Reforming Double Speak

Leesa Wheelahan
Faculty of Education
Griffith University, Australia

Two state governments recently published important statements about their VET systems in the one week. The Queensland Government published its long awaited White Paper entitled Queensland Skills Plan and the Victorian State Government published its statement entitled Maintaining the Advantage: Skilled Victorians. Alethea Mouhtouris reported in the 15 March Campus Review that there was applause all round for the Queensland White Paper, particularly from the Commonwealth VET Minister Gary Hardgrave, but less fulsome support for the Victorian policy.

In one press release Hardgrave approvingly said that the Queensland White Paper is a practical endorsement of the Commonwealth’s policy and the initiatives agreed at the 10 February meeting of the Council of Australian Governments. This is a good thing according to Hardgrave. In a press release the previous day Hardgrave criticised the Victorian statement for being a glossy veneer that lacked substance, and because it essentially contained the elements already agreed at the 10 February COAG meeting. This is a bad thing says Hardgrave.

Hardgrave seemed particularly upset by the fact that the Victorian government plans to establish four technical education centres, which will be senior technical schools linked to TAFE institutions. Hardgrave called these poor cousins to the Commonwealth’s own technical colleges, which are also senior technical schools. Victoria’s schools are “nothing more than an expensive update on what already exists – TAFE” Hardgrave said. But the consortium that is establishing the Commonwealth’s technical school at Sunshine in Melbourne’s western suburbs includes two TAFEs (Victoria University and Kangan Batman), and it is hard to see how the Commonwealth’s technical colleges can function without the co-operation of their local TAFEs.

Hardgrave interprets Victoria’s announcement of the technical schools as a hostile act, but it could be interpreted as vindication of the Commonwealth’s policy, which is that technical colleges are needed. The problem seems to be that Victoria’s technical colleges won’t follow the Commonwealth’s industrial relations blueprint that it is imposing on its own technical colleges. This includes stipulating governance arrangements and curriculum approach, and increased control by the school principal over hiring, firing, pay and conditions, and mandatory individual work-place agreements.
Hardgrave seems to be saying that only one model of technical colleges can and will work – the Commonwealth’s. But the Commonwealth is putatively in favour of markets, and in markets different models are possible and desirable, because markets (so the rhetoric goes) are premised on the notion that one size doesn’t fit all. Moreover, markets provide the possibility for testing different models. This demonstrates that in the hierarchy of principles, the Commonwealth’s union-busting and wage-cutting industrial relations policy takes priority over competition in markets.

Hardgrave’s support for Queensland and criticism of Victoria is all the more puzzling in view of the striking similarities between them and the similarities of both to the Commonwealth government’s VET policy.

Queensland, Victoria and the Commonwealth all say that skill shortages are our biggest problem and that the tight employment market and demographic changes will exacerbate skill shortages. As a consequence, all think that:

- all of us, and particularly older people, need to be learning and working longer;
- young people need to be attracted into the trades rather than being ‘fixated’ on getting a university education;
- we need higher participation rates in the work-force, and a higher percentage of the work-force to hold formal VET qualifications than is currently the case;
- apprenticeship-training times have to be shortened through ‘genuinely’ implementing competency-based training instead of specifying training times; and
- recognition of prior learning needs to be more widely implemented.

The Commonwealth, Queensland and Victoria want:

- industry ‘leadership’ and a VET system responsive to industry ‘needs’;
- better matches between VET qualifications and ‘actual’ jobs;
- more and better information about VET qualifications;
- a greater role for private providers in delivering publicly funded VET; and,
- more public funding for employers to diagnose their skill needs and implement training.

There does seem to be a difference of emphasis between Victoria and Queensland on the one hand and the Commonwealth on the other over the level of qualifications. The states are emphasising the need for higher-level VET qualifications, including for the trades. The Commonwealth is preoccupied by lower level traineeships, and wants to emphasise ‘skill sets’ that are below trade qualification level. This is a very dangerous precedent that could lead to fragmentation of the trades and diminution of skill levels.
But the commonalities between the Commonwealth and these two states are more widespread than their differences. All say they want a flexible, demand-driven and industry led VET system, and this is narrowly interpreted as meaning a competitive VET market, rather than building social partnerships based on non-market relations.

Hardgrave implies that the Victorian system is supply driven, whereas the Queensland White Paper will result in a more demand-driven system. One of the changes that Queensland is proposing is to split the purchaser (Government) from the providers of training. This separates the management of the TAFE system from decisions about training that will be offered. It means that the state will ‘purchase’ the ‘training’ it requires from providers, and this could be from TAFE or from private providers. Putting aside the argument about whether this is a good thing or not, Victoria has had this system for years.

Queensland plans to corporatise TAFE institutions, but only so far – they will remain Crown entities, and staff will remain public servants. In contrast, Victoria’s TAFEs are far more independent, and staff are employed by individual TAFEs. The effect is that TAFE teachers in Queensland are protected from the Commonwealth’s Work Choices legislation whereas Victorian TAFE teachers are not.

Queensland’s White Paper emphasises that TAFEs will co-operate rather than compete with each other, while TAFEs will compete with private providers. Queensland plans to designate each TAFE as a lead institute charged with developing curriculum for specified industry areas and brokering relations with industry for the state. The state will continue to play a far greater role in co-ordinating VET than is the case in Victoria.

Whilst the Commonwealth proclaims the need for markets it engages in anti-competitive behaviour, so it can hardly criticise the states for not going far enough down the market road. For example, the Commonwealth wants to fix a uniform price for apprenticeship training, as well as stipulating the industrial relations conditions, governance and curriculum arrangements in TAFE.

The only substantial difference between the Commonwealth and the states is over industrial relations. This leaves considerable room for Federal Labor to develop a distinctive policy. For a start, Federal Labor could support alternative coordinating mechanisms to the market promoted by the Coalition which has created the very skills shortages which it is trying to solve on the one hand, and on the other, the Queensland Government’s coordination which is unlikely to be sufficiently flexible or responsive to local industry. Federal Labor could consider the mechanisms used in the coordinated market
economies of northern Europe or it could develop the concept of the skills ecosystem into a national policy.

Even better would be a policy alternative that goes beyond narrow human capital theory to one that considers the role of education more broadly in building a socially just and fair society, in which equality of opportunity is not measured only in whether one has a job. Employment is important, but it can only be part of our goals. The great danger is that working class kids will be channelled into working class jobs, while rich kids will have access to powerful and socially valued knowledge in universities, and access to powerful and prestigious professions.