Re-professionalising vocational educators or just reshaping practice

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This paper discusses whether the likely changes in the role of vocational educators can be viewed as re-professionalisation or merely changes to accommodate emerging economic imperatives. It holds that during the last decade, the professional practice of vocational educators has been constrained by governmental directives that were concerned to meet the needs of ‘industry’. The goals for programs, as well as the means of instruction and assessment were determined and mandated by others with the intention of securing adherence to industry prescriptions. Now, with the demand to address enterprise needs and the marketisation of vocational education, a broader role and enhanced discretion is being expected of vocational educators. However, these new demands bring complications and concerns about how best to balance different clients’ needs. To what degree are teachers being expected to be complicit in addressing enterprise needs at a cost to individuals? Hence, this reshaping of vocational practice seems problematic. Is it returning educational leadership to educators or just granting some discretion to achieve government goals which now place an emphasis on the market and enterprises as a priority over student?.

**Introduction**

The standing of teachers in the organisation of educational provisions has always been uneasy (Lawn 1996). Teachers’ work is most commonly undertaken constrained by the requirements of the institution in which they are being employed, usually either church or state. Consequently, the role and standing of educators is usually shaped in some ways by the employing institution. Vocational educators are certainly no exception to this case. The last decade has seen significant changes in the role of vocational educators, which have transformed the concept of professional practice within vocational education. Many of the changes have been an outcome of government attempts to manage vocational education in ways most likely to secure policy goals. This has included determining quite specific goals for, and mandating the instructional and assessment methods to be used within vocational education. The goals set for vocational education by successive governments over the past decade have been aimed to make the Australian workforce skilful and adaptable (Dawkins, 1988, ANTA 1998). These demands were in the first instance advanced by peak industry bodies and government agencies that prescribed national standards and nationally uniform curriculum documents and accreditation processes (e.g. National Training Board 1992). The key role of vocational educators in this ‘industry-led’ provision is to faithfully implement curriculum arrangements developed elsewhere and by others.
However, now the goals for vocational education are shifting to the enterprise level of need, or those negotiated at the local level (e.g. Training Packages), albeit within a market-based system of provisions. Enterprises now have expectations that, in the training market, educators will develop programs based on their particular requirements. This includes determining the readiness of their staff and the preparation of customised and enterprise-specific educational programs (Billett & Hayes, in press). So, more than being mere implementers of curriculum arrangements developed elsewhere, vocational educators are now being asked to fulfil a broader and more discretionary role. This role includes determining and meeting the needs of learners either within enterprises or the local community. Each enterprise is likely to have unique combinations of need depending on its activities, location, staffing needs, division of labour, goals, values and readiness to participate in the educational provisions there is much to done in determining and shaping programs to also met this need. This will also be the case if curriculum is to be developed at the local level.

This paper discusses the emerging role of vocational educators and whether this is the re-professionalisation of educators or merely a pragmatic change of role to suit evolving economic imperatives. The discussion involves examining the emerging role and identifying what tensions and contradictions are hidden within it. This is achieved by drawing on recent work which, in part, sought to understand the emerging role of vocational educators. The case proposed here is that the emerging role suggests a reconfiguration of professional practice, as educators will have to address conflicting and contradictory demands.

The task for vocational education
The drive for Australia to become internationally competitive has had, and remains to have, profound consequences for policy and practice in vocational education. Some hold that this is the legitimate and indisputable goal for vocational education. That is, to directly assist enterprise profitability (Moran 1997). Both the previous Labor and current Coalition federal governments have proposed successful business performance as being fundamental to a strong economy and that vocational education has an important role to play in this success. In particular, the need to develop a skilled and adaptable national workforce has been at the forefront of the demands by government of vocational education (e.g., Dawkins 1988). Although firm linkages between business performance and vocational educators were first advanced in the late 1980s, they still feature today. In its current deliberations on a strategy for vocational education to the year 2003, the Australian National Training Authority’s (ANTA) mission statement restates the same fundamental concern.

“To ensure that the skills of the Australian labour force are sufficient to support internationally competitive commerce and industry and to provide individuals with opportunities to optimise their potential” (ANTA 1998)

This mission statement outlines not only the tasks for vocational education but also governmental priorities. These are addressing the needs of business through arrangements that co-opt the needs and aspirations of individuals in an attempt to secure business success. It acknowledges however, probably quite rightly, that most individuals want to realise their vocational potential through paid employment. Many in the field of vocational education are sympathetic to the kinds of ideas contained in the mission statement. For example, the idea of individuals’ realising their personal and professional aspirations through vocational education is likely to supported most vocational educators. In addition, the emphasis on individuals and the provision of opportunities to realise their goals would be welcomed by those whose efforts are premised upon education as a social good. Indeed, the references to individuals within this mission statement make it easier to defend
vocational education from those who are prone to dismiss it as being wholly pragmatic. Conversely, the reference to industry and commerce raises concerns about the goals for vocational education and makes problematic and whose interests predominate. This is not a new debate in vocational education. Yet the statement outlines the task for vocational educators and provides a basis to discuss the role of vocational educators in fulfilling these kinds of expectations.

Put briefly, to assist enterprises compete globally means that employees are required to have expertise in their vocational practice. Typically, this means that individuals require a body of knowledge associated with their vocation and, in particular how that vocational practice is manifested in the particular enterprise in which deploy that knowledge. In a rapidly changing and uncertain environment, this means that workers require knowledge which is robust in order for it to transfer to changing circumstances and problems. That means that is can be transferred to address new situations and solutions as they emerge within or for the enterprise. While knowledge which permits routine performance is valuable, contemporary workers need understanding and procedures which are capable of addressing transformations in the nature of the vocation, but also the organisational demands of contemporary work practice (Berryman 1993).

So, one dimension of the task for vocational education is to develop in those who participate in it the skilfulness required to be able to undertake both routine and non-routine vocational activities. This should contribute to individuals being effective in the workplace and, hopefully, realising career goals. Moreover, this skillfulness should be purposeful in effective vocational practice in the workplace and contribute to the national levels of skillfulness. An enduring burden for this educational sector is a lack of appreciation of the complexity and richness of vocational knowledge. The demands of the task, as set out above, suggest that a base of rich and complex knowledge is required for expert vocational practice. This has to be the goal for vocational education as it is through such a base of knowledge that individuals will be able to realise their potential and enterprises enjoy the benefits of that potential being deployed.

Concomitant with this first task, is that of preparing or developing further the capacity of those who participate in vocational education to perform both routine and non-routine tasks expected of them in the workplace. The diversity of the readiness of those who participate vocational education makes this task demanding. As noted above, in terms of previous success in educational programs, age, ethnicity and language backgrounds and aspirations instruction in vocational education is a demanding prospect. Categories of readiness might include diverse patterns of achievement in prior educational experiences. Diversity in experience in the vocation being taught is another likely factor. So the second part of the task is in meeting the needs of such a diverse cohort of learners in their pathway to expertise.

**Changing context for vocational educators**

However, in last decade, the voice and discretion of vocational educators has been marginalised. Educators are provided with detailed syllabi, to which they are expected to adhere, and their course submissions premised on meeting the criteria of a prescribed model of instruction and assessment. These constraints on practice have understandably led commentators to suggest that vocational educators have been de-professionalised (see Seddon 1997). This suggestion has arisen from the removal of a range of professional educators’ tasks, such as the freedom to determine educational intents and select the most appropriate mode of instruction and assessment. Equally, subservience to industry mandates, such as national frameworks for curriculum, have added to the reduction in vocational educators’ discretion. However, what remains uncertain is
the degree by which teachers feel compelled by these external measures to implement them with high a high degree of fidelity (Billett 1995). The important point is that, through the industry-led period, the expectation of the professional practice of vocational educators has been to implement externally developed curriculum prescriptions. This has led to the belief that anyone with the most rudimentary preparation can implement these prescriptions.

However, now it appears a shift from industry prescriptions to enterprise need is occurring within vocational education (Billett & Hayes in press). As a result, the legitimised tasks for vocational educators are now widening. The shift to address enterprise needs is in part a product of a collapse of the national award system that emphasised the quest for uniformity in the form of national competency standards and national curriculum for vocational education. Concomitant is the rise of enterprise-based industrial agreements which acknowledges the particular requirements of the enterprise and offer a departure from the uniform vocational education provisions. It is now being acknowledged that there is a collapse in enterprise support for entry-level training and where it occurs it is favoured at the shorter, lower level (e.g. State Training Board 1995, 1997). Indeed, the recent introduction of ANTA’s Training Packages exemplifies this shift from industry prescription to program negotiation at the local level. In acknowledging this change, the former CEO of ANTA, stated recently (Moran 1997) that these new arrangements for curriculum in VET will place the educator back at the forefront of the vocational educational process.

Yet, in some ways, educators have always been at the forefront of the educational process, and will always be the curriculum makers as it they who daily make the decisions about what is taught, in what ways and to whom. However, the intention for granting greater discretion to educators seems linked to government goals that could place the market above planning and enterprise goals ahead of those of individuals. Perhaps because of the above, an attempt to invigorate enterprise participation in VET is currently occurring which places a greater emphasis on addressing enterprise needs. Consequently, it seems that there is to be some recasting of the professional educators’ roles. But to what degree is this re-professionalisation one of greater discretion or merely shifting the difficult task of addressing clients needs from the government to the educators?

**Emerging role of vocational educators.**

In a recent study which sought to map the four client groups’ (industry, enterprises, individuals and regions) needs of the vocational education system (Billett & Hayes in press), subjects from these client groups were asked what they believed should be the role of vocational educators in addressing their needs. The responses were plentiful, diverse and, in some instances, contradictory. The aggregated responses were categorised under a set of roles identifiable in the data. These categories of roles are the vocational educator as a: (i) **Consultant**; (ii) **Curriculum developer**; (iii) **Instructor**; (iv) **Advocate and supporter of learners**; and (v) **Policy developer**.

Table 1 presents summarised aggregated data from the interviews and focus groups. In the left column, are the categorised responses. The respondents who identified each role are depicted in the columns to their right. The four client groups referred to are industry representatives (I), those from enterprises (E) those from local communities (C) and students (S). As the number of respondents differed across the client groups ticks are used to indicate responses from the particular client group.

In the following sections, these categories of roles are described.

*Teachers as consultants*
The role of vocational educators as consultants was most readily identified and supported by industry, enterprise and student informants. Community informants identified both interactions with enterprises and an educational leadership role in the community. The consultancy role is mainly concerned with vocational educators negotiating and consulting to identify and realise enterprise needs. This role includes demonstrating the utility of the proposed course to the enterprise and the educator having the ability to add something to the enterprises’ training needs and arrangements - adding value. Within this role the ability to negotiate with enterprises is supported most strongly. So educational leadership is manifested in two quite different ways - as a leader in the community and an ability to add value to enterprise needs. Significantly, the key focus was on being able to secure enterprise goals, something supported by the range of informants.

### Table 1 - Role of vocational educators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consultant and educational leader</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent consultant and ‘honest broker’</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating with enterprises</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgeable in many areas</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add value to enterprise need analysis</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand enterprise perspective</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide leadership for community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making enterprises self-sufficient in training</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum developer</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adapting programs to enterprise needs</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying full range of needs</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand enterprise needs through interaction</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work according to national standards</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danger of VEs pushing own product</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular review of curriculum</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good teacher - varied teaching skills</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical instruction and practice</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailoring instructional needs to the workplace</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be concerned about learning and transfer</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicates clearly with students</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need more indigenous teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advocate and supporter of learners -</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supporter, mentor and advocate for students</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassionate about students</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivates students and builds interest</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand student readiness to progress</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling on pathways</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy developer – dimensions of role</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need to be aligned to and inform policy</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobby for schools for VET programs</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware of what is going on</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Teachers as curriculum developers**

It was proposed that by all groups that curriculum development is largely about an ability to identify the full range of enterprise needs and then adapt programs to meet this need. Frequent interactions between educators and enterprises were proposed as a means of securing an
understanding of their needs. So this role in developing educational provisions was most
legitimated when the focus of determining educational intent and the context of courses was
posited at the enterprise level of determination, albeit with some reference to national standards.

*Teachers as Instructors*

The strongest single area of support emphasised being a ‘good teacher’ - characterised in terms of
teaching methods and presentation skills. The ability to furnish opportunities to develop
‘practical’ skills was emphasised, as was the need to tailor instructional procedures to the
exigencies of the workplace. Communicating clearly with students was also valued. Within these
aspects of the role was a demand to address students’ learning and assist the transfer of the learnt
knowledge. Of interest was the frequency of concurrence between individual and enterprise views
on the quality of instruction. Enterprises have identified concerns about the quality of teaching, in
particular when this is addressed towards their needs.

*Teachers as advocates and supporters of learners*

Community and student informants proposed the teacher had to be compassionate about students,
facilitate their development through support, guidance and through being a source of motivation.
Understanding students’ needs was extended to an appreciation of their readiness to progress.
Being supportive of students extends to providing advice on pathways through educational
provisions and concerns.

*Teachers’ as policy developers*

Industry and community informants emphasised the reciprocal relationship between policy
development and teachers’ practice, thereby advocating teachers’ involvement in formulating
policy while also being aware of and being guided in their practice by policy.

*Reshaping professional practice*

The shift to an enterprise-based provision of vocational education was evident in the responses to
the roles of vocational educators. In particular, the determination of curriculum intents (aims,
goals, and objectives) was being seen to be, by necessity, meeting enterprise requirements.
However, the different interests of the client groups are reflected here. Even where there was an
apparently common view, (e.g. the role of an Instructor) the intent differs. Enterprise viewed the
role of instruction as teaching the things the enterprise needs in the ways that address the
participants’ needs. The students’ responses support the former in terms of relevance, rather than
enterprise specific learning, but the latter in the same way as the enterprises. Yet it was in the
Advocate role where there was a concentration of student needs, not all of which are easily
reconcilable with the characterisation of the Consultant and Curriculum developer roles which
were so strongly proposed by Enterprises.

Curriculum development was seen as siting curriculum at the enterprise level, albeit adapting
industry prescriptions to enterprise needs. Such an approach is analogous to the School-based
curriculum movement (e.g Skilbeck 1985), although determination of intents is focused on only
two sets of interests. The implementation of curriculum (instruction) was seen as a process of
good teaching to realise the goals set by enterprises. Addressing learners’ needs was very much in
terms of their ability to achieve that which has been set for them by industry and enterprises.
Consideration of individuals’ aspirations is very restricted here, other than the provision of advice
about that of the given educational or career pathways were most appropriate.

The concern here is one of the robustness of the knowledge learnt and its potential for transfer.
Current views suggest that ideas about generic competencies fail to define or permit transfer
(Stevenson 1996, Beven, 1997). Nor can it be assumed that transferable knowledge can be
secured in either the classroom or the workplace without enriching the learning experiences situated in either of these settings. This may be achieved by making accessible the knowledge likely to transfer and then advancing prospects for transfer through a consideration of the application of that knowledge to other circumstances. Such instructional interventions require planning, an appreciation of the formulation of educational intents and processes, careful implementation by the teacher and solid engagement by the learners. All of these are unlikely to be secured by workplace practitioners who are unaware of these requirements or inexperienced in the application of techniques associated with maximising transfer (Billett 1998).

In the shift to an enterprise focus, the data above sets out a significant change in vocational educators’ role. There is a broader role required of the vocational educator and one that demands a broader and more discretionary role. Throughout the last decade of Industry domination of the curriculum processes, teachers have been valued as ‘implementers’ only. Their role was to implement with uniformity what was determined by others. Now, the demands articulated here refer to being an ‘adapter’, ‘designer’ and ‘researcher’ (to use Marland’s (1978) categories). So, it seems, educational practice is now being re-patterned for changing times (Seddon 1997). However, it is unclear that, after over a decade of effort to secure teachers’ subservience to industry mandations, whether vocational educators will be able to shift easily to the new roles required of them in ways that secure educational goals for all client groups.

The task for vocational educators is to balance the needs of the client groups outlined above. Many are reconcilable. A focus on a process of teaching may be able to address the conflict between enterprise-specific content and individuals’ career aspirations. However, such a goal is only likely to be realisable if educators are granted wider autonomy with the methods of instruction and assessment than currently occurs. Indeed, this is the very quality that can be used to suggest a re-professionalisation of vocational educators is being enacted. The granting of broader discretion indicates a shift in power and knowledge which is basis for teachers to assert their practice as being professional (Seddon 1997).

**Conclusion**

Successful federal governments have charged vocational educators and TAFE teachers in particular with the responsibility of making this country’s workforce globally competitive. However, successive policies have rendered this task most difficult as they have denied teachers the very discretion required to undertake this task. Now it seems that the re-shaping of teachers’ practice is to be an outcome of changes in policy within vocational education. However, in undertaking this tasks, the roles of vocational educators will have to be broadened. This broadening brings with it a reshaping of the roles of vocational educators. In addition, they will exercise professional judgement in balancing the needs of enterprises and individuals. Therefore, while meeting the demands of new economic imperatives, their power and knowledge for practice is expanded. Hence, these changes appear to be offering a re-shaping of professional practice that is concomitant to the changing role of teachers demanded by the client groups of vocational education. This new role brings with it rich possibilities for practice in changing times.

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