The committee for boys’ toys

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On 5 May, Commonwealth Minister for Vocational Education and Training Gary Hardgrave announced that the first meeting of the new National Industry Skills Committee had taken place. This is an important committee, because it has to provide strategic advice to the VET Ministerial Council on work-force planning, skill development, and training priorities. On 31 March, the Minister issued a press release announcing the membership of the committee in which he said that the committee would:

“…play an important role in ensuring the national training system is meeting the needs of Australian businesses and the Australian economy, and will be an integral element of the national training arrangements agreed in 2005 between the Commonwealth and all States and Territories.”

The committee’s role is not limited to advice on emerging skill needs, an area where it might have some claim to expertise. It is also required to provide advice on how training delivery (teaching?) can be improved, on research priorities, and on the way government should improve outcomes for disadvantaged students, “particularly Indigenous Australians and people with a disability.” In other words, it will play a big role in determining the outcomes of the VET system, and also the inputs needed to achieve those outcomes.

The committee’s guidelines say it is supposed to be drawn from a range of industries, including emerging industries, as well as small, medium and large enterprises. There is no provision for a representative of students, or teachers or registered training organisations. The committee has to engage formally with all relevant stakeholders including enterprises, industry skills councils, registered training organisations, among others.

There are meant to be nine members of this committee, but only eight have been appointed. The peak employer bodies have four representatives, and their nominees must be employers. The Commonwealth directly appoints the chair, and a further three industry representatives who are all employers, even though the guidelines allow employees to be nominated. The final position is for a representative from the ACTU, but this position remains unfilled, even though I understand that the ACTU has provided two nominations thus far. In response to my query to DEST about the composition of the committee, DEST said that “The
ACTU has yet to provide an acceptable nomination and we look forward to receiving such a nomination.”

This means that there is no employee representative on this committee. We don’t know why the ACTU’s nominees were not acceptable, but the composition of the committee seems to suggest that only a bloke from the trades would do.

‘Industry’ is apparently defined by the Minister as consisting only of employers from industries traditionally associated with the trades and other areas of building, manufacturing, mining and agriculture. These industries are also overwhelmingly male dominated. Six of the eight representatives are from these industries, and they are male.

Two representatives are women: one is from a large employer in the retail industry, and the other is a small business employer in interior design and renovation. Is it because we women like to shop and to decorate things? The two women on the committee are leaders in their industry field and also hold important educational positions: one is on the Victorian Qualifications Authority Board and the other is a Director of the Queensland Apprenticeship Services, and is active in local government and community organisations. Only one of the men has these additional qualifications – the Chair is a member of the Boards of the Queensland Studies Authority and World Skills Australia. It seems that women have to be qualified many times over to get a position on this committee.

The industries covered by the employers on the committee represent about 40% of the labour market. This includes retail trade, which employs 15.1% of all employed persons. So the six men represent around 25% of the labour market, yet they are 75% of the committee.

In 2004, 15.5% of the 1.6 million students enrolled in the public VET system were undertaking apprenticeships and traineeships, and of these, around 40% were undertaking apprenticeships in the traditional trades. The fields of education that are relevant to the industries covered by the six men account for almost 28% of VET students in 2004. All the employers on the committee represent industries that account for 36.5% of all students undertaking training package qualifications, including related enabling occupations, or 18.5% of all VET students in 2004.

This committee cannot meet its terms of reference. It does not represent a range of industries. What would this committee know about emerging needs in aged care, disability services or childcare, all industries that are highly feminised? What about cultural and recreational services, health, education, finance and insurance, communication services, property and business services, government
administration and defence and so forth? Australia wants to position itself as a knowledge economy, but the industry representatives on the committee are not drawn from these ‘new economy’ industries. How will we identify the emerging skill needs in these industries?

What expertise does the committee have to advise government on the needs of disadvantaged learners, when there is not even an employee on the committee? Will this committee speak on behalf on Indigenous students, and students with disabilities? This is perhaps the most extraordinary omission in the composition of the committee. Perhaps the women on the committee are meant to advise on these matters, because women are good at the empathy thing.

Hardgrave hasn’t set up a National Industry Skills Committee, he has set up a committee for boys’ toys. It is misjudged because it focuses on too narrow a section of the economy. Australia can’t live off the sheep’s back, or by digging things up and building things, not if it wants to be a high skills, high knowledge, new economy. It also has to consider who makes the economy work, and it isn’t just employers. It must include employees, but also women, because a lot of women work, and it needs to include the industries that women work in. If the government wants to seriously address the needs of disadvantaged students, then it should include representatives of those students and disadvantaged members of the community, and not just ask the bosses about what they think those students might need.