

Responding to social and economic change: the take up of VET by schools.

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Introduction

Schools are taking up VET in response to a series of loosely linked policy initiatives. This take up is challenging the linear or end on model of education and training which in recent times has tended to separate schools and their programs from post school organisations and workplaces.

VET in schools is also challenging because it is:

- redefining what is an appropriate general education
- using a variety of places for delivering education and training, not just the traditional school
- crossing traditional borders of perceived ownership, separation and control within education, training and employment placing systems
- a movement which is essentially bottom led
- creating models of co-operation and partnership based on various meanings of community
- offering a shift in the way the costs and benefits of schooling are conceptualised as schools engage in education, training, employment placement and employer support.

VET in schools has grown rapidly over the last five years. Beginning with a handful of pilot school programs funded from the Australian Vocational Traineeship System experimenting with the alternative pathways concept it involved 70,000-75,000 year 11 and 12 secondary school students in 1998, enrolled in some form of VET as part of their end of school program. In addition 1998 is the first year of implementation of the New Apprenticeship concept which is expected to involve 1400 young people engaged in a mix of schooling and contracted training to an employer.

While it is likely that only some 20 per cent of enrolments in Years 11 and 12 will engage in VET programs by 2000 the significance of this VET movement lies outside a mere enumeration of enrolments. To give some insight into the significance of VET in schools this paper presents some selected case studies of schools, employers and students engaged in this activity. By using case studies I also suggest that the first signs of structural change in the way things are done can be identified before shifts appear in aggregated data sets.

From these selected case studies the paper draws some tentative conclusions about:

- the changing nature of schools and schooling
- the emergence of community and co-operativism in providing co-ordinated responses to youth education, training and employment
- the patterns and criteria for employer engagement in training provision

- the role of governments and central agencies in the provision of education, training and employment services and infrastructure.

More broadly it might be asked whether these individual responses are indicative of the direction of future system level changes in the delivery and provision of education, training and employment services for youth in a period of increasing uncertainty and change.

Case study one

Narrogin Agricultural College is a residential year 11 and 12 school supported jointly by the Education Department of Western Australia and the Department of Agriculture. It is one of six agricultural schools in WA, and has a long history of success in providing students with a well-rounded education as well as skills to proceed directly into the primary industry work force or to higher education studies in Agriculture. As well as running a commercial dryland farm the school is gradually increasing its provision of short courses and field days to meet industry demands.

During 1995 the College was approached by the Farm Machinery Dealers Association (FMDA) to discuss an ongoing problem of a lack of qualified people in rural Western Australia to sell and service specialised agricultural equipment. The FMDA was attracted to Narrogin because of its reputation in producing practical graduates with a range of farm and engineering skills. The FMDA also indicated that the TAFE system, partly through its abandonment of pre apprenticeship training, was not addressing its needs.

Many FMDA members operate combined dealerships in farm machinery, heavy equipment and cars and trucks, which require skills in sales, parts, yard assembly and field servicing. Demand for these skills was said to be high, with the industry having the capacity to absorb up to 15 or 16 graduates annually from the proposed course. Given the range of products sold and serviced by FMDA members any proposed entry level training program would have to be broad based and include a mix of industry skills and general education. The FMDA also suggested that training program design should allow students a choice of pathways at course completion for entry into a range of apprenticeships relevant to the farm machinery industry needs.

The College responded to the FMDA by investigating the design parameters for such a course. Initially some problems were encountered with the guidelines of the State Education Authority (now the Curriculum Council) on support for dual certification VET courses and module purchasing authorisation. However, with ASTF funding support the course design process commenced in early 1996 with the intent of beginning the course at the start of 1997.

Introduced in 1997 the two year course makes extensive use of the Design and Technology guidelines of the Curriculum Council to incorporate National Competency Standards. The FMDA course is a two year full time course designed for youths exiting year 10 with no immediate goal of proceeding to full time tertiary education. During each year students are required to complete four weeks of structured workplace learning arranged in two week blocks. On completion of the course FMDA members will offer to graduates entry to apprenticeships with

advanced standing. Already a number of enterprises have made firm job offers for students to commence with them at the end of their year 11 studies.

In responding to the industry demand for this type of course the school has found that while industry supports the work placement part of the course through its members, it has relied on the school to undertake the design, implementation and resourcing of the program.

Case study two

Kwinana Industries Council (KIC) is made up of over 400 enterprises with an emphasis on heavy industry and technology, generating annual production of approximately \$2.5 billion and maintaining some 4000 jobs. Many of these enterprises realised that there were benefits to be gained by presenting a co-ordinated and unified face to the Western Australian Government and the communities within which they operated. Thus the Council was formed in 1991 with the objectives of:

- co-ordinating the activities of Kwinana industries on a range of common issues.
- providing effective liaison with the local community.
- promoting a positive image of Kwinana industries.
- highlighting Kwinana industries contribution to the community, and
- assisting the long term viability of Kwinana industry.

Within the overall structure of KIC a committee structure was established to focus on key areas. The Community Relations Advisory Committee (CRAC) became responsible for community liaison overall and in selected areas such as education and environment. The CRAC set about establishing a compact with eight secondary schools in the region. This compact has a mission statement which is a formal agreement between the KIC and the schools to

‘.....work together to develop mutually beneficial long term relationships in order to achieve excellence in education and broaden the learning experiences of students. Ultimately the goal is to encompass a better understanding of commerce and industry. It aims to help students gain a better understanding of the working world that is their future.’

Through the CRAC the KIC and its inclusive sub committee structures directly assists the eight participating schools, their students and teachers by:

- funding a full time co-ordinator, with appropriate resources, to work between the schools and participating enterprises.
- organising teacher-in-industry placements.
- contributing to the cost of teacher staff development in VET areas.
- sponsoring career expos and youth forums
- providing schools with industry speakers and enterprise open days for careers information.
- providing structured work place learning places in enterprises for VET in school courses such as Business studies, Engineering, Maritime Business, Retail and Visual Arts.

- running a KIC Traineeship in conjunction with the schools which is accommodated within the Western Australian Certificate of Education. This Traineeship is available in Clerical, Engineering, Horticulture and Hospitality.

Within the KIC there is a strong commitment to ensure that the compact provides an integration of schooling, training and employment for youth in the Kwinana region. For many Kwinana-based enterprises the recruitment of youth into advanced apprenticeships, traineeships and other positions is largely based on recruitment of youth who have participated in the KIC compact.

In supporting these vocational programs the KIC has identified what it considers to be four essential components:

- language and communication studies
- work and career awareness studies
- industry related studies, and
- structured work place learning.

It is significant that these employers appear to be merging elements of Key Competencies and Entry Level Training into what they perceive as a general education in preparation for life.

As with the Narrogin case study, depending on where you sit, there is the problem of participating employers wanting to offer employment to students doing structured work placements before they finish their schooling.

Case study three

The *Engineering Pathways Program* of South Australia differs in that it operates as a co-operative State-wide program for the community and engineering employers. Significantly, it is jointly developed and supported by the education and training central agencies of South Australia as well as the Engineering Employers Association, the Metals Trades Federation of Unions, the State based Metals and Engineering Industry Training Board and the Engineering manufacturers group training company.

The Program began in 1992 because of concerns on the part of South Australian manufacturing industry about the quality and quantity of young people entering the engineering trades.

With high level State-wide support the eight participating schools offer an engineering program on either a standard full time basis to year 11 and 12 students as part of their South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) with a variety of take up options to suit the orientation of the student; or as a New Apprenticeship option combining paid work and school attendance. A dual certification process provides the student with a SACE and an Engineering Pathways Certificate which identifies all successfully completed National Metals and Engineering Curriculum Modules and can be used for credit transfer into higher level TAFE courses.

Destination studies by the Pathways Group in recent times indicate that for 80 completing students 67 per cent were employed and 22 per cent were continuing in post school studies. Destinations for 11 per cent of completers were unknown.

In 1998 fifteen young people were undertaking a New Apprenticeship under the Engineering Pathways Program as well as continuing with their year 12 studies. For most of these New Apprentices the association of the Pathways Program with a group training company has provided a flexible link to the workplace allowing a mixed mode of education, training and employment to proceed.

A key mechanism for this project is a formal Memorandum of Agreement between the school and TAFE sectors to ensure appropriate credit transfer measures for the recognition of the modules completed by participating students.

The program has an active access and equity policy which promotes and supports girls into Engineering as well as Aboriginal students and students with disabilities.

Case study four

Mungindi is a school with a large Aboriginal enrolment located in a small community straddling the NSW /Queensland border. It is also the co-ordinating centre for a remote school network which uses telecommunications technology to deliver elements of vocational courses to students in Goodooga, Collarenebri and Boggabilla. Mungindi presents a success story about the creation of vocational courses and job opportunities for the local youth.

This case is the story of how a small school with a concern about long term employment prospects for youth in the area negotiated with a range of State level authorities to establish a cotton industry component in the rural industries *Content Endorsed Component* (CEC) of the NSW school certificate. The teachers involved in the establishment of this course identified an employment opportunity within the cotton industry and negotiated with local cotton growers, Moree TAFE, the NSW Board of Studies and the Education Department to design and implement it.

The rural industries course usually has between 13 to 17 students across four schools, with one half to two thirds being Aboriginal. The period of negotiation and development commenced in 1991 with a farms skills course and resulted in a cotton industry stream in the CEC rural industries course in 1996.

This case shows how determination even at a remote and small scale level can identify opportunities to reshape conventional schooling models into something which both captures the interest of youth and relates to a limited local labour market. However different measures of success might need to be used. Rather than large numbers proceeding on to post school studies and employment it may be more appropriate to look at the increase in retention from year 10 to year 11, even if only partial. It might also be appropriate to measure as success the placement of only one or two young people per year into the local cotton industry. And how do is it possible to include in statistics the positive change in values of local youth towards education and work?

Case study five

Mako Cabinets is a medium sized company employing 82 people that represents a positive attitude towards training based on both ethical and business considerations. Mako currently deals with three clusters of schools for providing structured work placements and work experience. In addition, 10 per cent of its workforce comprises either apprentices or trainees.

When questioned about why there is this commitment to training the production manager points to a number of factors:

- The issue of returning something to the community by participating in programs such as structured work placement.
- The benefits that the firm derive from participation in these programs allows it to identify young people with the attributes it seeks and thus offers a far more reliable recruitment platform than newspaper advertising and one-off interviews.
- The longer term loyalty built up between employer and employees means that labour turnover is ten years on average. This represents an enormous value to the firm in that recruitment and training costs are reduced and productivity is increased. It allows the firm to invest more effort in top end training of a stable workforce.

Mako is thus a firm coping with rapid technological change through investment in a training philosophy and a stable workforce. How do we transplant this story to other small to medium enterprises?

Discussion and Conclusions

The details in each of these case studies can be repeated many times over throughout Australia. In most cases the relationships being forged between schools, enterprises, TAFE Institutes and various communities in co-operative patterns of delivery of education, training and employment transition are not reflected in the aggregated statistical collections of central agencies.

From these case studies it is apparent that there is a strong tendency to accommodate technological and social change at the level of identifiable communities. The common problem identified in these case studies was the tension created between a willingness of communities to work within National and State frameworks and a perceived unwillingness in the administration of many of these frameworks to accommodate new forms of co-operative relationships or funding support.

A common theme also is the change in employers' attitudes to training provision after participating in these new arrangements. Many employers enter into the provision of structured work placement on a non-wage basis because they believe they can contribute to the community in which they operate. But after a while many of them realise that this form of participation offers significant productivity improvements by providing more efficient and effective selection and recruitment mechanisms for juniors which also result in lower levels of staff turnover and higher levels of employee loyalty. These appear to be outcomes valued by most employers.

In times of rapid economic change this structural shift in the provision of Entry Level Training to schools, if appropriately promoted, might be a cost effective means of engaging more employers in the provision of training and responding collectively to the skills demand of change.