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Customised or Custom Built? Re-thinking the role of VET in Workplace Learning

Terrific to be here, it's a peculiar thing you know that as soon as you stand up in front of a group of people with a microphone, time accelerates.

I'll move right along. I need to first of all acknowledge Ray Townsend and Marg Malloch – Marg's from Victoria University as was mentioned in the introduction and also Renee Calendar and John Martino who are both involved in the case studies associated with this research. I also want to preface my comments by saying that - as was mentioned in the introduction - I'm coming at this from what I would say a practitioner researcher's point of view.

I'm the Managing Director of a registered training organisation (RTO) and we're out there trying to engage with a wide range of employers across quite a diverse range of industry settings. We're involved in the practice and we're trying to make this happen but at the same time we're quite interested in research and have been involved in a number of projects for NCVET, for the Department of Education and Training and so on.

Some of the comments that I'll be making this morning do draw upon that broader background of work whilst I will be talking mostly about this particular project. As mentioned it's one of the projects for NCVET (the published version of it looks like this – referring to report in hand) and of course the terrific thing with the NCVET work is that these reports can be downloaded as free PDF files and that's available in that form and the URL for those of you who are not familiar with the NCVET site is at the end.

We're talking here about case studies with employers, where essentially these were enterprise based case studies, we're not purporting or pretending to talk about the whole of industry for these case studies, they really were based on discussions with individual employers, face-to-face interviews.

In three of the cases, in the case of the baking, the information technology and I think the seafood was the other one; we had little clusters of employers that came together into focus groups to participate and contribute to this study as well; it was quite interesting.

I'm not going to talk about every word that's on the slides; I'm assuming that - I think the plan is that people will be able to get access to these through the website or something? If I skip over a couple of slides don't panic too much because if it finishes you can always follow it up later on.

The range of industry sectors from which these enterprises were drawn is represented on the slide there, you can see they were kind of quite diverse from areas like mining and vehicle manufacturing which is already been part of the agenda here today through to things like hospitality, seafood, viticulture and so on, quite a diverse range of businesses, some of them were bigger, some of them were smaller, some of them were rural, some of them were in major capital cities, so we were trying to get that kind of diversity.

These are the sort of questions that we were wanting to explore: how do employers perceive the vocational education and training achieved by their employees, what value do they place upon VET qualifications, how do they use VET qualifications and other questions related to the perceptions of training and perceptions of training providers.

I might say at the outset that one of the things that really stimulated us to apply for funding for this research in the first place was that as a RTO, we've become aware that employers don't necessarily value VET qualifications in the way that we might or in the way that their employees might.

We've done quite a lot of work with unions over the years and we've seen how unions place a value on qualifications and their members often place a high value upon qualifications – quite rightly so in my view. It was our kind of anecdotal and experiential evidence that that value is not necessarily shared in the same way by employers and I think that theme has already been identified in some of the discussion this morning. Summing up, these were some of the key themes that came through and I don't think there's anything terribly surprising there really.

Clearly, qualifications are used as part of the gate-keeping processes – that's not a surprise – they are perceived as being part of the developmental pathway or developmental tool for employees. The issue of compliance is already been mentioned and that was a theme in some of the earlier research that we were aware of before we started this.

There's a sense that in some cases, the employers' engagement with formal qualifications is driven more by a sense of compliance than by what some might call commitment. I do want to say a bit more about those bottom two points: the issues about interpretation, the issues about responsive partnerships because I think that's where the real guts of this research is.

Terms like qualifications, competency, work-related learning even the term training itself, these terms are merged through these discussions in a way that has actually been problematic in various ways. It was obvious to us that employers don't necessarily carry the same meanings for this language that we do and it became very obvious to us that TAFEese and VETlish are not the languages of industry.

Earlier work that we'd come across included some work by Jack Keating where he talked about the idea that qualifications rest upon a community of trust; this research showed us to some extent that community of trust is there.

Employers still – sort of, have that trust about qualifications but in my notes here I've got to highlight the idea that the trust is neither naïve nor absolute, it's kind of there but it can't be taken for granted.

Bear in mind that this is case-study based research, it wasn't a large scale survey with hundreds of employers and so on, it was based on more intimate conversations with employers about what's going on in their businesses and how training and learning processes might be part of their story. What came back out of that was a sense that employers are using qualifications as indicators of potential rather than as proof of confidence, which is kind of different kind of slant on it.

Government subsidies have already been mentioned, a number of the employers talked about the significance of those and how important they were for them and some of the employers talked about just how they see the use of formal qualifications as just part of good human resource management and industrial relations policy.

Nevertheless, there was still a certain ambivalence there; but given the ambivalence, if you're going to have some sort of training it's probably better that it's accredited. The sort of comments that you can see on the screen there reflect – these are just little snippets lifted out of the data – employers commenting on their perceptions of accredited training and qualifications.

They talked about things like transferability; they talk about things like meeting a certain standard, providing an incentive, providing a career path, these sorts of things. Again, the theme of compliance, I've already mentioned: laws, regulations, EBAs and so on.

The first one there is from one of the baking industry employers that was engaged in the study and what was interesting there was he talked about how the nature of the work had shifted. Originally they had fully qualified bakers and therefore they had baking apprentices but the nature of the work in that particular enterprise shifted into more of a food processing kind of agenda rather than a traditional baking agenda. They determined that they didn't need the full range of skills that might have traditionally been associated with a full apprenticeship in baking.

Things like enterprise bargaining agreements and so on were part of the picture. One of the employers there, you can see the comment: 'I wouldn't do the training, absolutely not, if you didn't have to'. This is partly what you know, from the point of view of the training provider.

Listening to one of the other speakers a little earlier reminded me of a meeting I was in with one of the senior TAFE bureaucrats in the Victorian system, who was insisting to a group of TAFE providers that they needed to be able to take a phone call one afternoon and have an operator on the ground and delivering a program for an employer on the next day because that's what responsiveness means. It just struck me as really quite a bizarre and ludicrous and kind of wrong-headed understanding.

I know as a training provider that if we get from an initial first phone call to having a contract signed to deliver some work within three months, we've probably done really well. Often times it takes a lot longer than that, so the notion that employers are a kind of waiting for us to arrive and stop everything when we do is a kind of a rather curious one, I think, in relation to the policy expectations of our workplace learning.

Issues of interpretation, this is a really key theme that came through this work - I want to stress that I'm talking here on reporting perceptions - and you can see that there's a statement there that says TAFE could never cover it in a lifetime because each business is different. It's a really kind of in your face kind of statement coming from an employer and I'm not reporting here that that's fact. What I'm saying is that there's a perception that this is the way it is and it's a perception which I've come to understand through the work that we've been doing as a provider.

Time and time again we see how businesses are different, even businesses that are superficially similar and the baking employers was a very good example. We had a small cluster of employers from the baking sector, they were all retail bakeries, they were all shopfront operations, basically family businesses, very similar operations. When we got together talking with those bakers, they talked about the various ways in which they're different and the ways in which training and development processes within those businesses are different and how the learning needs to be sculpted and shaped around the contexts, the circumstances, the work organisation and even the culture of the business. As one of the bakers said, we all use the same ingredients but it's what you do with it that makes the difference. There was a perception that the learning and development opportunities really need to be shaped around those notions of context which Helen's been talking about this morning.

Another really interesting thing was how much time people put into this stuff, it was kind of curious that in some cases we talked to people about training and they said 'Na, na we don't really do any training here, no not really'. When we broadened what we were talking about, we get statements liked this: 'well I worked out the other day that about 30 to 40 per cent of my time is being spent in that'. I had a statement in the report that says 'for many employers contributing to this study, particularly those in smaller enterprises (so this connects with what Giselle's just being saying) formal training does not come into the picture, they're too busy coaching, checking, demonstrating, explaining, correcting, challenging, supervising and supporting their staff to be worried about training.

Concerns about needing the training and development opportunities on the job so the production can keep going, a small employer there, this is bottom quote referring to the glass, from the surfboard industry, he talked about having one glasser and one sander and one guy that maybe does all the finishing work and so on. It was interesting talking to both large employers and smaller employers and both groups saying it's much easier, we're a really big organisation but it would be much easier to do all this training stuff if we were really small. It's a lot easier to organise, get a handle on and you can track what people are doing and so on.

The small business is saying we're a small organisation like this guy in the surfboard manufacturing saying: look we really struggle with this stuff and it would be so much easier if we were a bigger organisation.

Interesting kind of issues, a bit like the old story about the blind men and the elephant, you know the old story about the several people with visual impairments if you like, and they've all got hold of a different part of the elephant. There's one saying, it's kind of like a hose you know, it's kind of leathery but it's like a hose, it spurts some water and it's got a hole in the end, and there's somebody else saying, no it's not, I don't know where you are, it's kind of like a tree, it's kind of solid and hairy and it goes straight down into the ground (he's got hold of the leg) you know and then somebody else has got hold of the tail and describing what that's like and somebody else has got hold of the ear and saying well it's kind of flat and leathery and of course they're all telling the truth.

That's the kind of complexity that we're dealing with here and what makes it more difficult is that the elephant is not standing still while all this is going on, it's actually kind of doing some kind of a dance in response to the environment and we're trying to hang on and deal with it, it's complicated kind of stuff.

Another note I've got for myself here, I've said that in an earlier report to NCVET I talked about how the system needed to be moving its energy from a focus on delivery to an emphasis on dialogue on design for effective learning, a shift from delivery to dialogue and a shift towards notions of design.

It's my contention that our dominant metaphors in this industry, the metaphors of package and the metaphor of delivery are not particularly helpful for the kind of work that we need to do if we're going to be involved in workplace learning, of course when we get involved in dialogues on design, it's a lot about relationships. All of the work is embedded in the relationships that we develop with people.

This statement here, 'we've got to look at the competencies and what they mean to the company' was I think one of the key statements that came from employers about this. I've got a note here that says: 'I wonder sometimes whether we in the VET system are guilty of thinking that the training package doesn't need to be interpreted because we already know what it means, we carry the meanings and we think we can deliver the meanings, well in fact it doesn't really work that way'.

What employers are saying to us: if training packages are the fundamental point of connection and I would argue that training packages are always going to be inadequate. They're always going to be a compromise because they are fundamentally weird beasts contrived to meet multiple agendas, they are simultaneously both instruments of policy and they try also to be instruments of practice and they don't do any of the jobs perfectly. But that's okay, not very many tools do and most tools are only as good as the people. The training packages are our tools but they are the fundamental point of connection and if they're going to be meaningful and useful, we have to show and work with employers to see how they can make sense out of them, and how they might be relevant and meaningful and useful for their purposes.

There is some other stuff here about price, the issue of price was raised this morning and it's a critical issue but interestingly, employers were saying that price was not necessarily the main factor in terms of their judgements about purchasing for training. It's a factor certainly but people said things like quality, locality, flexibility, can the provider really do the job and bearing in mind the title that we put on this report about getting the job done, at the end of the day is it going to help to get the job done?

I've got some stuff in here about what employers expressed frustration about and so on, there's just this last couple of points here. Employers do need access to information, seeing it's already been touched on this morning and they need good quality information and the people that we were talking with told us that they found that hard to get.

I want to argue that the term training provider may actually not be a very helpful term, but the role is greater than being a provider, the role is greater and more complex than that, we're actually engaged in a complex, multi-disciplinary field of practice and it's part politics and it's part industrial relations and it's part anthropology and it's part the discipline that we're working with. There are a whole lot of factors that come into play when you start to engage in learning in the workplace.

I also want to say that we got to remember that we don't have a monopoly on learning. The learning has going on all the time, as has been alluded to here, the learning's going on when we're not there, it's going on when we're not teaching, it's going on when we're not paying attention. Even if we've got the very best trainer visiting the workplace on a regular basis like in the work we do, we try to have somebody on-site every week, that person even if it's the very best trainer or facilitator that we can make available, that person still is only there for a fraction of a time in which the workplace is functioning and operating so what effect can they really kind of have unless you take a broader, systemic, holistic view of it. Complex sort of stuff; challenging stuff.

My last point is the employers aren't the only stakeholders. The message that came out of this research is that employers are saying that the system, they have a perception that the system is still not listening to them as acutely and as carefully and as sensitively as they would like it to. I think we all need to get better at doing that and we've got to keep working at that constant challenge. At the same time and we're also mindful that employers, whilst they're an important stakeholder are still not the only stakeholder. What that means is that the practitioners are once again caught in this pit with the elephant you know and the elephant is dancing around and we can get trampled in that process as well.

I'm not arguing that it's easy, there are genuine tensions there to recognise, tensions to negotiate, tensions to mediate. But I do believe that with good will and with persistence and with dedication and with creativity and with good educational judgement and sound theory backing us up, it is possible to develop effective programs which could meet the needs of the enterprise, whilst simultaneously and along the way also addressing the needs of individuals.

These things are not necessarily mutually exclusive but I think Helen's point about the consensus is an absolute critical one, we can't take it for granted. It has to be constructed and it's bloody hard work doing that but when it works, it can be immensely satisfying.