The Clayton’s Review

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The review of the National Centre of Vocational Education Research initiated by Commonwealth Minister for Vocational and Technical Education Gary Hardgrave has the whiff of a Clayton’s review about it. Whilst the NCVER website had published the terms of reference for the review some time ago, the consultant’s paper requesting submissions to the review was not made publicly available until 10 February, when a link to the paper was published in DEST’s Training Talk. Submissions are due by 28 February. Less than a week’s notice was given for consultations with the consultant in Hobart and Brisbane. The consultant will report to the Minister by the end of March, and in turn, the Minister will make recommendations to the VET Ministerial Council at its June meeting.

This seems to be going through the ropes. It looks like a consultation is taking place, but the timelines are so compressed as to make it impossible for real consideration of the issues and meaningful consultation to occur.

This is the most opaque issues paper I’ve seen in a while. It provides a lot of information, but it doesn’t actually discuss any issues. Issues papers normally do outline the thinking behind the development of terms of reference, so that people can respond and contribute to this thinking.

The paper outlines the NCVER’s role, governance and sources of funding. It explains that the changes that have been implemented as a consequence of the implementation of Skilling Australia’s Workforce Act 2005 and tells us about the guiding principles of the VET system, which are that ‘industry’ needs drive policies, priorities and delivery, that VET is streamlined and nationally consistent, that pathways are flexible and accelerated, that young people have opportunities to gain skills for work, and that training respond to skill shortages.

The paper invites comments on the range of services, value for money and impact of NCVER research and statistics, and around the responsiveness of the NCVER to ‘shareholder’ priorities. It is left up to each ‘stakeholder’ to answer these questions from their own perspective.

Consequently, this looks like an impeccable review – it seems to be canvassing all ‘stakeholder’ views, considering them on balance, and then making appropriate recommendations to the minister. However, because the paper does not discuss the role of research and statistics in supporting VET
more broadly and providing insights into different ways we can think about this, ‘stakeholders’ don’t have the opportunity to consider these issues more broadly beyond their own perspective. Moreover, there will be no opportunity to respond to this question – which seems to me to be the most important question – because the consultant is reporting directly to the minister.

We have to look at the Steering Committee to understand the politics of this review. First, it was emphasised that an ‘external’ consultant was to be appointed. What does external mean? It seems to mean external to VET. Presumably, this is so the review process would be ‘tainted’ by someone who had links to the ‘producers’ of research.

Second, the composition of the Steering Committee includes DEST and the states, but it also includes the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Australian Industry Group, the Council for Small Business Organisations, and the ACTU, as well as ‘insider’ stakeholders such as TAFE Directors Australia, ACPET, the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA), the Client and Student Voice Action Group, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

The point of the review seems to be to manage the politics of the Steering Committee, and to give the Minister something he wants to hear. The terms of reference shape what consultants do, but so does the composition of the Steering Committee. All consultants have to ensure they deliver a report that the Committee can agree with, and that the key stakeholders are satisfied. This is a fact of life.

The heavy representation of the industry peak bodies combined with emphasis on the need for VET to meet ‘industry’ needs suggests that ‘industry’ needs to have a greater role in shaping research priorities, and that research to date hasn’t been sufficiently responsive. This doesn’t come out of nowhere. VET researchers have been scolded at the last couple of AVETRA conferences by various representatives of the VET system, and told our research wasn’t relevant or responsive, that we took too long to do it, that we needed to relate more to ‘industry’, and that we needed to give policy makers something they could use.

This is a reductive and top down view of research. It assumes that unless policy makers or industry leaders can cite research in shaping policy that it isn’t having an impact. This is a very limited view. I teach VET teachers and I have constructed subjects that are largely based on NCVER’s research, so teachers are using this research in shaping their practice. I know other colleagues who use NCVER’s research in this way and it seems to be one of the most important ways in which research can be used. There is no comparable source of research in the schools or higher education sectors. The
NCVER must be congratulated for providing such high quality resources to practitioners to improve their practice.

It is very instrumental to assume that there is a direct correlation between research and the way it is used. Evaluative research is often used in this way, but it is hard for this kind of research to challenge policy, because it is always constructed on the assumption that it must improve the implementation of existing policy. There is little or no scope to say that the emperor has no clothes. This is the kind of research that the NCVER mostly undertakes – it is very good evaluative research and it is important, but it can’t say that the policies themselves are the problem.

Evaluative research rests upon more fundamental research that explores the world, work and society, and the way the relationship between them is changing. This is the kind of path-breaking work that the NSW Board of Vocational Education and Training conducted when it contracted John Buchanan’s ACIRRT from the University of Sydney to explore the nature of work. It went beyond descriptive and evaluative research and provided new theoretical frames of reference that are having an enormous impact on reshaping VET policy – at least in many states. It is a mistake to assume that we can answer questions about what should do in terms of our existing practice – we have to go outside our practice and our stakeholder positions to consider new ways of thinking and the implications these may have.

The current review of the NCVER is so compressed, the terms of reference so narrow, and the composition of the steering so dominated by ‘industry’ representatives, that it means that these more fundamental questions will not be considered. Rather than giving the NCVER more scope to conduct independent research, it seems that the focus will be on ensuring ‘industry’ has more say in shaping its outcomes.