Changing Identities and Performance of Post-Compulsory Educational Providers

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Guest Editor – Special Edition

Post-Compulsory Education and Changing Practices

Introduction

In recent times, many reports have argued for educational providers across the sectors to think creatively about how to best meet the learning needs of post-compulsory education students. These developments aimed to cater for the education and training needs of the full spectrum of students whether judged by ability, age or employment expectations. They also lead to increasing the variety of vocational and professional education provision and pathways, improved modes of career support, and relaxed controls over access to different sectors for qualifications and accreditation.

This Special Issue of *The Australian Educational Researcher* explores how and why new cross-sectoral arrangements in post-compulsory education are reframing the performance and identities of further and higher education in Australia and internationally. This context poses new challenges for educational policymakers and for the practices of the participants and the next generation of students and teachers and lecturers as well as for us as educational researchers. It also provides new opportunities for better positioning educational institutions in what are *ad hoc* and ill-formed competitive markets after more than a decade of unparalleled and poorly focussed change. The question the papers in this Issue pose is whether these arrangements involve institutional shifts so that existing paradigms of delivery, pedagogy and assessment are altered in favour of better outcomes for students, staff and their communities. No unequivocal answers are possible yet, but these are key questions for our time.

Changes to public funding for the various levels and sectors have been used as a leverage for many of the structural reforms noted above over the last decade. Many of these interventions were aimed at making education responsive as an industry to

local and regional aspirations and economies. These levers were particularly influential in further and higher education. However, some aspects of reform were driven by educators who saw the need to restructure schooling so that the artificial barriers between primary, secondary and tertiary education – constructed post-WW2 – could be partially demolished. This allowed for greater access to education by the broader community. It also facilitated linking the educational experience to workplace and employer expectations. In turn, it changed the perspectives on the value and quality of credentials and the competencies expected of the workforce that was required to function productively in the competitive global economies of the 21st century.

One thing that is clear is that there is an urgent need for research to better identify how far (if at all) the boundaries between education levels, sectors and providers are being broken down through the formation of enhanced and flexible credentialing and qualifications pathways and changes to young people's lives, study and work choices (Dwyer & Wyn 1998, Carnegie 2000, Jones, Yonezawa, Ballesteros & Mehan 2002, Harris, Rainey & Sumner 2007). Educational policy and practice in Australia as well as internationally currently is marked by the push towards vocational education and training in higher education. This policy approach is changing the face of its clientele and the accompanying 'credential creep' throughout secondary and tertiary education. As early as 1998 the OECD (1988) reported:

> The once clear boundary between secondary and higher education is gradually blurring and even losing its relevance. The term 'higher education' itself, which in the past was associated with a specific set of institutions, now covers a much wider variety of courses and programs…' (p. 35)

There is little considered debate and information about what this means for the future, let alone for people negotiating their way through the maze of practices emerging from constant and not always coherent policy reforms, especially given the number of stakeholders. It could be argued that while qualifications policy is pushing further and higher education together, broader policies related to the resourcing of education could be forcing TAFE and University collaboration apart. This is a complex policy dilemma and research that addresses these issues is very welcome.

Since that OECD report, much of the ground has shifted, but it is fair to ask whether we have bridged gaps between 16+ educational sites and processes or do we now have structures that disrupt policy advances because we continue to discriminate between providers in ways that retard the realisation of adventurous articulations and pathways? For example, in Australia, under current national policy imperatives highlighted by the Ministerial Committee for Vocational Education (MCVTE), States and Territories have committed to increase qualification completion in courses at diploma

level and above by an average of 2% per annum over the next 10 years, to the extent possible within existing funding. This is just one example of how policy is being steered by the state to drive reforms through outdated and ill-fitting educational structures. The aim is to free up the means and locations at which people can further their education and training requirements without incurring too much expense and within shorter timeframes.

This decision reflects priority areas determined at a political level. Other examples in Australia include – the Australian Government *Human Capital Enhance by VET Report* (2007); the NSW government strategy: *Our 15-19 Year Olds – Opportunities and Choice* (2006); and the NSW *Co-operation between Schools, TAFE and Universities* guide to good practice (2005). This was followed by the NSW Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal *Review of the skills base and future challenges for VET.* There was also the Victorian report *Credit Matrix* (2004) for building bridges between qualifications, the ALP Opposition's *Job Ready Certificate* policy proposal and the Phillips/KPA *National Study to Improve Outcomes in Credit Transfer and Articulation from Vocational and Technical Education to Higher Education* (2006).

While the list is extensive, and the topics broadly scoped, the general points raised can be summarised as:

- there remains an overwhelming need to reduce attrition rates in Vocational Education and Training (VET);

- there is a need for enhanced completion rates in higher level certificate and diploma qualifications;

- there is a need to identify new and emerging industry and qualification areas to met market requirements; and

- there is a need to expand and refocus relationships between public higher education providers.

The basis for the MCEETYA (2005) *Good Practice Principles for Credit Transfer and Articulation from VET to Higher Education* principles is recognition that effective credit transfer and articulation is a key component in making lifelong learning a reality. In addition, students need reasonable assurances that they will be able to take educational pathways, which recognise previous areas of learning, skill development and qualifications to facilitate the desired end by a more efficient means. The eight MCEETYA Principles provide clear support for:

- formal vertical and lateral pathways;

- equivalence of learning outcomes;

- general applicability;

- transparent rules and procedures;

- agreed measures for evaluation of effectiveness of credit transfer; and

- improved mobility of students between VET and higher education.

One of the strengths of the MCEETYA principles is that they bridge VET and higher education by acknowledging the integrity of general and technical knowledge in a way that is both productive and fulfilling for individuals. Furthermore it serves the economic agenda of the state. Such recognition opens up a form and level of dialogue about qualifications and credentials that Australia has not seriously engaged in before. Thus, it is believed, education systems and sectors can be freed from many of the constraints of current structures and regulations.

Of direct significance for understanding the current policy footprint in Australia is a cumulative and extensive body of work on educational choice, "16+" options and trajectories, youth studies and policy activism in the UK. This work is most recently portrayed in a study of access to higher education (Ball, Davies, David & Reay 2002) that investigated internal status differences through students' positive and negative choices in further and higher education. This work is based on well-founded theoretical precepts taken from Bourdieu's typology of 'classification' and 'judgement'. Complementary work undertaken by the same authors includes: *Internal Marketing* (Maguire, Ball & Macrae 2001), *The Refusal of Adulthood* (Maguire, Ball & Macrae 2001b), *Choice, Pathways and Transitions Post-16* (Ball, Maguire & Macrae 2000) and *Parents, Privilege and the Education Market-place* (Bowe, Ball & Gewirtz 1994).

The findings suggest that choices are made through differently determined 'opportunity structures' that relate to socio-economic and socio-cultural factors. Thus "choice" about what qualification one might pursue, at which institution, in which sector, is now seen as better understood as related to individual biographies with institutional identities. Much of this is trapped within stereotypes, class and gender factors, along with attitudes to work and study. Yet there is very little evidence-based research on choice and flexibility in further and higher education compared to a wealth of research about school choice undertaken worldwide over the 1990s because, being non-compulsory, the option of choice beyond schooling is seen (falsely) as self-evident (Crump 2000).

It is well documented that geographical, class, gender, race and cultural variables are at play in choosing post-compulsory education (Dwyer & Wyn 1998). A need now exists for new types of document analysis and conceptualisation of this expression as part of a market ideology for education. It is commonly accepted that general education options are taken by more privileged students and VET courses more by disadvantaged students. Historically, these have been segmented on class and gender lines. OECD research shows that for increased job chances, the most significant stage is upper secondary education, its graduates a third less likely to be unemployed in their early 20s than non-completers (OECD 1998, p. 8).

Such was the pace of development in the early 1990s, brought about by further and higher education amalgamations (mirrored in the UK by the redefinition of Polytechnics), that the National Board of Employment, Education and Training initiated a review of practices for credit transfer on behalf of the Commonwealth government (NBEET 1992). As early as this, dual concerns of efficiency and equity were expressed. The general point in the NBEET Report was that credit transfer had been conservative and *ad hoc*. This needed to change if post-compulsory education was going to be more flexible around accreditation, assessment and qualification procedures, and to provide broader choice options for potential students from all age groups and the wider community. In 2007 most of this remains unsystematic and undertaken on a student-by-student basis.

A re-thinking and re-framing of the collaboration between secondary, further and higher education is begun in this special issue of AER. These papers provide guidelines for determining whether organisational, management and curriculum changes impacted on the traditional groupings of students in a distinct manner and opened up access to non-traditional clients to further and higher education. New expectations provide the springboard for the numerous sectoral partners to engage in shaping these initiatives and new identities. The notion of flexibility has been the key to these contradictions, with the consequent opportunities for post-compulsory education to be more responsive to needs of existing policy stakeholders and accessible to a wider range of voices from the community and employers.

The institutional functioning of schools, the cultural content of curriculum, and the pattern of relations between families and schools, are important sources of educational outcomes. What is occurring now is a reverse articulation of this process. It is made up of new flows of students between sectors to serve lifelong learning objectives, regardless of the structures and functions of the original institutions. Also worth asking is whether the changed arrangements are available more broadly to the community, given the human and capital costs involved in establishing new ways of post-compulsory provision?

The papers in this special issue add to our ability and willingness to reframe these questions. In doing so, it is worth taking the time to reflect on how young people see this period of their lives. One final senior school year student wrote to me that the transition from junior to senior high schools had been a difficult and tiring process. Some of the experiences from 'staying on' into the senior years and looking towards the future were:

- Nights are no longer for sleeping, but an opportunity to finish off the Business / Maths / English / Modern History / Biology assessment that is due soon (probably tomorrow)…

- Caffeine is now your best friend. The only time you're not seen with a coffee is when you're buying the next one at a café.

- Assessments come all at once, covering each other up until you don't know what stage each one is at, what you have to do, how long it's meant to be…

- Relationships are non-existent, as stress and pressure overflows into every aspect of life. You can no longer go out with friends as "I have an assessment to do" is no longer an excuse but a reality.

- Movies, books and poems are no longer entertainment but opportunities to see how power / journeys / change is written about in each. There is no joy in reading or watching films, only critical analysis.

It is young people like this person that matter to the contributors to this Special Edition of *The Australian Educational Researcher*, and drive their research and commitment to changing things for the better, I am proud to be associated with their work and thank the Australian Association for Research in Education for the opportunity to present it to you.

The Contributors

This Issue opens with the paper by John Stevenson on *Technical and further education and training reforms: theoretical issues*. Stevenson examines theoretical issues arising from technical and further education reforms in terms of theoretical relationships among knowledge, skills, activity and meaning, employing the original concepts rather than interpretations, and in a way that is relevant to all 16+ contexts. Stevenson argues that there has been a 'continual governmental orchestration of changes … since the 1960s' associated with a 'societal polarisation of what is taken to be legitimate knowledge' (p. 15). As Stevenson acknowledges, choices have to be made about what to include in a curriculum, but he argues that in vocational education and training there is a presumed relationship between the productive needs

of society and the needs of the individual that excludes and suppresses other concerns and knowledge. He concludes that a fresh analysis is needed about how legitimacy should be afforded to different ways of learning and knowing because, in VET contexts, the constant return to industrially-derived verbal codifications of specific behaviours as found in workplaces impoverishes learners' potential education and career options.

The second paper addresses one of these so far less legitimised areas of learning, 'wellbeing'. Wyn, in her provocative paper on *Learning to become somebody well: challenges for educational policy*, recounts the emergence of new social and economic realities that mean the world for which we are preparing young people is changing, and therefore we need to offer them new areas of learning and a disposition to embrace new skills. Wynn quotes young people who are 'learning to enjoy the journey rather than focus on the destination' (p. 36). While this is an old travel cliché, it is a thought alien to the still mostly rigid and linear structures of education and training despite notions of choice and life-long learning.

Wyn highlights for us the importance of attending to new educational tasks that could have an effect on identities and personal capacities for this generation, and those just visible on the horizon. This includes assisting young people develop the cultural resources to enable them to thrive, just as previous generations thrived (or failed) on academic resources, each destiny largely shaped by the level, scope and quality of material resources at hand or provided through education and training. Wyn's paper points out how flexible narratives are a key element in young people's lives in the 21st Century, but this does not mean they are being "irresponsible" in taking their time to make life choices, but a factor of negotiating uncertainty and change successfully in a far more complex world than that for which existing 16+ options were constructed. Wyn points to a disjuncture between the lives of young people and the direction of current educational policies that place an overwhelming focus on vocational and economic outcomes that, whilst able to be justified, is what Lingard has called 'old pedagogy' being stamped onto the discordant needs and experiences of the young people meant to benefit. The biggest failing, according to Wyn, is the failure to acknowledge, with sufficient energy, the opportunity to enhance individual and community well-being.

Alternatives in education can be sought and won not only within existing sites of practice, but also in separate entities and locations. The third paper, te Riele's *Educational alternatives for marginalised youth*, provides a map of the alternative education landscape for marginalised youth, using examples from New South Wales, Australia as her data. Te Riele starts with the assertion that completion of secondary education has almost become a minimum requirement for entry into the labour

market in Australia and across the Western world. Certainly, without this, employment is perilous, expedient and transient, often ending in late teens with little prospect of re-employment. This economic driver, assisted by political decisions about schooling and unemployment benefits for young people, has forced up senior school retention rates (in Australia from 46% in 1985, to 75% in 2002, where it has stabilised), and government policy is to drive it even higher.

Te Riele argues that the multitude of policies around young people, work and education has led to confusion and inefficiency. In addition, this has created a space for a different type of alternative school, one that is based not on behaviour management or personal preferences for individual fulfilment, but on meeting the needs of young people for whom current structures are toxic. Te Riele explores new meanings for 'at risk' and ways of seeing the problem as the systems' rather than something about young people that needs to change. Te Riele suggests that changing educational provision within stable units or schools has more pronounced and longer-lasting effects, and can be cheaper and have better educational outcomes. There are lessons here for mainstream schools too.

The next paper focuses on a specific example of a policy intervention aimed at changing school student attitudes to further study, in this case for higher education. *But no one in my family has been to university* by Maras, reports on the second stage of a 3 year study looking into widening participation in education involving 3,570 students aged between 13-18 in a London borough. The work reported on in this paper focuses on Year 10 students (14-15 year olds) in two consecutive years based on the data from the *Attitudes to Higher Education Questionnaire* (AHEQ). Maras begins by rehearsing the well-established links between social and economic background and participation and performance in education. She explains the 'Widening Participation' policy of United Kingdom government aimed at creating an inclusive higher education system for all who can benefit from it. As a consequence, local education authorities are working hard to meet new and optimistic national benchmarks (50% of 18-30 year olds to be in higher education by 2010), mainly to be achieved by increasing participation through interventions aimed at the disadvantaged.

The results of the AHEQ, conducted by Maras, suggests that there are gender and age differences, with young women more positive about education generally even though the results for young men did show some improvement in some key areas that were attributed to the intervention. Young men were less likely to see themselves as going to a university after school, and this could be partly explained perhaps by young men having a weaker identification with school itself. Maras suggests that the link between higher education and 'better' jobs (defined as having higher earnings power /

potential) is one of the key messages of the 'Aim Higher' policy intervention and is one seen as attractive to changing perceptions and expectations about continuing participation in education and training. As an aside, Maras reflects on how this has shifted from the notion of learning for learning's sake, and the development of this more instrumental and mercenary construct could catch out higher education academics who will soon have more young people, from a more diverse population, sitting in front of them thinking about pounds, euros and dollars rather than the value of knowledge.

Stanley continues the themes already addressed by other authors of participation and work-readiness through the lens of human capital. He argues that an emphasis on the latter arising from economic planning is having an impact on educational planning, with work-readiness becoming a key element in secondary schooling (and in higher education too). An emphasis on human capital is driving the pressure to push up retention and participation rates on senior secondary schooling, with vocational education and training redefined into explicit vocational pathways a powerful item in the policy-makers toolbox.

Stanley points to the challenges facing the state when attempting to drive current contexts in the light of future needs, in that many of the jobs of the future have yet to emerge, and the lead time and costs for re-shaping educational provision are long and expensive. Examples are provided for New South Wales, the largest state in Australia, especially around the decision to improve the status of VET in the matriculation (Year 12) secondary school examination, as well as the relevance and industry alignment of the Higher School Certificate industry curriculum frameworks. These have been very successful in attracting students and well-received by employers, but the long-term contradiction between current practices and future needs is not going to be easy to resolve and so far these policy initiatives have not been able to shift what happens to the 10% of lower achievement students.

Vocational education and training in schools, as a means for reinventing the relationship between schooling and the economy, is also the focus of the paper by Karmel who provides a neat history of the phenomenon in Australia, pointing out that 'VET in school' programs have been attractive to those with weaker academic backgrounds, with socio-economic background also playing a role. These programs also have been at the lowest end of the qualifications scale, in most cases. None-the-less, as expressed in various forms across the different state education systems in Australia, 'Vet in schools' programs have been as successful nationally as Stanley indicated for NSW, with 212,000 Australian senior students undertaking VET in their school in 2004 (the latest figures available) and 50% of senior school students doing at least one VET course. This growth in participation through VET has helped push

up the apparent Year 12 retention rate (Year 7 – 12) from the low 30% range in 1981 to the mid 70% in 2005. Karmel explains how government policy associated with youth unemployment was a big driver of these figures, as well as the academic program of schools failing a very significant proportion of teenagers. However, Karmel is sceptical the huge increase in VET in school participation has increased Year 12 retention.

The policy framework for much of this area was driven by a series of nationally-agreed goals (for instance, the Adelaide Declaration 1999) that included the point that schooling should be socially just and all students able to access high quality education. The national government committed $40 million between 1997-2004 and this complemented significant state and territory expenditure. School-based apprenticeships and traineeships are a more recent element of this policy footprint with numbers soaring from just under 4,000 in 2000 to nearly 16,000 by 2005. At the same time, Karmel suggests, VET itself underwent major reforms and this was reflected in the language used for teaching and courses. While these initiatives have been successful at least in terms of more and better participation, and more relevant and achievable courses, Karmel points to the resilient challenges of involving industry in a meaningful way, fitting into 19th Century school structures. On top of these factors, there is the lack of reasonable recognition for VET courses counting towards university entrance. Karmel concludes that VET in school programs so far have affected transitions to work rather than longer term outcomes and so policy work, and research, in this area is far from complete.

Woodin and Burke extend a number of themes already addressed in earlier papers in their exploration of *Men accessing education: masculinities, class and choice*. This paper draws on a project on men aged 18-54 participating in pre-university access and foundation programs in four London further and higher education sites. They take a similar focus on widening participation and lifelong learning, addressing the gap in our knowledge about men's experiences in relation to choice in terms of gender, class and racial identifications. The UK 'Widening Participation in Higher Education' policy (DfES 2003) is the starting point for Woodin and Burke questioning the high level of awareness and agency projected onto individual students in these policy directions, with the onus shifted to them to make good choices in a government-steered, expanded and (claimed) more flexible education market.

As the authors explain, it is not that simple. They view 'choice' as inseparable from wider social relations and identities, and as a process that is value-laden and culture-specific, where some choices are legitimised over others. Choice is never purely rational, nor are the options ever equal at any one time or place, for any or each group. In this study, the focus on 'access' and 'foundation' courses allows particularly

sharp insights into what is happening on the ground and this is a good example of what I call 'forensic policy'. One of the earliest findings is that the lives of the men they interviewed called into question the idea of choice in a marketplace that is the assumption of policy making in this arena. If this premise is false, then too much time and money is going into a flawed idea. Aspects not considered, apparently, in these policy directions, are factors such as a desire for educational achievement leaving working class men isolated, ethnic minority men locked into family expectations (whether low or high), perhaps in courses that are institutionally marginalised, and middle class men getting 'back on track' but still struggling with internalising the construction of a heterosexual masculine self.

Woodin and Burke correctly argue that it is important not to see this evidence as supporting deficit models, and locating the problem solely with the individual or group / community and a lack of cultural capital. Whilst having access to knowledge about how the systems work, and therefore being better informed about what choices are available and how to access them, the men in this study were well aware of the real nature of the obstacles to their progress and yet continued to see accessing higher education as a crucial mechanism to achieve their aspirations. Participation in 16+ education in these instances is an expression of personal and social struggle, but choice policies alone did little to help, given their limited perspective on the real lives of the participants themselves. This study is an invaluable *aide memoire* to any future decisions.

This Special Edition of *The Australian Educational Researcher* concludes with a look at the other side of many of these issues: what happens in leading the process of reculturing educational sites, partly at least in response to the changes to post-compulsory education discussed in the previous papers. Geijsel, Meijers and Wardekker take a close look at the roles and actions of school leaders attending to secondary vocational education in the Netherlands where the present challenge is to change schools from an industrial diploma factory into a career centre. They argue that teachers need to prepare students for participation in this changing society but teachers need other professional skills than they have at hand. Current societal changes, they suggest, may be giving rise to a 'boundary experience' for many teachers when school management decides that the organisation has to react to those changes. Some teachers thus experience conflict, professional shortcomings and uncertainty. This has resulted mainly in changes in behaviour and structure but cultural change ('reculturing') seems hardly to happen and many school leaders, they argue, do not know how to start culture change. Capacity building, a collaborative culture, teacher participation in decision-making, and transformative leadership appear to be some of the ingredients to make this happen on the other side of the ledger. In order for policies about students' action to work fully, schools and colleges

of vocational education and training need to be ready and prepared to make things happen. This mirrors the point made by Maras for higher education lecturers. The authors see reculturing professional practices and privileging knowledge of teachers and lecturers as a process of co-creating new meanings in a dialogue both with oneself and others.

In 2007, education in a worldwide context is an undertaking with a clear and distinctive character unknown a decade earlier. The co-operation of all sectors and providers is crucial to the potential success of these innovations. There is an increasing impetus to seek closer relationships with communities and clients beyond traditional boundaries. While whole-of-organisation responses are rare, policy and practice in education increasingly reflects new roles in responding to private and public demands. These networks include universities, institutes / colleges of TAFE, private and community providers of VET, and schools. Whatever the nature of these new networks, educational institutions no longer operate in isolation from the influences and practices of each other, their local and international competitors, local communities and feeder institutions.

Given these changes, there has been a range of drivers and barriers to school, further and higher education linkages. Better understanding the lives, career preferences and study choices of students from Yrs 10-12 is another strategy to assist determining whether vocational education and training, university and/or work provision will meet changing and increasing educational participation. Demographic shifts – as well as those for gender, ethnicity, race and socio-economic background – are radically transforming underlying attitudes and goals in young people about when, where and how they learn. We hope the papers in this Issue provide some answers and help pose new questions for further research.

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