The educational politics surrounding curriculum development in TAFE NSW: A literature review

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Abstract
Traditionally, curriculum development, evaluation, dissemination and implementation in TAFE NSW were undertaken internally. Since the introduction of VET policy initiatives in 1994, curriculum development in TAFE has been privatised, i.e. formulated by Industry Skills Councils. This paper is derived from the Literature Review chapter of the author’s as yet un-submitted PhD thesis. The research aims to investigate the educational politics surrounding curriculum development in TAFE in NSW and how the changes to curriculum are related to broader educational policy and political reforms. This study also aims to determine how these changes altered the nature of vocational education, and how they reflect the wider changes in educational values. The literature review identified the conceptual proposition that the changes in policy and governance in TAFE are the manifestation of global neoliberalism and that, as a consequence of the tenet of privatisation, resulted in the marketisation of TAFE.

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1. Introduction

For over 100 years, technical and vocational education in NSW, and more broadly TAFE, has been receptive to community and industry demands in its curriculum development undertakings by including in the consultation process curriculum professionals, TAFE teachers and administrators, and industry representatives who were familiar with TAFE curriculum and the subject areas under review (Ross, 1977). This process continued until the early 1990s, when the federal Labor minister of education, John Dawkins, introduced Vocational and Education Training (VET) policy initiatives, which required all states and territories to adopt nationally-accredited VET qualifications and the consequent implementation of training packages and competency-based assessment. These policies also allowed industry to sanction, write and ratify VET curriculum.

The new VET policies were influenced by neoliberal market-based principles. As a consequence, the TAFE system encountered significant restructuring and numerous policy incarnations. Economic rationalist ideology and economic expediency has now become part of TAFE curriculum development policy (McBeath, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c). As a result, the responsibility for the development of ‘curriculum’ was taken away from the academics, professionals and teachers of the curriculum and conferred on industry.

The aim of this study is to investigate the educational politics surrounding curriculum development in TAFE in NSW and to examine how curriculum change is related to broader educational policy and political reforms. This literature review addresses the impact of neoliberal ideology on the curriculum development process in TAFE NSW and explores the influences of the different layers of power relationships in policy formulation. This literature review also examines the changes in the curriculum development process to determine how they have altered the nature of technical education and the concomitant changes in educational values.

2. The inception of TAFE and the introduction of VET

When the Labor Party was elected to federal government in 1972, one of its priorities was to realign technical education to “upgrade” the workforce (Gooze, 2001). In 1973 the Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education, was commissioned to undertake a comprehensive investigation into the role of technical education in the workplace as well as the general community. The committee, chaired by Myer Kangan, adopted the landmark Kangan Report in 1974, which conferred TAFE its current identity by incorporating the word Further into Technical Education.

At its core was the idea that post-secondary and adult education should “develop the individual” in addition to preparing people for work and providing individuals with “second chance education” and “lifelong education” (Kangan Report, 1974). Kangan embraced the UNESCO philosophy of lifelong education (Ryan, 1999) which advocated a “humanist-democratic” agenda that recognised an individual’s commitment to learning - both formal and informal – over a whole lifetime (Seddon and Bohren, 2012). Kangan’s philosophy correlated with Dewey who advocated that the primary objective of education should be the generation of a psychological disposition that encouraged continual and critical learning throughout a whole
lifetime. Education was seen as “a journey towards personal and social transformation” (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2007, 348). This would allow students to become “democratic political agents who shape their vocational and social lives toward [a] greater measure of freedom and social justice rather than workers who are the passive objects of economic enterprise” (Hyslop-Margison and Naseem, 2007, 349).

TAFE introduced an holistic, studio-based curriculum in many TAFE courses, especially the creative courses such as Architectural Drafting and Interior Design. Subjects such as Life Oriented Studies, taught by the General Studies faculty, were incorporated into all curriculum disciplines. The subjects focused on contextualising the social framework of the students’ chosen career paths and the relationship of their studies to further education and training. The students were also encouraged and empowered to participate within society as full and active citizens.

The creation of the TAFE Commission in 1974 by the Whitlam government marked the introduction of a federalism agenda for VET. The establishment of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) in 1992, to advise on and manage the frameworks that underpin the development of a national education and training system, signalled the true commencement of federalism and integrated education and knowledge into the federal government’s economic agenda (Davies and Bansel, 2010).

Kangan’s humanistic philosophy was abandoned in the early 1990s when it was deemed by the government of the day that it was more important to focus on technology rather than developing a well-rounded worker. Any mention of philosophy or any attachment to social issues became anathema in TAFE curriculum development (Ryan, 1999). Kangan’s concept of post-secondary education, which was linked to social objectives, was replaced with an economic rationalist view of education. Dawkins’ policies replicated the UNESCO convention on Technical and Vocational Education, which recommended a framework for the national legislation of competency standards, nationally consistent curricula and assessment, national registration of providers and accreditation of courses, and the certification of articulation arrangements between providers and jurisdictions (Lundberg, 2000). The national VET policies created the evolution of complex and constantly-changing federal governance structures and standards-setting systems (Beddie, 2010).

The national VET policies, which impacted upon TAFE NSW, became integrated into and influenced by the political and economic policies of successive federal and state governments. Conservative governments favoured “big” business, while Labour governments privileged the unions. The following discussion summarises the economic and political influences that determined VET policies in Australia.

3. Factors influencing education policy reforms in VET

3.1 Globalisation

Globalisation can be defined as the influence of international events – economic, cultural and political – over an individual country or state, with governments paying obeisance by modifying how they manage their monetary, fiscal and other economic processes (Ölssen et al, 2012), the concomitant changes in the relationships
between nations, and the changing scale of political, social, economic and cultural life on a global scale (Bourdieu, 2003).

What has accelerated and distinguished modern globalisation is the emergence of instantaneous global communications (both personal and corporate) via the internet and satellite technology, the availability of inexpensive mass global transportation and tourism, and the proliferation of multinational companies in all corners of the world (Taylor et al, 1997). This has produced an “interconnectedness of economic, political and cultural activities across the globe”, whereby, the traditional constraints of geography no longer apply to political, economic, social and cultural arrangements.

Most western countries, including Australia, have found that their economic and political autonomy is being radically reduced by global factors impacting on the formulation of their national development policies (Olssen et al, 2012). No country can today be either isolated or insulated from global events or economic pressures. National governments have to adapt their welfare systems to what is called the “capacity for international competition” (Habermas cited in Rizvi and Lingard, 2010).

Globalisation has impacted on the formulation of “education policies, pedagogies and politics and all things social and cultural”, that is, globalisation has reshaped the nature of economic life in general, and working life in particular (Hirst and Thompson, 2006). Successive governments in Australia have implemented economic restructuring to adjust to their areas of comparative advantage and their political ideologies. In all instances, education was marketised, encouraging citizens to seek the “best” educational opportunities, with foreign education providers entering the market (Cully, 2006). Australian governments embraced corporate managerialism as the framework for both the “structure and modus operandi for the state” and incorporated a politicised administrative system (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). All policies became 'ministerialised', thereby strengthening the influence of the relevant minister and his advisers in policy formulation (Knight and Lingard, 1997).

Australian education policy became influenced by the empirical and ideological concerns over globalisation. This allowed the Hawke-Keating governments to narrow the focus of technical education by implementing new VET policies that tightened the education-economy nexus by proposing “upward skilling” of the workforce as a means of controlling the national economy (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010).

3.2 Global neoliberalism

Globalisation is closely related to the ‘new right’ or ‘neoliberal’ economic philosophies (Marginson, 2004; Olssen et al, 2012). Before modern globalisation, and in particular after the First World War and the Great Depression, most western governments intervened in the social, political and economic lives of their citizens to alleviate the worst effects of the market economy. Many western democracies adopted the welfare-based economic theories of John Maynard Keynes, whereby the government accepted a greater role in the management of its economy by paying closer attention to unemployment, economic growth and social equality, rather than placing an emphasis on market forces (Olssen et al, 2012). This often was achieved by both the regulation of the economy and by government intervention, such as controlling foreign and domestic investment and public works programs.
The partial collapse of the global economy elicited by the energy crisis in the mid-1970s was one of the main reasons for the cessation of Keynesian economics and the rise of neoliberalism in many Western countries, including Great Britain, the United States of America and Australia (Marginson, 2004). One of the main suppositions of neoliberalism with regard to education policy reform was the reduction in state education funding which would have to be equipoised by introducing or increasing user-pays charges and the introduction of competition in certain education sectors. Codd (1993) argued that the augmentation of “individual choice” in a deregulated economy abrogated the state’s responsibilities, duties and obligations to “social citizenship” or “welfare” to achieve economic efficiency.

The proponents of neoliberalism argued that Government bureaucracies were inefficient, highly centralised, inflexible and unable to respond rapidly to the demands of change (Taylor et al, 1997). They advocated less government control, asserting that a flexible, deregulated market would provide people with the opportunities to optimise and utilise their skills and therefore enhance their life goals (Olssen et al, 2012). Yet successive Australian governments have introduced interventionist policies, based on a ‘standards’ ideology, such as national curricula in schools and VET, professional standards for teachers and high-stake national testing (M Clarke, personal comm.).

In school education, neoliberalism has shifted the focus away from the quality of schooling and equity in schooling to that of accumulating data on the measurement and testing of pupils and to discourses about teacher leadership and school effectiveness (Keating, 2009, 2011). In VET, the emphasis of policy has been the national curriculum and funding only those trade courses that will lead to immediate transition into employment. Lifelong learning, under Kangan, was seen as a foundational competence for the individual to negotiate rapid economic and social change (Seddon et al, 2010) rather than seen simply as retraining during times of high unemployment. Universities have now become the “mediums for a wide range of cross-border relationships and continuous global flows of people, information, knowledge, technologies, products and financial capital” (Marginson and van der Wende, 2007, 5).

A managerialist ideology was promulgated by federal government ministers. John Dawkins saw corporate managerialism as the most effective means of unifying and nationalising VET and the most expedient means of marketising VET. He made federal government funding to the states contingent on TAFE adopting his managerialist ethos (Marginson, 1997). This methodology for policy production was named the “ministerial” policy-making process (Lingard and Porter, 1997). Policies were written primarily by the government minister and his advisers with minimal input from his bureaucracy. Dawkins reduced his reliance on his departmental bureaucrats and relegated a number of statutory authorities from his policy formulation process. The new managers in TAFE were recruited for their economics and management credentials to make the ‘hard’ economic decisions and instigate corporate ideology to achieve greater productivity from their staff, thereby achieving more output with reduced funding (Marginson, 1997). The new managers were expected to be innovative, externally orientated, performance centred and dynamic (Clarke and Newman, 1997), compared to the career managers who were often ex-teachers. In practice, the new managers had no background in educational administration, and in some instances had no qualifications or experience relevant to the departments they
manage. While educational institutions emulate corporate business models by building their management hierarchies – recruiting more managers at the expense of teachers – those same businesses were working on reducing theirs (Currie and Vidovish, 1997).

Efficiency has also become a powerful mechanism for increased surveillance of previously-autonomous professionals (Gleeson and Shain, 1999). Currie and Vidovish (1997) and Randle and Brady (1997) argue that there has been little evidence that managerialist practices in educational institutions in Australia have generated greater productivity or efficiency. Their research has also shown that any commitment towards management-prescribed goals has led to an increase in staff alienation towards the new management regime and a decrease in morale. The increase in staff numbers required to administer the managerialist processes is seen by many as inefficient and ineffective, as it diverts resources away from the core productive activities of teaching. This researcher’s over thirty years’ experience in TAFE would concur with this argument.

3.3 The influence of globalisation on VET

“Globalisation has now become an ideology, proselytised by international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank in assertions of the need for less interventionist and leaner government and for freer forms of economic competition between nations” (Taylor et al, 1997, 79). These international agencies have inexorably influenced the structure, scope and function of educational policy in Australia, by associating education with economic growth (Lingard et al, 2005). Knowledge and skills are thereby seen as a source of comparative advantage in the global economy.

In the late 1980s the federal Labor government was confronted with the need to provide for social order and equity due to the high levels of unemployment and the collapse of the full-time youth labour market (Marginson, 1997). The OECD asserted that education was quintessential to the improvement of labour productivity and technological advancement, and advocated that all governments needed to become more economically efficient and more financially competitive in the global economy through the inculcation of flexible, responsive and competitive behaviours (Marginson, 1997), thereby commercialising education.

Marginson (1993) argued that Dawkins “scapegoated” education as the cause of high levels of youth unemployment and recession in Australia. Taylor et al (1997) also argued that Dawkins used OECD data selectively to create and legitimise his own national policy agenda in higher education by exploiting OECD ideology to legitimise his own education policy agenda. Dawkins’ policies emphasised the “needs of the labour market rather than the needs of the individual” by applying “economic rationalism to vocational education and training” Goozee (2001, 107). VET policy was influenced by industry, which is focused on efficiency and profitability rather than personal educational needs. Dawkins encouraged and promoted private VET providers, so as to reduce his government’s education funding and to “steer outputs from the distance while evading responsibility for the effects” of his policy on both the “users and employers” (Marginson, 1997, 92).
4. The marketisation of VET

Minister Dawkins’ proposal to marketise VET by allowing private providers to compete for federal educational funding, as well as the privatisation of VET curriculum development was based on the neoliberal philosophies of the OECD, whose views and reports Dawkins regularly exploited to add legitimacy to his policy proposals (Ryan, 1999). Dawkins regularly attended the OECD meetings in Europe, and presented papers in open forums, to further validate his claims. He chaired the OECD meeting on education and the economy in Paris in 1987. Vickers (1995) saw this as the genesis of the federal government’s rationalisation for procuring control of the TAFE system. The states and territories were compelled to agree to this new arrangement or risk jeopardising their college funding.

TAFE, as the largest and the only public provider of VET in Australia, was compelled to adopt a free market ideology and embrace the “cult of entrepreneurialism” (Jakupec and McTaggart, 1997), as government funding per capita was systematically reduced while student numbers increased. In addition to the introduction of tuition fees, TAFE colleges were encouraged to make up the shortfall in funding by introducing fee-for-service courses, entering joint partnerships with industry for tailor-made training ventures, selling curriculum and course materials and tendering for federal government training contracts in competition with private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs).

TAFE has had to adopt an economic rationalist agenda to identify market niches to attract commercial students and to market itself internationally to attract foreign income. TAFE also introduced higher level qualifications, such as Associate Degrees and Bachelor Degree qualifications that attract full fee paying students. TAFE has had to improve its efficiency and effectiveness in an increasingly competitive market, while still being expected to provide access to education for a diversity of disenfranchised groups and continuing to be the nucleus for social and cultural activities in smaller and remote communities (Angus, 2012; Jakupec and McTaggart, 1997).

The marketisation of TAFE was a political process that disavowed politics while at the same time working politically in order to appear to replace the political with the economic (Bahnisch, 2000). VET policies were veiled from any political discourse. Policies seemed to emanate from sound economic judgement and well-researched investigations. The policies were deemed to be most apposite for Australia’s VET needs. This discursive characteristic of neoliberalism allowed the privatisation of education to succeed virtually uncontested in the 1990s when similar reforms were considered “unthinkable” when they were touted in the 1960s and 1970s (Marginson, 1997).

TAFE reduced its training costs by increasing class sizes, reducing face-to-face learning, increasing self-managed learning, reducing investment in the development of teaching resources, technologies and equipment, increasing the use of part-time staff and reducing professional development (Schofield, 1999).

Successive federal governments marketised VET by adopting policies and strategies that promoted structural reform in the public VET sector. These reforms included removing barriers to the VET market for private providers, increasing the scope of
funding contestability and the facilitation of competition (SRC, 1999). Some of the proposed reforms, such as establishing competitive neutrality among public and private providers by developing consistent costing and pricing policies, did not eventuate, yet this allowed both state and federal governments to reduce spending on educational infrastructure, the individualisation of student support, and the creation of markets in all sectors of education, as well as overall funding cuts (Marginson, 1997). This approbated the neoliberal marketeers to mobilise and spruik the powerful (but contested) terms of “freedom” and “choice” (Bahnisch, 2000). The marketisation of VET allowed private providers or private RTOs to compete with the publicly funded TAFE institutions. It also afforded private enterprise the opportunity to write and ratify the curriculum for all VET courses in Australia.

Apple (1997, 24) argues that by making education a marketable commodity, the state can shift the blame for the “very evident inequalities to access and outcome” that it had promised to reduce, from itself onto the individual schools, parents and children and community.

Boston (2001), a former Director-General of the NSW Department of Education, argued that neither efficiency nor profitability was realised when TAFE NSW was decentralised. It resulted in the duplication of administrative and service costs, as each of the ten TAFE Institutes in NSW has its own finance, human resources and property units.

4.1 Economic rationalism and VET policy

Education institutions are now encouraged to make management decisions based on economic and/or business protocols rather than focusing on education. At the same time, VET adopted neoliberal managerial principles. Marginson (1997) argues that one of the main reasons that economic rationalist philosophy became entrenched in higher education is that John Dawkins, who was the federal Finance Minister before he became the federal Education Minister, promoted economists as advisors in his ministries, compared to the previous practice of recruiting ‘lifelong’ and ‘neutral’ public servants. These economists were mostly conservatives who formulated neoliberal policies that were deemed to be more New Right and more polemic in nature than the policies espoused by Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the USA.

Dawkins argued that international competition, technological change and the need for more flexibility in the labour market required long-term adjustments to educational systems (Marginson, 1997). This was going to be facilitated by greater youth participation in vocational education, and fostering a more pronounced involvement by industry in higher education, including VET and university training and research, as well as “changes to the governance, finance and delivery of education”. VET was used as the vehicle for social and macroeconomic reform (Marginson, 1997, 155). The OECD claimed that stronger links between industry and education institutions would result in Australia being able to keep pace with advances in technology that would result in long-term benefits to the economy (OECD, 1986).

The enduring relationship between Minister Dawkins’ Labor party and the trade unions further encouraged the closer links between industry and tertiary education, as this also allowed the union movement to participate in negotiating the restructuring
of industrial awards and the modification of industry training standards (Marginson, 1997). The subtext was also the federal government’s desire to link workers’ wages and the new industrial awards to a worker’s qualifications, that is, level of skill-based education (ANTA, 1994, 10). The Business Council of Australia also took part in the national training reform agenda. This led to women’s groups and indigenous people being marginalised, as it is inevitable that when so many disparate interest groups are involved in policy formulation, there will always be “political struggles over which voices will be heard and whose values will be reflected in policies” (Taylor et al, 1997, 27).

The main tenet in Minister Dawkins’ *Towards a Skilled Australia* policy was the creation of closer links between industry and TAFE. It and aimed to integrate employment, education and training (Ryan, 2011), and set the foundation for other policies that were to follow. The federal government saw this as an opportunity to ensure better employment opportunities for school leavers through a revolutionised TAFE system that would result in a highly-educated, globally-competitive workforce. The VET policy initiatives were aimed at making VET more relevant to industry, thereby improving Australia’s competitiveness and enhancing the life choices of individuals (Porter, 1998). The policy would ultimately result in a narrower, vocational focus in VET (Ryan, 2011). Ahearn (cited in Ryan, 2011, 10) argued that there would be “quite a remarkable ideological eruption which saw a swing away from what could be loosely described as the Kangan student-centred ‘culture of access’ to the industry- and employer- centred culture of the ‘new vocationalism’”.

The policy avoided any discussion regarding ‘general’ educational issues. This invited significant criticism from academics, who argued economic efficiency was given priority over human educational needs in the allocation of educational resources, and that the new educational policy was not producing a fairer distribution of educational benefits, but was targeting economic efficiency and/or improved customer service rather than educational outcomes (Codd, 1993). Under the federal government’s ‘price competitive’ policy, private providers are also able to tender for government-sponsored VET services. This has created a cluster of large and powerful global management firms that developed significant interests in education. Taylor et al (1997, 123) claim that quite often, “electoral politics and the associated problems of juggling long-term policy objectives and short-term political pressures to some extent explained the urgency of getting the new policies up and running in Australia, and the consequent emphasis on technicalities rather than [educational] principles”. Educationalists claimed that Dawkins’ policy reforms were ‘fast-tracked’ to avoid debate, scrutiny and any opposition due to genuine differences in values and ideologies. It showed a reluctance to relinquish power by those who benefit most from the current arrangements and avoided any psychological opposition to change – sometimes stemming from the implied criticisms of older practices implicit in the new policy frameworks (Taylor et al, 1997).

### 4.2 Training packages and competency based assessment

From 1996 onwards, Training Packages replaced the traditional ‘curriculum’ documents. Training Packages are sets of nationally-endorsed VET standards and qualifications that are used to recognise and assess the skills and knowledge that people need to perform effectively in the workplace (TAFE NSW, 2014). Training Packages define only the outcomes and the criteria against which each outcome is
recognised and specified (Down, 2003). Even though the traditional ‘curriculum’ was
deemed to no longer exist, and ‘syllabuses’ and ‘modules’ were a thing of the past,
the concept of ‘curriculum’ was still embedded in Training Packages (Smith, 2002).

The traditional assessment models were replaced with competency-based
assessment (CBA) methods. CBA was inherent in Training Packages and deemed to
be the single prescribed method of assessment. CBA advocates the skills,
knowledge and attitudes needed to achieve a standard of performance expected in
the workplace, within a national qualifications framework (Deissinger, 2011). Smith
(2002) claims that the shift to CBA essentially privileged industry at the expense of
the students, thereby allowing industry to become the most important stakeholder in
VET. She argues that Training Packages are written for the workplace, but are being
applied in educational institutions.

Marginson (1997) claimed that the ambiguity of the skill descriptors used in
competency-based assessment allowed employers to adjust the assessment
methods to suit their own particular needs. It did not encourage a pedagogy that
encompassed general education philosophies in addition to the generic technical
competencies. It seems contradictory that Dawkins encouraged competency-based
assessment, when his own research showed that employers were seeking graduates
with a more-rounded education:

> Employers and industry groups have attested to the value they place on graduates
> with a broad educational foundation and with well-developed conceptual, analytical
> and communication skills. The general problem solving skills of enquiry, analysis and
> synthesis are essential to the building of a flexible, versatile workforce able to cope
> with rapidly changing technology (Dawkins, 1988, 9).

Other opponents of CBA argue that it is technicist, centralist and simply
uneducational and that it seeks to control all education and training in terms of work-
related competencies through a tripartite committee of union, industry and
government representatives (Taylor et al 1997). It is not enough to meet the short-
term needs and demands of industry and employers. It is also imperative to ensure
that the long-term social goals of education are also met. This may not be possible
since there is an absence of any holistic approach in CBA¹.

5. A comparison of traditional curriculum development procedures
with the current procedures

Economic rationalist ideology and economic expediency has now become part of
TAFE curriculum development policy (Mcbeath, 2007a). The traditional curriculum
development process was formulated utilising social democratic education policies,
which incorporated community participation and equality of education principles
(Taylor et al, 1997). There were a larger number of stakeholders, such as TAFE
teaching sections, government departments, community groups, unions, industry etc.
The new (privatised) model has industry as the sole stakeholder. The traditional
curriculum was written by the teachers entrusted to teach the course, whereas the
privatised curriculum is written by an Industry Skills Councils - private companies
whose directors are neither educators nor curriculum experts.
The flow charts below compare the traditional procedure for the writing or revision of a course (figure 1) with that of the current procedure (figure 2).

**Figure 1.** The steps and procedures in establishing a new course or revising an existing course in TAFE

Drawn: G Loupis, after Ross (1977)
*NRCC = New and Revised Course Committee

**Figure 2.** The steps and procedures in establishing a new course in VET

Drawn: G Loupis, after CPSISC (2012)
*RTO = Registered Training Organisation

The current curriculum is developed and evaluated outside the classroom. The state-wide curriculum departments in TAFE have now been dissolved and the current curriculum ignores the questions of citizenship which were previously embedded in curriculum development (Taylor et al, 1997). The traditional curriculum model allowed for the evaluation and dissemination of the curriculum amongst the teachers teaching the course before it was finalised, whereas the private model does not have that provision. The teachers are presented with the curriculum after it has been finalised and approved by ASQA.

Commercial issues have become more important than educational principles and values and that curriculum design and resource allocation are often compromised (Ball et al, cited in Apple, 2001). The privatised model of curriculum development has
privileged industry at the expense of the students, the most important stakeholders (Smith, 2002; Holland, 1992). Turner (cited in Smith, 2002, 4) argues that “if we continue headlong down the Training Package path, we may well end up with a workforce of automatons who are proficient in narrow, specific fields but unable to ‘think for themselves’, as the education system failed to emphasise the importance of the intrinsic value of learning, and the significance of the relationship between different bodies of skill/knowledge”

5.1 Curriculum design

For curriculum to be effective, it needs to be designed and developed in a way that encourages students and teachers to engage in discussions of important issues that lead to both the acquisition of deep intellectual knowledge and the practical skills to apply that knowledge to solving problems in the real world. “This will foster a pedagogy that encourages emotive motivation in students” (Bowers, 2006, 9). “There needs to be a focus on an educational approach to the curriculum not a narrow operational competency-based approach suitable for pre-defined learning outcomes. Competency-based frameworks that delineate the universe of outcomes – such as those used in vocational education and training derived from industry-based occupational standards – are unlikely to be appropriate except for low-level work-based programmes” (Boud, 2003, 46). The privatised VET curriculum, with CBA at its core, removes the ability for teachers to exercise their professional judgement.

Curricula need to retain links with the real world, but at the same time they should remain flexible to allow ideas, concepts and theories to be expanded and explored in a scholarly way. The design and development of vocational curricula should be enhanced with the “consultation of both academic and industry experts as it is a vital aspect of the presage; that range of procedures and plans that form the context into which the students situate their learning” (Bowers, 2006, 20).

To enable students to become knowledgeable about their histories, their experiences and the culture of their everyday environments, and to enable students to discern the dominant culture’s codes and signifiers, teachers must constantly teach a dual curriculum: a curriculum that empowers students to make sense of their everyday life, and a curriculum that empowers students to obtain the tools for mobility and value in the dominant culture (Macedo, 2006). In this way, teachers will become cultural agents. However, for this to be possible, teachers will need to be part of the process of developing the curriculum – not merely interpreting and more or less effectively putting into practice a curriculum that had been fixed outside the classroom (Bowers, 2006). In the classroom, VET teachers are forced to deliver a “reductionist pedagogy and curriculum”. The educators simply become the “enforcers” of a curriculum that they have had no involvement in developing. The teachers do little more than follow a script. This, Dudley-Marling (2007) declares, renders the teachers’ role ethically bankrupt.

Giroux (1992, 141) argues that curriculum must have theoretical underpinnings, and that the teachers of the curriculum should be allowed to teach by example:

If students are going to learn how to take risks, to develop a healthy skepticism towards all master narratives, to recognise the power relations that offer them opportunity to speak in particular ways, and be willing to critically confront their role as critical citizens who can animate a democratic culture, they need to see such
5.2 The impact of VET policies on curriculum development

Significant criticism has also been levelled at the privatisation of VET curriculum by teachers of creative courses who state that the competency-based assessment methodology inherent in the new curriculum does not encourage creativity and innovation, as there is no means for a studio-based holistic design project to be assessed within the CBA framework. Teachers of architectural technology, interior design, fine arts and graphic design contend that their students benefit when they are offered the opportunity to engage in critical dialogue with their peers. Cartledge and Watson (2008) reinforce this argument by contending that design skills do not exclusively reside in the actions of designing, but rather are keenly developed through a capacity for critical analysis, which is not possible to assess within the CBA context.

Smith (2002) argues that because industry is focused on productivity and profit, rather than 'learning', asking industry to write the curriculum is exploitive and oppressive. Apple (2001, 412) contends that no matter how radical some of these proposed 'reforms' are and no matter how weak the empirical basis for their support, they have now redefined the terrain of debate of all things educational. After years of attacks and mobilisations, it has become clear that “ideas that were once deemed fanciful, unworkable – or just plain extreme” are now increasingly been seen as common-sense.

Of particular concern is the recent preference for employers to hire university graduates for associate professional occupations for which TAFE diplomas are more closely designed (Ryan, 2011). This is due to the restrictive nature of VET curriculum. The curriculum leaves little room for ‘education’ or the development of the adaptability needed in the so-called ‘new world of work’ (Smith, 2002). Ryan (2011, 21) also contends that any education “policy innovation that adopts a one-size-fits-all approach is usually wasteful and ineffective”.

Ryan (1999) was openly critical of the rhetoric in John Dawkins’ policies. He pointed out that little concrete evidence was provided in any of the documents used by Dawkins to support his argument that TAFE was unresponsive to industry and was performing poorly. Therefore, for over two years, this ‘lie’ was repeated to mobilise a bias and to reset the parameters of policy debate. Hall (1988) pointed out that well before Dawkins’ policy, industry was well represented at all levels of TAFE governance.

Hill (2003, 4) argues that one of the reasons for the curriculum being taken away from the teachers is that:

Firstly, teachers are dangerous because they are intimately connected with the social production of labour-power, equipping students with skills, competencies, abilities, knowledge and the attitudes and personal qualities that can be expressed and expended in the capitalist labour process. Secondly, teachers can adopt modes of pedagogy that are antithetical to labour-power production.
6. Current TAFE NSW policies - NSW Smart and Skilled

The latest iteration of TAFE NSW VET policy is *Smart and Skilled*, which was introduced in October 2012, to be implemented at the start of 2015. The main aims of the policy can be interpreted as being:

- That only courses which the NSW government deems to be required by industry and labour markets will be subsidised.

- That only courses up to Certificate III level will be fully subsidised, that is, all trade and apprenticeship level courses. All other courses from Certificate IV to Graduate Vocational Certificate or Graduate Diploma will be offered as full fee courses with students being able to enter a fee-help or HECS type scheme to repay their tuition fees.

The State government will subsidise only the TAFE courses that will fill skill shortages and will lead directly to a job. Patty (2012, 3) argues that this will allow the government the opportunity to dictate which courses it deems politically appropriate or expedient to fund, and which courses could convert to a user-pays basis. The NSW Minister for Education, Adrian Piccoli, claimed that the policy aims to “make the training system more responsive to business and industry. A skills list will define [sic] which courses are on offer and this will be based on industry consultation and labour market trends” (Bold, 2012,1). This essentially means that the state government will cease to subsidise all paraprofessional courses, thereby forcing students to pay full fees, or encouraging them to enrol in similar courses offered by private providers, and as a consequence privatising all paraprofessional courses in TAFE. This will also result in contestation between individual TAFE colleges within the metropolitan area, as well as between TAFE colleges and private providers.

In 1962, in the USA, Milton Freedman persuaded governments to reduce spending on education to encourage private investment and competition amongst private education providers. It correlated with Friedman’s philosophy that all higher education benefitted the individual and therefore there should be no need for excessive public subsidy for those who get a higher education at the expense of those who pay taxes and do not get these benefits (Marginson, 1997). Friedman (cited in Marginson, 1997, 122) argued that vocational education was a “form of investment in human capital precisely analogous to investment in machinery, buildings or other forms of non-human capital. Its function is to raise the economic productivity of the human being. If it does so, the individual is rewarded in a free enterprise society by receiving a higher return”, that is, higher salary and better work conditions. The VET reforms were seen as the means of bringing “the economic vision of portable human capital a step closer to realisation” (Marginson, 1997, 213). In 2015, a two-year Diploma Courses will cost students $14,000 in tuition fees, compared to the current fee of $3,028. The *Smart and Skilled* policy initiatives which appear to be echoing the 1987 Dawkins VET policy initiatives, are geared towards this outcome.
7. Theoretical Framework: Curriculum theory and the link to policy analysis

Since the early 1970s many researchers have argued that curriculum development has become more influenced by political considerations (Stenhouse, 1975) than the traditional economic and technological considerations. English (2000, 39) averred that “knowledge is never neutral” and that the process of formulating a curriculum is in fact a political act as it decides who will benefit from what is in the curriculum and ultimately who will be excluded from it. Lye (1997) argues that curriculum formulation is the manifestation of power relations, whereby it allows any group holding power to exercise maximum control with a minimum amount of conflict.

Curriculum was invented to stress a rational coherence and sequencing of knowledge related to the forming of social and economic organisation, that is, “appropriate options and permissible action” (Popkewitz, 1991, 22). Curriculum sustains the dominant group’s structure of society (Shor and Freire, 1987). All curricula make choices between content and practices which ultimately advantage one group over another, that is, “whose knowledge is of most worth” (Apple, 1990, vii). What counts as valued knowledge is both a consequence of socially produced selective traditions and, through its educative effects, contributes to the wider economic and cultural formation of society and culture, its patterns of power and inequality (Seddon, 2000). Wheelahan (2012) claims that knowledge is most marginalised in VET curriculums and qualifications, as they are based on competency-based training, where all of the outcomes are related to specific workplace roles and tasks. Bernstein (cited in Wheelahan, 2012, 2) argues that “access to abstract theoretical knowledge is a precondition for an effective democracy, because theoretical knowledge is the means that society uses to think the ‘not-yet-thought’ and ‘unthinkable’ and to imagine alternative futures”. VET curriculum should therefore also incorporate the “disciplinary knowledge” that students require to permit them to study at a higher level within their chosen profession.

The curriculum has the power to “socialise” a student and to shape a student’s cognitive and affective interpretations of their social world (Lye, 1997). Curriculum, by virtue of its theoretical framework, its embedded ideology, language and the philosophical stance of its formulators can influence the way people think, in the same powerful ways that their social and/or cultural background can influence their political beliefs (Schiro, 1998). Curriculum is therefore more than just a document that outlines the skills, performances, attitudes, instructional content and values that students are expected to realise from their training.

It is through the curriculum that educators and curriculum formulators vie to control the education system (Schiro, 2008). They should therefore acknowledge the influence that their own ideologies will have on students as they have the power to indoctrinate and “acculturalize” their students by subtly orientating them towards a particular ideology that to the student will seem to be the only and/or “natural” approach.

Curriculum has implications for the distribution of authority and influence in society, by contributing to the establishment of individual and organisational centres of power, and to constraints on the exercise of power. Curriculum “determines both students’
learning and teachers’ work in ways which institutionalise hegemonic conceptions of what it means to be an educated person” (Seddon, 2000, 310). Curriculum governs the purposes and objectives of education, the resource allocations, and the political efforts of learners and teachers orientated to realising those ends.

Through the curriculum the state is able to manipulate and control students, and ultimately, workers. The ethical and moral implications of control, dominance and power are eliminated from any discussion when the only problem of education is implementing technologies aimed at regulating and managing populations (Seddon, 2000). Curriculum is structured to instruct the mind to obey specific laws and rules that dictate forms of expression. It represents a microcosm of the larger processes and situations by which human vision and intellect could be ordered and organised (Popkewitz, 1991). Seddon (2000, 308-309) argues that the VET (and TAFE) curriculum:

...has become politicised and highly contested as different groups have vied to shape this powerful technology in ways that benefit and/or represent their identity and interests... What counts as ‘curriculum’ is governed by the conscious and unconscious choices that are made in the process of determining what should be taught... Curriculum creates patterns of inclusion and exclusion in terms of knowledge, skills and dispositions that are taught and, simultaneously creates selective traditions that in social and political terms define useful and/or valued learning... Further conscious and unconscious choices about who should have access to particular knowledge, skills and dispositions, and how access should be distributed across society determines the character of education provision. Education and curriculum are social products constituted within historically specific social relations of possession/dispossession and advantage/disadvantage.

In VET policy, curriculum was no longer a key regulatory devise that shaped and governed educational provision, but was increasingly an outcome of identity politics, that is “whose values are validated in policy, and whose are not” (Ball, 1990, 3). Curriculum became a commodity that was desired, worked for and consumed by particular groups. VET now exhibits the overt characteristics of knowledge as a form of display rather than paying attention to the intrinsic “qualities” of the individual. These displays were symbolic of the new established order and the illumination of its proper governance (Popkewitz, 1994; Seddon, 2004; Seddon, 2010).

The ensuing study aims to investigate the policies that changed the forms of knowledge in TAFE and the conditions of power contained in these policies. This study also aims to uncover the mechanisms utilised by certain social, political and professional actors to dominate knowledge and thereby assume their identity in economic affairs. The forms of knowledge in TAFE frame and classify the world and the nature of work, which in turn, has the potential to organise and shape individual identity (Popkewitz, 1991). The dominant educational philosophies in VET aim to educate people to adapt to these social forms rather than critically interrogate them.

Curriculum policy makers are involved in a political act as they determine “who gets what, when and how”, thereby either preserving or reshaping society (Boyd, 1979). The changes in VET policy reflected “the political and economic environments operating at both State and national level rather than specific management or administrative problems requiring resolution” (Goozee, 1993, 142; McBeath, 1997a; McBeath, 1997b). By relating education to the economy and the state to identify the
kinds of social relationships that underpin the learning process, this research becomes politicised (Giroux, 2002; Popkewitz, 1991). That is, the values affirmed in this research are political. Pusser and Marginson (2012) also contend that since educational funding is a contest for the allocation of scarce State resources, this research is political.

8. Educational values within economic rationalism

John Dawkins actively pursued only the reforms that connected education to the economy, and showed little concern with teaching, curriculum and learning. This process deprived teachers of the opportunity to utilise their extensive knowledge of innovative research and analysis. Teachers have effectively been frozen out of the policy making process, while at the same time the system seeks to make stringent demands on them for greater accountability to externally devised policies (Taylor et al., 1997). Dawkins’ policies emphasised the role of education in the economy and its functions of preparing and selecting people for employment but have tilted the balance towards these functions.

Bashir (2010, 8) argued that “education is the greatest right…and the most empowering acquisition. One of the driving forces of Australian prosperity over the last few decades has been the huge improvement in the educational attainment of young Australians”. Cox (cited in Taylor et al., 1997, 153) claimed that one of the most important functions of education is to help create “a truly civil society” in which people relate to each other in terms of reciprocity and equality. For this to be facilitated, alternative paradigms need to be offered to counter the current public policy assumptions about competition and privatisation, which is “unraveling the social fabric”. That is, education policy should not be developed simply in terms of privatisation, competition and market-individualism.

According to Dewey (1916), education is the key to developing a democratic society in which everyone can feel free to participate, while at the same time generating “psychological dispositions that encourage continual and critical learning throughout a lifetime”. Education is meant to “uplift students and communities, who are motivated by notions of social reform, social improvement, egalitarianism and for the common good” (Apple, 2001). Many social democratic reforms in education (greater access and opportunity, women’s and minority rights) are being “watered down” and made secondary to the economic reform agendas (Pont et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 1997).

Marginson (1997) argued that there is always more to education. Education can change the character of people’s social attributes – their nature as self-managing, autonomous citizens. He expands on this philosophy by quoting Gough Whitlam – “Education is the key to equality of opportunity”. Numerous other educators (Popkewitz, 1991; Bahnisch, 2000; Olssen, et al, 2012), have also espoused that education is one of the most obvious and influential ways for the state and other political actors to directly intervene in shaping citizens’ conduct.

To avoid the dehumanising effects of the economic ascendancy in education, especially when the economy is closely identified with market liberalism, education policy needs to be articulated with cultural policy to achieve a better educational outcome (Apple, 2001). This will allow more critical questions to be raised about
citizenship and identity and about the ‘winners and losers’ in the globalised world. Matters of pedagogy and curriculum, certification, decision-making and governance, the student body itself as well as, of course, policy making arenas are all implicated here (Taylor et al, 1997).

The emphasis placed upon skills training at the expense of education was motivated ostensibly by Dawkins’ desire to meet industry’s requirements, eschewing any notion of personal development. The current curriculum will not allow VET students to navigate whatever the future holds, and this will not ultimately serve the needs of industry, whatever emphasis is placed on skills and technology. It could create a disillusioned and alienated generation (Pring, 1996).

TAFE contributes to the economic growth of Australia by making individual workers more productive and augmenting the creation of knowledge, ideas and technological innovation. The ‘human capital’ ideology has been used to justify policies of accessibility and the marketisation of VET since the early 1990s on the basis that investing in ‘human resources’ would contribute to economic development at both the individual and societal levels. Hill (2003) argues that education is not a commodity that can be bought and sold, and that education and privatisation have opposing goals, motivations, methods and standards of excellence and standards of freedom. The privatisation of education systematically reduces the “historically hard won social institution of education to a commodity for private purchase and sale” (McMurty, cited in Hill, 2003, 40). Ball (1997, 80) argues that within a marketised VET system “the ideals and ethics that are embodied” in a marketised VET system “animate, organise and steer educational provision and practice in fundamentally different ways. They represent very different versions or definitions of what it means to be educated. They define what education is and is for very differently. They contribute to very different visions of future Society”.

Political theorists claim that an understanding of policy-making and policy-effecting processes are central to the challenges of determining how scarce resources can be economically allocated to affect political change in preferred directions (Ilchman and Uphoff, 1998). The TAFE policy process is influenced by the political mobilisation of the values and interests of the governments regulating the policy process (Bahnisch, 2000). VET policy can no longer be clearly demarcated from other social systems – the political, economic and cultural – but particularly the political, because its future will be determined by the slow accretion of political events as much as by the accumulation of fundamental social, economic and cultural change (Scott, 2012).

9. Conclusion

I have taught in technical education for over thirty years utilising both the traditional curriculum and the VET curriculum. Within that period I sustained a holistic approach that went well beyond the simplistic/mechanical model required by the VET curriculum. I concur with the educational researchers in this Literature Review that the current VET curriculum was founded on neoliberal economic and political principles rather than educational principles. It may not be possible to revert to the traditional curriculum model – within the foreseeable future. As Apple (2001) explains, no matter how radical some of the proposed ‘reforms’ were at the time of the formulation of the [VET] policies, or no matter how weak the empirical basis was
for their support, they have now redefined the terrain of debate of all things educational.

In the current political climate of protracted privatisation of government services and institutions, it would be quite optimistic to think that this research project would have any influence in encouraging the reverting of VET curriculum development to the traditional model, ie, being given back to the educators. If Federal and State governments are committed to educating a skilled workforce which is expected to contribute to the economic development of Australia, and not just producing working fodder for industry, it is critical that they reinvigorate the relevance of technical skills training. Significant changes in VET policy will need to be instituted. A good start would be to reduce the emphasis on administrative compliance in VET institutions and focusing on the social, cultural and employability needs of the individual learner.

Endnotes

1 A significant of literature, from 1999 to the present, has been critical of the principle of CBA, especially in the assessment of the creative disciplines, eg graphic design, fine arts and architectural technology (Billett, et al 1999, Misko, 1999, Booth, 2000, Williams, et al, 2003, Pickersgill, 2005, Guthrie, 2009, Wilkinson, 2010, Deissinger, 2011). It is worth examining the origins of CBA to understand why it has been criticised by researchers and teachers of VET, not only in Australia but also in the USA and Europe. CBA originated in the USA in the early 1970s as an alternative method of assessing vocational educational teachers who were receiving poor results in their teacher training courses. The paradigm for vocational teacher education became “performance-based” and was centred on assessing the “role requirements” and “standards of behaviour” of trainee teachers (Deissinger, 2011, 6).
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