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Recent reforms in vocational education and training

For quite a few years editorials and papers within this journal have highlighted the broad-ranging demands being placed upon technical and vocational education to better meet the increasingly complex training needs of industry, individual learners and other key stakeholders. Given the rapidity of technological and social change that has continually impacted on countries and economies across the world, the persistence of this theme is unsurprising. Training organizations and training personnel charged with the task of skilling and upskilling workforces have been urged to become more agile and innovative in preparing people for this ever-changing world of work.

Whilst training providers are being called upon to adapt and innovate, many countries too are re-examining the national policies and structures underpinning their training systems to determine ways of making vocational education and training (VET) more responsive and efficient. In the European context, the goal for most countries is to lessen the impact of skills erosion in addition to meeting the skill demands of new and emerging industries and job roles (Cedefop, 2018). Among the many responses to this challenge, countries are developing qualification frameworks, implementing strategies to build apprenticeship numbers and increasing access to work-based learning, while at the same time growing the availability of VET higher-level qualifications and programs at post-secondary level with robust pathways to further education (Cedefop, 2018).

In England, a significant reform has been the introduction of the Technical and Further Education Act 2017 which has extended the responsibilities of the Institute for Apprenticeships to include technical education and introduced degree-level apprenticeships. Institutes of Technology are being established, which will focus on higher-level technical skills and will be eligible for access to loans and grants for their students. (Parry, 2017, p. 1)

Central to the reform is a distinction between ‘technical’ and ‘academic’ education.... The two-type structure based on this conception will move upper secondary and tertiary education in the direction of a more tracked system of programmes and qualifications, albeit with opportunities for individuals to transfer between the two tracks. (Parry, 2017, p. 1)

In addition, two reviews have been established affecting the English system. The first, the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding, is seeking ways to ensure that the post-18 education system is joined up, offers a comprehensive range of high-quality, alternative routes for those wanting to pursue a vocational education pathway and is supported by a funding system that is suitable for all stakeholders. The second review is being undertaken to identify how best to extend technical education reforms to levels 4 and 5 (Foster & Powell, 2018).

In Australia, reform is also the order of the day with two major reviews directly impacting on vocational education and training. The first of these, recently reported, investigated the extent to which the National Vocational Education and Training...
Regulator Act 2011 supports a responsive, effective and efficient approach to regulation to ensure the quality of the national VET sector. Author of the report, Braithwaite (2018), has made a range of recommendations in the areas of enhancing engagement between the regulator (the Australian Skills Quality Authority) and the sector, strengthening registration requirements for training providers, raising the quality of teaching and improving data on VET, student protection and information. Of the 23 recommendations, nine have been supported by the government while another 11 have been supported in principle only, requiring more work with key stakeholders.

The second review is of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) which is the national policy regulating qualifications in Australian education and training. It was last reviewed between 2009 and 2011, and, in the Commonwealth government’s view, the technological advances in educational delivery, increasing interest and participation in sub-qualifications together with changes in international practice related to qualifications frameworks, are key drivers for investigating whether the AQF continues to meet the needs of educational providers, learners, industry and the community. Both of these reviews have the potential to be highly influential in driving change within vocational education and training in Australia so that it better addresses the ever-increasing skill development demands being placed upon it. The intent is clear – enactment will be the next challenge.

The criticality of the ongoing workforce in an increasingly demanding social and economic environment is clearly laid out by Kate Golebiowska, Alicia Boyle, Sophie Pannec and Denise Horvath in the first of the papers in this issue which focuses on the growing immigrant-born population of early childhood education and care (ECEC) workers in the Northern Territory of Australia. Reforms undertaken in the sector are aimed at achieving high-quality services by growing the size of the workforce to satisfy the demand for services, meeting higher educator-to-children ratios and raising the overall qualification levels of ECEC workers. By analyzing combined statistical data, the authors report that the number of workers may be too small to fully implement the recent reforms. The paper concludes by identifying data quality issues and future research directions that would help inform and develop a new and more effective strategy for the Northern Territory ECEC workforce.

Debriefing is a routinely used strategy in pilot training. However, limited studies have investigated what aspects of debriefing actually contribute to learning outcomes across professions. The paper by Timothy Marvin, Yoriko Kikkawa and Stephen Billett reports on an investigation focusing on the learning of pilots flying large commercial aircraft in a multi-crew flight deck. The researchers observed, recorded and analyzed over 32 biannual simulator training and assessment sessions including extended periods of debriefing. The paper explores the quality and outcomes of these learning experiences, particularly the efficacy of the simulator-to-debriefing ratio. The findings suggest that appropriate debriefing duration and processes should be determined through considering personal readiness of pilots and situational factors during the training.

The authors of the next paper, Elizabeth Sanli, Kerri Ann Ennis, Robert Brown and Heather Carnahan used Delphi methodology to develop instruments to measure performance of immersion suit and self-contained breathing apparatus donning tasks in Marine Emergency Duties training in Canada. Experienced Marine and Offshore Safety and Survival instructors rated a range of items important in these tasks, and, through a
process of consensus making, assessment checklists were created. The authors note that these checklists will aid in measuring performance in a consistent manner within a course environment, while minimizing interference with the instructional experience.

The next three Practice Papers report on action research projects undertaken by Australian VET practitioners. Although their disciplines differ, each of these papers highlights the important role practitioner inquiry can potentially play in ‘transforming the conduct and consequences’ of practice in an environment of constant change (Kemmis, 2012, p. 891). Cornelis Van Sebille reports on an action research project which examined the feasibility of creating a mobile performance–workshop venue as a teaching tool to overcome some of the costs and funding constraints threatening the ongoing viability of technical performing arts training in his institution. From a review of the literature and analysis of interviews with specialists engaged in innovative delivery models, the author suggests the adoption of three different approaches to enhance training provision. These include learner-adaptive delivery, targeting untapped demand and building the flexible infrastructure support needed for mobile training delivery.

An individual teacher can have a significant impact on students by creating an environment that encourages and supports successful learning. Conversely, an unsupportive teacher’s actions can have the opposite effect, inhibiting student engagement and retention. In her action research study, Allyson Dutschke examined what attitudes and practices were held by teachers in two schools across a large VET organization: whether all teachers had the same attitude and how these attitudes were displayed as practices with students. Gathering data through an online survey and interviews, the researcher found that VET teachers were generally aware of the influence they can have on student retention and engagement. They clearly understood the need to be supportive and innovative in their teaching practice, and the research revealed that many teachers are going above and beyond the call of duty to do the best for their students, although confronted by time constraints, issues with relationship building and organizational and other demands.

The final paper by Clare Dallimore reports on her action research project examining issues faced by Afghan students studying in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) across metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia. Questionnaires were used to gather information from Afghan students, Afghan community leaders and teachers engaged in the delivery of the AMEP classes. Results of the study indicate that students were satisfied with the English classes in general but were keen to have bilingual support for those who struggled with the complexities of Australian culture and the concept of education. The author highlights a number of areas in delivery which could improve student attendance and satisfaction with the classes. Included amongst the recommendations are professional development for AMEP teachers and the active engagement of Afghan community leaders in the provision of bilingual support for students involved in the program.

Finally, the persistent theme highlighted earlier in this editorial re-emerges with the review of a recent book edited by Matthew Pilz, Vocational education in times of economic crisis: Lessons from around the world. Published in Cham, Switzerland, the book provides a comprehensive view into how different countries have been affected by, and responded to, the shared economic crises over the last few decades. The reviewer, Jill Downing, concludes that with TVET under the microscope, this publication
responds to a need for all stakeholders to have a better understanding of what is occurring in other contexts and be able to learn from, and contribute to, an improved VET system’.

References


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