THE RENAISSANCE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING:
MISCELLANEOUS HINTS FOR UNDERNOURISHED ELEPHANTS
YEARNING TO DANCE

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Abstract: This article considers the influences on VET delivery and highlights concerns for systems contemplating change. It comments on the purpose of VET and the way VET systems are managed.

Most publicly funded Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems throughout the world, dressed in their various garbs, are elephantine and bureaucratic. Whilst there are notable exceptions, most hobble along, weighed down by a miscellany of agenda, in a world moving at cyberspeed.

Globally, VET is at the crossroads. The renaissance of global VET requires energy stimulated by a vision of tomorrow rather than the frameworks of today or yesterday. In attempting to reinvent its value, in an era marked by exponential change and discontinuity, it is at risk of accepting that any new direction is good enough. If the system does not know which route to travel, any path will do.

TRIANGULATED PILLARS OF VET MANAGEMENT

VET systems are predominately publicly owned and managed. Both the providers and the systems are subject to competing pressures and have been drawn into the reforms of the western world’s public sectors. Public VET providers are largely centrally funded and controlled, with different levels of delivery-based autonomy.

Western-world VET sits in the eye of a storm rampaging simultaneously on three fronts: from the new world operating paradigm of globalization, evolving technologies, changes in work and social values; from higher education providers who, throughout the world, have experienced radical increases in student numbers without commensurate funding adjustments and thus have pursued new markets (such as VET); and from increased economic drivers resulting from public sector management reforms. Faced with this environment, distinct VET systems, if left unmanaged or managed in traditional bureaucratic ways, will become unsustainable and are likely to prepare students for a world that has disappeared.

It is difficult to make global statements about the world of VET. VET commentators within industrialized countries frequently ignore the basic needs of much of the world where two thirds of the global population can only access clean water by carrying it themselves from water courses and 80% of the world’s population have never used a telephone, let alone sent an e-mail message. The industrialized countries, with only 15% of the world’s population, contain 88% of all internet users. Even if appropriate telecommunications systems were in place, without literacy and basic computer skills, most of the third-world’s population would still be excluded. To close the knowledge gap generated by technology and globalization, the first step is to address the learning deficit in the
third-world where, in 24 countries, 20% of primary school aged children are not in any educational system.

The delivery of VET, irrespective of the host country, is supported by three pillars: money and economics (“the financial pillar”), political and ideological considerations (“the political pillar”) and community, local and social issues (“the social pillar”).

**Social Pillar**

VET providers usually discharge a significant social responsibility by reaching the unreached and including the excluded. VET expands access to education for the socially, educationally and economically disadvantaged. It is low cost, accessible and non-threatening. VET students commonly come from the lower socio-economic groups, many are mature-aged and most have no or no significant previous academic certification. VET fulfills a need for “second chance” education and retraining. VET also meets a social need for aligning education with the skills required in the future workforce. In many cases, VET providers pick up the pieces left by the failure of the economically driven markets to meet social obligations.

**Political Pillar**

VET providers support social infrastructure, contribute to regional growth, provide employment and are often significant local participants in economic development. As State owned organizations or at least largely government-funded bodies, VET providers react to the political ideology and imperatives of government. Efficient and effective program management does not necessarily achieve the social or political outcomes required by government. The political environment of public sector activity is an important influence on public sector management.

**Financial Pillar**

The raison d’être for VET is not the financial well-being or strength of the provider or the system. It exists to meet a broader social value. However, governments expect their agencies to operate both effectively and efficiently. This is particularly so today, as evidenced by such programs as the UK’s “Next Steps” initiative, New Zealand’s “State Sector Reform Program”, Australia’s “National Competition Policy”, Canada’s “Public Sector 2000” initiative and the USA’s “Reinventing Government” program.

Public sector managers have been induced away from an adherence to inputs-driven and formalized processes to an emphasis on optimal resource allocations, outputs-driven strategies and value for money. The key changes to the management of publicly funded organizations include a strategic management focus, a shift to quantifiable output measurement, the devolution of management controls within an agreed performance framework, a preference for private ownership and contestability in public sector service provision, the imitation of private sector management practices and an emphasis on cost-cutting and efficiencies.

Economic considerations are always high on government agendas. Governments and the public expect VET providers to operate frugally. That alone, however, is not enough. They can operate efficiently and still not achieve the social and political outcomes expected of them.

The nature and function of VET providers have substantially diversified in recent years. This has resulted in a diversification of funding sources (UNESCO, 1999, p.10) which, in turn, has intensified the focus on funding and financial efficiencies. In practice, the loose-tight controls of government may have been antithetical: loose when they should be tight, and tight when they
should be loose. VET providers, with operating systems glued by public sector impediments, have been asked to act like businesses and have been judged like private providers (Queensland, 1998).

Diagram 1 depicts the triangulated model.

Providers positioned at point A in Diagram 1 will only provide programs if they are profitable. In order to survive, their fee-for-service revenue must significantly exceed their government funding. They are unlikely to have many supporters in government as they divorce themselves from political imperatives and, more significant, from the community, social and support imperatives traditionally met by VET. They will have little connection with local communities.

Providers positioned at point B in Diagram 1 will be driven by the social pillar of VET provision. They will not pursue financial strength or short term financial profit and will probably be managed inefficiently. They ignore the short-term idiosyncratic demands of local politicians and the broader imperatives of government and public sector reforms.

Providers positioned at point C in Diagram 1 will be consumed by political imperatives and the demands of Ministers and local members. They will constantly divest resources to pursue short-term interests of stakeholders and will be unable to maintain any constant strategic growth consistent with financial survival. They ignore the broader learning framework of VET and will be unable to adjust to the contemporary needs of students and industry.

A provider often “bounces around” inside the quagmire of the triangulated framework propelled by the particular imperatives of the day. Different governments with different ideologies will attempt to position VET towards one or other pillar in the framework. It is unwise to accept long term positioning near any one particular pillar without embedding a flexibility to adjust towards another pillar should medium term circumstances dictate. This is due to VET's status as a tool that meets a variety of agendas. There is a trade off between the three pillars.
KNOW WHAT YOU ARE

VET is a difficult concept to define. Generally speaking, it is an outcomes based phenomenon. It is usually understood to mean all learning experiences that directly enhance the skills, knowledge, competencies and capabilities of individuals, required in undertaking gainful employment. VET provides technician, craft and trade type ‘middle-level’ skills and knowledge. It is essentially practical, applied, technical and job-related. However, rapidly changing technology, globalisation, organisational change, the development of the ‘knowledge society’ and the market-oriented, deregulatory policies of governments have blurred the boundaries of the sectoral/skill-level notion of VET. Its focus is on the nexus between education and training, in all their forms, at all levels, and employment, whether paid or unpaid, and the economy. It calls for a multi-disciplinary approach (Maglen, 1996).

VET is a process in pursuit of an outcome. What it is, is less important that what it produces; how it is delivered is less important than the product of the delivery process. Yet the scuttle-but of hearsay around VET corridors increasingly infers that VET in the new millenium may shift to become applied vocational skills defined by reference to pedagogue, basically work place (or application) based and applied learning, rather than the qualification produced, the skill level acquired or the employment opportunities which it creates. This, so the scuttle-but continues, is dependent on policy. Most VET providers see themselves as implementing government policy. However, policy creation and implementation are iterative and interwoven. To echo Mintzberg (1996), policy implementation involves policy determination and re-creation. Administration is not just a question of efficiency and rational rules: it inherently involves policy choices. In this sense, VET managers have a degree of autonomy independent from government. The key to shaping that independent capacity is to ensure that it is exercised speedily and in a way that is relevant for the world of today and tomorrow, not perpetuative of the world of yesterday. It is within this crevice of implementatory discretion that centralised, bureaucratic systems can leap forward into tomorrow.

FUNCTIONALITY OF VET

VET systems exist for the students and the creation of skills and competencies needed for tomorrow’s world. The system itself has no intrinsic worth. Most state based education systems are a vertically integrated process and often a vertically integrated monopoly. Many western world public sector reforms have sought to unbundle the vertical integration by segregating the various parts of the process into different units, with these units then dealing at arm's length with each other. This process has been pursued, for example, in water, gas and power industries. It clarifies the cross-subsidies between zones of activity and makes the “chunks” of the process financially transparent.

Publicly owned VET providers are vertically integrated. To use a water industry analogy, VET providers control the data and knowledge catchment, storage, treatment and transportation. Global VET providers are very good at catching the rain and harvesting the raw materials. For many years, teachers and educators became experts at treating the raw materials to align them the required skills or, using our analogy, the type of water required. They are less adept at this today as the skills needed are changing rapidly. Interestingly, throughout the world, enormous resources and energy are being directed at developing mechanisms to address this gap. It is astounding, then, that so little attention or resources have been diverted to the pipeline – the distribution networks. Water engineers know that a weak pipeline causes enormous potential risk. The raw water may be of excellent quality, or poor water treated usually at a significant cost, but a leak in the pipe undoes all
the hard work. Industry knows that you cannot sell the world’s best product without a good customer interface and distribution network. Teachers have not received the same attention. In many countries, VET teachers are deficient in their theoretical or practical skills (UNESCO, 1999, p.7). A new model of the VET system should see the role of teachers re-appraised with skill mixes and pedagogy reinvented. Teachers will be re-skilled on the job and probably in their own time. They will acquire new entrepreneurial skills by an increased interaction with industry and the community. Using the water analogy, water engineers no longer invest in new copper or cast iron pipe when a cheaper more flexible and durable pipe can be used. If global VET should adopt a business model then it must recognize that no business spends so little on its distribution network and customer interface. Its leaders should reappraise the historical under-investment in teaching skill maintenance and development.

INNOVATION AND THE NET: ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

VET organizations have objectives framed around learning. Different VET providers specialize in different disciplines or markets. Within faculties, there are sub-streams of interest and specialities of learning. One teaching methodology may not suit every type of learning process. Teaching is a process. Learning methodologies are processes. They are means to an end. One “size” does not fit all. Each particular circumstance needs to undertake assessments of appropriate methodologies.

The internet and web based delivery is a particular delivery and learning methodology. It will suit some types of programs and some students. The focus on internet delivery is important but it is not an all-consuming panacea for the future. It is a strategy that supplements other methodologies rather than supplants them. In the absence of the young generation of today cloning their learning attributes - and there is no evidence to suggest that that is so - then there is and will remain a demand and educational integrity in a variety of delivery methodologies.

In the discontinuous world of the new millennium driven by rapid technological change, globalization, economic uncertainty and diminishing resources, the real key to the future of a reinvented global VET provision is innovation (beyond flexible delivery), rather than planned structural processes. VET providers will be doomed by repressed, centralized, dictatorial managerial styles and curriculum morbidity. Testimony to this is the global difficulties experienced by curriculum developers in designing and unleashing traditional curriculum in a world that moves faster than the capacity of traditional curricula development mechanisms. The curriculum is often redundant before delivery. The answer, of course, is to build a curricula framework and leave the detail to devolved experts at the grass roots who can adjust it to suit the idiosyncrasies of the market and the students as they try to align their skills with the rapidly evolving needs of industry.

VET providers are, by their nature, professional organizations. They are best managed “bottom up” rather than “top down”. Hierarchically driven power produces resource misallocation in highly process-oriented front line staff. The result is a need to recognize that the centralized systems must move towards autonomous devolution with a clear vision of the future. Managers must move to individual autonomy and be accountable for results and co-ordination, not processes. The processes should be the responsibility of the teaching staff.

The traditional worldwide catch-cry in VET is that there is not enough money. There is, of course, never enough money. The trick is to recognize that solutions must be pursued outside traditional frameworks. Are the processes, for instance, still the right processes? Staff need to be stimulated to look for solutions which require reallocation of resources rather than new resources. Organizations need to address what they do and why they do it. No longer is it enough to say that particular
processes are in place because they always have been. The challenge for VET leaders is to find new and better ways of producing enhanced outcomes with fewer resources.

An important ingredient to an enhanced future therefore is managed devolution. That however should only follow clarity of vision. The immediate task for most VET leaders is to define the future of VET in terms of positioning, outcomes and parameters. They need to focus on the values VET delivers rather than the more difficult contemplation of the abstract purpose of VET.

**VET AS THE PRIME GLOBAL LEARNING FRAMEWORK FOR TOMORROW**

VET teachers are often passionate about their work. Passion, however, often resists change. Passion driven in a particular direction, within particular parameters, is a valuable organizational resource. Managers should inspire passion in their teachers, but provide a framework for its pursuit. Inspiration of passion in teachers is rare without engagement of the teachers in the broader debate and without inclusive and participatory decision-making processes.

As VET leaders search for their own solutions it may be wise to recall that in rapidly evolving environments an investment in a solution provides only one answer and leaves begging the solution to the next question. Frameworks to guide multiple solutions are often better structures to build.

**REFERENCES**


