

A brief Comment on “The quality of teaching in VET: options paper.”  
Re: Indigenous teaching and learning in VET

I speak as a non-Indigenous adult educator, who has worked in both VET and Higher Education for twenty years, where my principal focus has been on improving education outcomes for people in Indigenous, marginalised and disadvantaged communities in Australia and the region.

It is well-known that Indigenous people enrol in VET programs at a higher rate per capita than non-Indigenous people. Given that Indigenous people are also the most educationally-disadvantaged grouping within the Australian population, this places a special responsibility on the VET system and its teachers. I was therefore surprised and disappointed that issues around teaching and learning for Indigenous students received no attention in the options paper.

When the Blueprint for Implementation of the national VET system’s Indigenous Strategy partners in a Learning Culture was evaluated by NCVET in 2002-03, the view was put very strongly by Indigenous stakeholders that the VET system was failing to develop an Indigenous teaching workforce. To rectify this, NCVET commissioned some follow up research as part of its national research strategy for Indigenous VET, but, to my knowledge, this has not led to any significant change in the numbers of Indigenous teachers employed in secure full-time positions in the sector. The same stakeholders emphasised that non-Indigenous VET teachers and managers were still not being provided with the professional development they needed to deliver effective and appropriate education to Indigenous students.

My own view is that teaching Indigenous students in VET is a specialist field of practice. It is best done by Indigenous teachers, because Indigeneity is itself a recognised specialist ‘qualification’ for undertaking this work. The arguments for this are complex, and cannot be elaborated here, but they include the fact that education is a means of transmitting a peoples’ values and knowledge from one generation to the next. This is recognised in several specific clauses in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples, to which Australia is a signatory. In a situation such as we have in Australia, where access to professional teaching qualifications has been limited by past practice, there are nevertheless going to be a significant number of non-Indigenous people teaching Indigenous students in VET for the foreseeable future. It should therefore be recognised that these people need specialist training to undertake their work. This training need is by no means satisfied by one –day or even one-week ‘cross culture’ or cultural awareness courses, but should include professional development up to and including at degree level in Indigenous education.

Bob Boughton  
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