

**Changing Relationships Between the Vocational Education System  
and Their Clients**

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**Changing relationships between the vocational education  
systems and their clients**

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## **Changing relationships between the vocational education systems and their clients**

This paper reports the findings of a study which aimed to determine how recent research can best inform the strategic direction for the Victorian vocational education and training (VET) system. However, the outcomes of this analysis, are likely to be equally applicable to other states and territories. The findings include the need for policy and practice to: recognise the changing context in which VET programs are developed and implemented; seek mutuality among the changing interests and needs of the VET client groups (industry, enterprises, individuals and regions); and address their changing relationship with the VET system. Together, these outcomes have significant implications for policy and the development, implementation and evaluation of vocational education programs as well as the role of VET teachers. From this analysis changes in the relationships between the VET system and its clients are proposed.

### **Introduction**

Changes are occurring currently in the relationships between client groups and the vocational education and training (VET) system and, importantly, among these client groups. Central to these changes is some departure from the highly centralised and corporatist approach to VET policy and practice cultivated during the Dawkins era and which favoured the voice of 'industry' (Dawkins 1988). This approach was sustained by the compact between unions and employers under an accord fashioned by previous federal Labor governments. In essence, this was an era of reforms for the nation's vocational education and training systems aimed at securing micro-economic goals. These reforms were implemented through 'top-down' administrative structures for VET and the quests for national uniformity and adherence to industry prescriptions. Fostered by the belief that such prescriptions were the means to improving educational outcomes and encouraging wider participation in and sponsorship of VET, highly centralised and national policies were mandated and dogged efforts at implementation followed. Dissent was not tolerated in the pursuit of this quest. The role of 'industry' was favoured under these arrangements and held to represent the collective needs of enterprises through the development of prescriptive national competency standards and common curricula associated with these standards. This approach to VET sought to remove much of the discretion of curriculum developers, teachers and VET institutions (Billett 1995, Jackson 1993, Stevenson 1995). It seemed that the development of VET curriculum was too important to national economic goals to be left to teachers and educational institutions alone.

So, rather than seeking the voluntarism which characterises enterprise commitment to VET in countries such as Switzerland and Germany (OECD 1994a; 1994b), government initiatives sought to regulate, mandate and legislate this commitment. However, it seems questionable whether commitment can be secured by such means. Significantly, when the regulatory and legislative frameworks are removed, as is now occurring through a transfer from national industrial awards

(which mandated training) to enterprise agreements, much of the previous commitment to VET appears to be dissipating (Callus 1994, Guthrie & Barnett 1996, Misko 1996, Smith 1995). For example, relatively few enterprise agreements contain references to structured training (Guthrie & Barnett 1996). Moreover, there has been a marked decline in the numbers of apprentices being employed in Victoria (STB 1994) and a pattern of sponsorship for entry level training has emerged which emphasises shorter duration traineeship-type arrangements over the three/four year commitment required for apprenticeships (STB 1995, STB 1997). Even the recent increase in the participation in traineeship arrangements fails to compensate for this reduction of apprenticeships. It seems, therefore, that key goals of the so-called National Training Reform Agenda have not been realised. Employers have failed to make an increased commitment to training. Nor has there been the kind of transfer of the cost of VET from the public purse to the private sector that was predicted to accompany giving industry the key decision-making role. Consequently, governmental policy in placing the authority for both the quantum and quality of the nation's training effort within 'industry' appears to be misplaced. Indeed, the failure to secure this sponsorship may explain why government is now so intent on seeking sponsorship by individuals for their own vocational development.

The failure to secure these policy goals may be because government's regulated and prescribed approach has not fostered the voluntarism that seems to underpin a mature commitment to VET within Australian enterprises. It is also becoming clear that national prescriptions and core curricula are unable to address the particular needs of individual enterprises. The current implementation of the Training Packages or 'book-end' model of curriculum (ANTA 1997) is indicative of a response to this concern. It claims to offer pathways and flexibility in an effort to balance the need to be responsive with that of avoiding duplication of effort at every delivery point (e.g. workplaces, private providers, TAFE institutes) (ANTA 1997). So it seems that changes to some components of the existing centralist industry-based policies provide evidence of a shift in focus away from a purely 'industry' client focus.

The above is part of an analysis of the current context which deliberations about directions for VET policy and practice should take into account. It is part of the findings of a critical review of recent research literature which aimed to inform policy directions within the Victorian state vocational education system (Billett et.al., 1997). The case advanced in this paper also draws from the findings of this study. In particular, it proposes that the current shift to address enterprise needs is neither sufficient or wholly appropriate. The legitimate needs of industry and enterprises should also be balanced with those of individuals and regions. The analysis which follows argues that mutuality among the interests and needs of these four client groups is required for a mature VET system.

### *Shifting the focus*

With the change of federal government, the collapse of the accord, and the greater focus on enterprise agreements, the linkages between vocational education provisions and national industrial awards are under challenge. Enterprises are now making demands of the training system which are different from what the industry-based system offers (Catts, 1996, Smith et al, 1995). The inadequacies of “industry” frameworks are becoming evident through enterprise specific arrangements and also direct interaction between enterprises and vocational education providers in the development of programs, thereby eroding further the prospect of uniform and highly specific curricula prescriptions (Lundberg 1997). Consequently, the relationship between ‘industry’ and enterprises is shifting and being re-negotiated, hastened or precipitated by the demise of bodies which have sustained the national foci (e.g., NTB, Standards and Curriculum Council).

Given the increasing irrelevance of prescriptive national industry frameworks there is an urgency to determine how the needs of enterprises, industry, regions and individuals can best be addressed in ways that provides some balance in their relationship to each other’s needs. However, before going further, it is worth briefly defining these client groups, particularly as the first two are often mistakenly referred to synonymously. Industry is defined as the spokespersons for an industry sector, who are usually bi-partite and claim to speak for both the employers and employees within the industry sector. Industry does not directly sponsor training or employ; rather it provides advice and guidance for the sector. Enterprises are the companies where individuals are employed, where entry-level training is sponsored and fee-for service training can occur. Regions are areas that have particular combinations of enterprises and communities comprising demographic and other factors that indicate particular vocational education and training needs. The concept of communities has multiple meanings (Lawrence 1997). Here, instead, the ‘locale’ is referred to which has geographic boundaries, and contains within it different groups whose interests, values and perceptions are likely vary. Individuals are those who engage or wish to engage with the VET system typically as independent clients, and to a lesser degree under enterprise sponsorship. The delineation of the four clients groups leads to a consideration of what arrangements can best be aligned to provide for the skilfulness required by enterprises, the requisite base of skills to sustain industries, to address regional needs and provide pathways through which individuals can realise their personal and vocational goals.

### Shifting relationships and maintaining balances: industry vs. enterprises

In an effort to gain their commitment the focus for policy deliberations and practice is now turning to meet the needs of enterprises. However, inherent problems are associated with such a shift. A highly deregulated and enterprise-focused approach to VET may well ignore state and national goals, instead leading to the adhocery and short termism evident in the United Kingdom (Billett 1997b). Such an

approach is likely to ignore the needs and aspirations of the locale and its individuals. Enterprises are posited as requiring more direct control of training, than the current arrangements premised on national industry prescription. This seems a legitimate need particularly when private investment is being encouraged. Consequently, change are required in the relationship between enterprises and industry which include direct interaction with providers of VET unbridled by detailed industry prescription.

*“(C)oooperation between training providers and employers is crucial because supply side competition can only be sustained if demand signals from enterprises and industry are well informed and accurate” (Coopers & Lybrand, 1996:26).*

However, while this shift emphasises a de-centring of decision-making and permits situational factors to be included in curriculum development, as foreshadowed above. It also poses a potential threat to long-term national goals for vocational education and skill levels of the workforce as highly idiosyncratic curriculum provisions may not address individuals need for vocational knowledge which is robust (transferable). This situation suggests problems for individuals, their locale as well as industry requirements for workers with robust knowledge. Consequently, any shift towards an enterprise focus must guard against losing goals which reflect balance between the needs of client groups, mutuality among clients and the maturity inherent in the existing system.

So in advancing the legitimate needs of enterprises, the goals and processes which were adopted for a national industry approach to vocational education, founded on regulation, mandation and prescription, are now inappropriate (Lundberg 1997). A highly centralised approach requires regulation. An enterprise focus will likely require support and guidance, if robust outcomes are desired, to refine goals and develop relevant curriculum as well as in relating enterprise-specific content to broad national goals. For example, enterprise commitment to training is associated with securing goals which are specific to the particular enterprise (Catts 1996, Smith 1997). This is very much associated with their decisions about committing expenditure to training (Burke 1995\*). These factors suggest that without support and guidance a vocational education system premised on the needs of enterprises without mediating the needs of other clients may be quite short sighted. For example, entry-level VET provisions traditionally have provided a skill-base for industry and are the kind of structured opportunities and probably furnish the best prospects for developing robust vocational knowledge. These provisions make important contributions to industry, enterprises and the individuals who undertake them. However, participation in these provisions is stalling at the very time that efforts are being redoubled to address the specific enterprise needs (see Table 1). While it may be too early to say whether such tailoring on its own terms will be sufficient to encourage wider participation by enterprises, the reduced commitment to VET by enterprises permits a timely glimpse

at a VET system premised on the enterprises. Understandably, in a highly competitive and tough market, these enterprises want arrangements which focus on their specific goals (Catts 1996, Smith 1997), however there are long term consequences in the form of a reduced skill base for these enterprises. The difficulty of reconciling the exigencies of enterprise in the sponsorship of entry-level training and desirable strategic goals for levels of participation should not be underestimated. It has probably underpinned the decision to support the expansion of the Group Apprenticeship Scheme (ANTA 1997). However, the key sponsorship of VET appears not to reside within industry.

Sponsorship of entry-level training is held to be important in maintaining and developing national skill base and responding to global competitiveness (ANTA 1997). However, currently enterprise sponsorship comprises a small portion of the overall training profile (14-17% STB 1997). Moreover, enterprise commitment to apprenticeships has declined 41% since 1990 (see Table 1). The decline in apprentice numbers has been partially offset by increases in Traineeship commencements (see Table 1). Significantly, the recent high levels of Traineeship commencements were associated with governmental interventions in the form of support and facilitation (e.g., NETTFORCE). So the fluctuating patterns of enterprise sponsorship of entry-level training cannot be relied solely upon to secure the maintenance of the country's skill base. Hence, deregulated and supply-side approaches to managing the nation's skill base must be questioned if long term goals are to be realised.

Table 1 - participation in Apprenticeship and traineeship programs and Associate Diplomas

<b>Year</b>	<b>Apprentices</b>	<b>Traineeship Commencements</b>	<b>TOTAL ELT</b>	<b>F/T Assoc Dips</b>	<b>All Assoc Dips</b>
1990	16,073	1,492	17,565	-	
1991	8,705	1,004	9,709	4,790	15,309
1992	7,529	1,845	9,374	5,156	13,616
1993	9,298	4,295	13,593	9,216	22,762
1994	10,887	2,477	13,364	13,104	32,036
1995	11,578	1,916	13,494	13,237	33,486
1996	10,159	7,205	17,364		

#### *Emerging focus on individuals*

In contrast to the evidence of a reduced commitment by enterprises, the participation by individual Victorians in Associate Diploma (+154% 1990-1994) and advanced trade courses (+63% 1990-1994) demonstrates their commitment to and investment in vocational education (STB 1995). True, the levels of participation in Associate Diploma courses can be attributed to limited employment options with individuals taking strategic actions. However, and regardless of this, these individuals are making a significant social and economic contribution through their sponsorship of themselves in

these courses. Referring to New Growth Theory, Chapman (1997) links human capital to economic growth, proposing that human capital is increased by higher levels of education. Consequently, there is a national benefit in the form of a potential economic growth from an increase in post-compulsory education. Through their participation, individuals are making a significant contribution at the very time when enterprises are favouring shorter and lower level courses. Yet, unlike industry and enterprises these individuals are not considered stakeholders. Ironically, individuals are increasing their contribution whereas those with the authoritative voice within vocational education seem to be failing to live up to the responsibility invested in them. Clearly, the decline in enterprise commitment to VET is undesirable. However, more balance is required in how all clients' interests can best be managed.

There is an emerging focus on individuals in VET policy and practice. For example, the individual has become integral to the United Kingdom system, albeit to promote individual responsibility through sponsorship of their own vocational development (Gibbs & Maguire 1995). What is emerging here and elsewhere (e.g., European Year of Lifelong Learning) is that individuals' development over time is now being viewed as a key element in securing not only personal goals, which lifelong learning has traditionally been associated with, but also economic goals that will benefit both the enterprises for which individuals work and also their country. However, individuals are not just economic units. They are component of the social and economic development of a country. Yet, it seems individuals' role needs to be transformed from them being considered as a means to securing goals set by others (e.g., industry), to their inclusion in the development of the goals for and provisions of vocational education. So, in addition to the transformations taking place in the relationship between industries and enterprises, a greater consideration of individuals as an explicit client group of VET is now warranted. Added to this are the needs of the regions in which these individuals live and work.

### *Regional needs*

Regional needs have long been the subject of government reports, committees and promises. It has been acknowledged that regional needs, usually those outside the metropolitan centre, are hard to gauge and under-emphasised (ACFEB 1995, KPMG 1996, Schofield 1996). Yet without accounting for their needs it may be difficult to secure goals associated with the desired levels of participation in and sponsorship of VET. For example, rural employers have been identified as needing more effective consultations with training providers (Market Equity 1997). Equally, success in extending VET provisions such as apprenticeships and RPL to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is likely to be premised on acknowledging and accommodating social and cultural factors in those communities (Woods 1996). This need is also illustrated clearly in recent planning documents which



identify diversity in demographic factors (e.g. age and ethnicity) across different areas (see STB 1995) which have clear implications for vocational education programs.

The Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) sector, which is owned and managed in the local community, has been acknowledged as making a significant contribution to the VET provisions in regional Australia (Schofield 1996) which includes responses to local enterprises. In this way the ACFE provision offers a model for the development and implementation of vocational education programs tailored for the 'locale' and to bring to the national VET system a strongly local flexible and learner-centred approach to community based delivery (Schofield 1996). The Victorian TAFE institute system with, autonomy associated with administration and some curriculum planning also indicates a move from the centre and a capacity to respond to local needs.

Therefore, with the de-centring of VET provisions and the emerging realisation of the importance of engaging situational factors albeit at the enterprise, community or regional level, it is necessary to consider the needs of the locale alongside those of industry, enterprises and individuals. The locality value of the ACFE sector is instructional here because:

“...state and national labour market and training planning is simply not sensitive enough to pick up small scale and localised demand deriving from local circumstances and which may not coincide with state or national training priorities” (Schofield 1996: vii).

The changes in the relationships among VET client groups outlined above has implications for the further development of the State's VET system in terms of its direction, its mix of policies and emphases within those policies. Mutuality among these clients needs is probably required to develop a VET system able to consider and respond to the balance between securing both short term and long terms goals.

#### Towards mutuality and a mature VET system.

Where maturity is most evident in the existing VET system is in the long-term strategic relationships between TAFE institutes and their community and with particular major enterprises. To what degree these particular outcomes are the product of market-based reforms (Anderson, 1997) or responses to regional needs remains unclear. However, these examples of mutuality and maturity are models for further development. Equally, measures which seek to nurture the training system rather than reform it by external means are worthy of consideration. For example, performance measures for TAFE staff and administrators can be used to monitor performance towards negotiated goals. However, such accountability can only be operated fairly in a framework that grants greater professional discretion to teachers and administrators. It seems incongruous to make teachers accountable for measures which

they have had limited involvement for developing or can be held responsible for their utility. The links established between providers and enterprises might again focus the mutual benefit of these relationships in particularly rich ways. Teachers in vocational education should be included in developing these arrangements, not just viewed as implementers and ‘the problem’ within VET.

The waves of external reforms and their regulated and legislated form have also failed to capture the enthusiasm and interest of enterprises. In fact, quite the opposite has happened. New ways, such as those referred to below might need to be considered to recapture the commitment of enterprises and especially capture the interest of small enterprises. It is proposed here that mutuality of client interest is likely to be a more appropriate goal for the next decade than the external mandation and regulation which have served the VET system so poorly in the recent past.

Conclusions: Changing relationships and roles for client groups

From the above, it is proposed that the changing role for VET clients is now timely and appropriate. Mutuality among the interests of these groups is sought as a base for a mature VET system which seeks balance in addressing the these ‘stakeholders’ needs. In this concluding section, the changing relationships and roles are proposed. A basis for this mutuality is provided in Table 2 and outlined below.

Table 2 - Changing roles and emerging curriculum foci

<b>Clients’ changing role</b>	<b>Emerging foci for curriculum</b>
Individuals: <u>From</u> individuals as economic units <u>to</u> individuals as aspirants with personal and professional goals	arrangements for individual aspirations which have both industry and enterprise dimensions. Pathways for individuals and a focus on careers.
Enterprise: <u>From</u> a fittedness with ‘industry’ mandation and regulation <u>to</u> acknowledging a fittedness with their own unique requirements within an industry framework.	having training needs identified and realised by local providers - strategic alliances between local enterprises and providers - development of curriculum arrangements (goals, processes, etc. established at local level). Broadly-stated industry goals transformed at the particular enterprise to develop more specific outcomes.
Regions: <u>From</u> national and state-based priorities <u>to</u> negotiated regional priorities.	greater regional planning and reaction-based arrangement - undertaken in conjunction with local training providers (e.g., TAFE Institutes). Responsiveness to changing demands at the regional level. Accreditation processes localised - focusing on processes of learning as much as infrastructure requirements and pre-specified outcomes)
Industry: <u>From</u> centralised prescription, mandation and control <u>to</u> facilitating	responsibility for the provisions of broad curriculum goals which are relevant for the

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individual, regional, state and national industry aspirations.

industry, but not so prescriptive that enterprise or regional needs are required. Maintaining career pathways for industry aspirants. Developing and promoting the industry profile.

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### *Individuals*

An emphasis on individuals, their commitments, and their needs is emerging as an area where transformation is needed in VET policy and practice. Individuals make significant contributions to and investment in programs that have a particular vocational outcome (Chapman 1997). From the review of recent research papers (Billett et al., 1997), the roles and needs of individuals in fulfilling personal and professional goals through VET provisions can be seen to have three dimensions: (i) they will need to have skilful knowledge required by enterprises while also being able to work across the industry of their choice; (ii) individuals' needs are not restricted to those of younger learners or those concerned with initial entry to the occupation, but rather with lifelong learning provisions; (iii) individuals are demanding high levels of outcomes associated with a career not just a job. The erosion of direct influence on VET by industrial relations practice - with its strong workplace focus has embedded VET in contested terrain. So changing from submission to the needs of industry to active participants and legitimate stakeholders in the curriculum development, individuals goals and aspirations need to be incorporated within VET decision-making.

### *Enterprises*

Decision-making within enterprises determines how and in what ways employers sponsor participation in, and fund VET programs. Moreover, enterprises are unique organisations with idiosyncratic needs and requirements. A curriculum foci for enterprises needs to develop a firmer understanding of what influences their participation. For example, when the data on enterprise commitment to training is compared to current policy prescriptions, such as user choice, a mismatch is evident. It seems that enterprises want support and facilitation - not more choice or options (Billett & Cooper1997). Consequently, the focus for curriculum and resource decision-making should necessarily shift to determine in which ways these needs can be addressed. Mechanisms that are responsive to enterprise needs within an industry framework, rather than those which are reactive to an industry-based framework based on national prescriptions.

So, rather than directives between 'industry' and enterprises, more direct and situationally purposeful relationships may be developed including those between providers and particular enterprises. The recent decline in participation in apprenticeships remains a key issue for VET policy. Mutuality in relationships between industry and enterprises may assist securing enterprise commitment to these provisions and mediate the entry-level course development to maximise portability within the

industry. Thus, the emerging focus for enterprises is from fittedness within industry prescription to arrangements which address enterprise needs to be accommodated within industry frameworks, from bottom up to top-down (e.g., goals determined at the industry level and objectives negotiated at enterprise or college level). This, plus support and guidance, may assist in redressing the current decline in enterprise sponsorship of entry level training.

### *Regions*

Problems with centralised curriculum and administration have the potential to lead to the needs of the locale being misunderstood or assumptions about appropriate for regions/communities. Equally, educational needs, demographic factors, local enterprises needs, distance, existing resources, etc. are all factors which influence the provision of vocational education and which need to be accounted for and understood at the regional level. Hence, a de-centred approach needs to account for the legitimate needs of the locale.

### *Industry*

The role of 'industry' then should move to mediating the more specific demands of enterprises and address the demands for curriculum emerging from regional deliberations. This role needs to be enacted to maximise the prospect of transfer to other enterprises within the industry and, simultaneously, may limit the problems inherent in state-based or enterprise specific arrangements. Ways of representing individuals' aspirations for career goals may be realised through these arrangements which might otherwise be wholly enterprise, college or regionally-focused. Industry will be able to realise its influence through broad statements of intents for courses and recommended content. Its role then also needs to include the complex task of planning and presenting pathways that reflect enterprise needs and individuals' aspirations. Little is known about the pathways which individuals within industry take. However, not all workers enjoy the kinds of career progression articulated in the Metals model (i.e. apprentice - tradesperson - advanced tradesperson - para-professional). It should be a priority for industry to discern the nature of pathways that workers take in their industries and attempt to facilitate pathways across their industry and also others.

Industry's role therefore moves from prescriptive measures to mediating the specific needs of enterprises and provider programs, maintaining the industry's base of skills and permitting the pathways for individuals' career development. A more 'bottom-up' as opposed to the 'top down' approach that has characterised VET provisions in recent years is being suggested. Consequently, the use of highly specific industry based outcomes are likely to be redundant, as outcomes of this kind need to be negotiated at the enterprise/community or institution level. This change also removes the need for an instruction and assessment approach that is premised on such accountability- i.e. CBT.

In sum, it is proposed that these changing relationships and emerging roles offer a way to realise the goals of the four key VET clients thereby providing a basis to realise far wider participation and sponsorship in VET.

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