in 2014 we were at 74,000. Again, needing to increase the output rate by 28,000 completions per year to reach the target.

And perhaps the most disturbing is the employment outcomes. Between 2008 to 2014 there has been a 7.5 percentage point drop in graduates with improved employment circumstances.

These are sobering statistics.

We can all point to a variety of reasons, not least of which is declining funding.

But there may be others, and I proffer a few.

- Maybe there are more attractive courses in other sectors and better financial support from the Government that makes those pathways attractive
- Perhaps the reputation of the sector and the options it offers is on the nose
- Maybe there's a concern about the quality of the training experience, and possibly it's seen as too easy or solely for those who don't have an academic bent.

I have a different view – and it's one the sector need to face head on – Australians appear to be rejecting our VET qualifications.

There is huge variety available to them pitched at levels suited to their circumstance, but we have enrolments in less than half of the qualifications with most concentrated in about 50 and overall nowhere near the levels we need to maintain the capabilities we need in the economy.

There would be few industries where there are deliberate policies which constrain the product so much. Apart from public safety concerns most industries are encouraged to diversify and innovate in their product offerings.

That's why we all have mobile phone devices that connect to the web and keep us connected to our emails. It's why we moved away from the slide rule to calculators to XL on our laptops.

The debate about training products we are having in Australia at present, or more politely put, the lack of debate seems to be saying – *everything will be right if only we could get the slide rule to move faster.*

Even if we overcome the issue of the product being rejected we risk setting up our qualifications that offer little relevance to the demands people will need to remain active and contributing workers.

We have the interesting phenomena that more and more jobs are moving off production lines or within tightly controlled hierarchies.

The world of work needs people to be increasingly self-sufficient but able to engage and connect.

Most qualifications in VET are built off the premise of prescribed tasks that are exercised in a defined context. I am shocked at the training package standards for the business and leaderships qualifications.

If the innovation tsunami teaches us one thing, focusing on doing a task well has limited long term benefits for the graduate unless they

understand the underpinning knowledge and the application of competencies in different circumstances.

I am not suggesting the wholesale abandonment of competency as there are key things we need to know can be exercised with skill in the workplace.

The picture I paint is one of a basketball coach. She or he can spend many hours rehearsing set moves and have it down to a degree of expertise only for it to fall apart when it is played out on the court.

In that situation, I'd reckon I'd prefer to have players with basic skills and then adaptability and flexibility to respond to the circumstances they face in the real world of the basketball court.

Along these lines, TAFE Directors Australia is advocating for greater autonomy and flexibility in qualification design. We are pushing for a start, self-accreditation at the diploma and advanced diploma level because at this level the bulk of qualifications assume prior training and work experience.

In a world needing innovation and flexibility built off strong knowledge to adapt to new environments, this seems like a good place to start.

SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE

The other reason for a bright future for VET built off the back of the workforce and teachers is the power of the education model we have at our disposal.

The history of VET is based on open access to learning, regardless of education attainment. This doesn't mean that we allow any one into courses, but that a learning model meets the person where they are at and offers an accessible teaching and learning model.

While on-line learning is changing the way learning is organised and delivered, at some point there has to be learning exchange between the trainer and the teacher.

Often this can involve reflection on practice in the field, or straight transmission of knowledge, but at the core is the social situation in which real learning occurs.

I am often attracted to the theory of Vygotsky, that we learn from others in close proximity – what he called the zone of proximal development.

Why do I believe that? In a world where we could safely claim there is universal knowledge – facilitated by the internet - why is there such differences in approaches and understanding around the world. We all learn from our contexts.

In an increasingly connected world there is still a call for close interpersonal connection. And that is what we need to preserve in VET.

We are all aware of the changes to the TAE and new competencies that are required. This demonstrates my point. The standards are there – what needs to be done – but it is silent on how.

We have this massive deficit in the VET architecture, or blind faith, that stating the standards then assures delivery. Nothing could be further from the truth. It's a bit like saying that the recipe is written so the meal will look after itself.

We need a methodological approach to this issue and some assurance within the system that course design and delivery – the baking of the cake – is based on sound learning principles.

TDA is starting some work on this front so that consumers can come to TAFEs confident in the quality of the course and its delivery. We will want to work with practitioners like you.

VET COALITION OF EDUCATION LEADERS

We at TDA want to start a broader narrative across the sector and with industry leaders about returning an education discourse to public policy.

We are aware that ministers have considered whether there is a case for change to the current package concept but they were presented with little options and even less evidence of the changing demand of work.

I have instituted the *VET Coalition of Education Leaders* to bring some of these issues to the fore.

We are small in TDA and under pressure on a number of fronts, but I feel this is crucial to the future of the sector.

Visit the TDA website and look at our newsletters to see what we are proposing.

As we look at the size of the task and the challenge facing all of us who care so deeply for the sector I was reminded about a bible story from my Sunday school days. The story of Gideon.

The nation of Israel was occupied.

God called Gideon to raise up an army to defeat the enemy occupiers.

32,000 men joined. They were a small army compared with the 135,000 enemy soldiers.

God told Gideon that his army was too big.

So Gideon allowed any man to go home if he was afraid. 22,000 left, leaving only 10,000.

Again, God said there were too many so Gideon took them down to the water to drink.

Almost all of the men got down on their knees to drink from the water. But 300 of them remained standing but bent down to scoop up the water and lap it from their hands.

These 300 men remained in Gideon's army because they showed they were always alert for action.

Gideon divided these men into three groups and surrounded the enemy. The men were equipped with trumpets and lighted torches hidden in clay pitchers. At about ten o'clock at night Gideon and his army attacked and all the men broke the pitchers, waved the torches, and blew the trumpets, and shouted their battle cry.

Most of the enemy were sleeping when they heard the trumpets blowing, the pitchers shattering and the three hundred torches. They must have thought they were surrounded so they fled.

As I conclude I ask you to be a Gideon.

Although the odds can appear overwhelming and the pathway rough can you stand-up for vocational education and training in Australia?

Can you help us bring back balance to the sector?

It's no use saying that it's all the Government's responsibility.

We need to stand up. We need to be alert. The buck stops with you and me.

I want to be a Gideon for VET and I hope you can join me.

ENDS