

# VET policy: processes, stakeholders and issues



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## Abstract

This discussion paper aims to foreground other papers in this series by defining what policy is and providing an outline of the 'ideal' approach to its development and translation into practice in the VET context. To do this we define the VET sector and its missions. We then move on to describe the key stakeholders in the sector and the sorts of policies that have been enacted from 1998 onwards using the VET policy timeline developed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).

We then introduce a series of propositions regarding VET policy and its implementation. These propositions include that VET policy developments and implementation are often too rapid and focused too much on the short term. We contend they tend not to be developed holistically. We also suggest that VET policymaking at present is in the hands of officials and others who lack contextual knowledge, especially of the VET system and how it actually works. This compromises the likelihood of successful policy implementation. Policy initiatives and changes also come so hard and fast that there is incomplete implementation and change fatigue. This is coupled with a critical lack of effective policy analysis, program monitoring and evaluation.

Ways forward include creating agency with a role similar to that of the former Australian national Training Authority and establishing a comprehensive review of the sector: a 'Kangan revisited' to provide a strong basis for making the necessary changes to ensure that the sector survives, grows and develops in positive ways.

## Introduction

This discussion paper aims to provide a base for all the other papers in this series to build upon. It will do this by defining what policy is and how, ideally, policy solutions and initiatives are developed. We use Australian and other government-based literature to inform the ideal, and then contrast this with the actuality of practice in VET policy development at both national and jurisdictional levels. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research's (NCVER's) compendium of VET policies over

the past 20 years (NCVER, 2018) helps identify areas on which VET policy and other initiatives have focused. We and other authors have concentrated on seminal national and jurisdictional policy initiatives and issues. We recognise that these influence policy development and practice at the provider level also.

We will examine the role of the multiple stakeholders that contribute to policy development in VET. If nothing else it is the diversity of these and the breadth of VET's remit that create challenges for the sector's policymakers. These challenges take a number forms: first, it is that aspects of the sector and its missions are also part of the roles of other education sectors. Its missions and borders are porous. The second is the effects of federalism and stakeholder views with their attendant shared and conflicting interests, priorities and powers. This is particularly so when these effects are manifested in levels of funding, support and fidelity of implementation. Federalism's advantage is the checks and balances it imposes on policy and its implementation. Its downside is that the VET policy that is actually developed is more likely to be compromise than innovation and vision.

Finally, we will examine a range of propositions and issues that challenge the effectiveness with which VET policies and their attendant initiatives are developed and enacted. The other papers in this series highlight areas of policy and other factors that restrict the extent to which the VET sector can fulfil its overall mission. These issues include funding (Burke), VET FEE-HELP (Saccaro & Wright), teaching quality and qualifications (Guthrie & Jones), competency-based training (Hodge), contracting out and market design (Toner) and VET's role in ameliorating disadvantage (Myconos, Dommers & Clarke). NSW offers a case study of more measured and cautious response to free market VET policy (Shreeve & Palser).

This paper will conclude with considering how to ensure that in future VET policy is better developed and more effectively implemented and reviewed. Before doing this we must briefly describe the VET sector and the wide range of things it tries to do.

## Defining Australian VET and its missions

To set the policy agenda involves defining what VET is and what missions it seeks or is charged to fulfil. This is no easy task, but is one that Anne Jones's paper attempts by looking both back and forward. As in other countries VET in Australia is more complex and broadly focused in terms of its missions than either the schools or university sector. Policymakers, politicians and their advisors have generally had little direct experience of vocational education at the sub-degree level. They comprehend traditional VET missions such as apprenticeships, but their understanding of its other roles, we contend, remains more elusive. At worst, they are ignoring a resource for action and change.

The VET sector's roles are diverse, especially when it is seen as acting in consort with the roles of private, community and school-based providers and those enterprises that train formally but internally. Its number and range of provider types is great. They range in size from very small to very large. With over 4000 VET providers registered in 2016 (NCVER, 2017), the majority of these private, regulating the sector is problematic.

The rhetoric is that the sector is industry led. We contend that this is only partly true. While peak industry bodies play an important role in the process of policy formulation (and they can be fierce advocates for the importance of the sector – though also often critical of it), a more accurate description is that the sector is government led but industry advised. Moreover, the policy and practices advocated by industry peak bodies can often be at odds with local industry and individual employer views about what is desirable. This means that those implementing policy at a local or regional level face challenges in turning broader policy rhetoric into reality in the face of local, more specific issues.

Towards an understanding of what VET means in the Australian context, the glossary of terms of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) describes the sector as providing:

Post-compulsory education and training, excluding degree and higher-level programs delivered by further education institutions, which [provide] people with occupational or work-related knowledge and skills. VET also includes programs which provide the basis for subsequent vocational programs.

As is often the case in VET, this description defines VET by what it appears to be rather than by what it actually is. It hides a range of other important roles. The sector has vocational and economic roles, certainly, but it is also vitally concerned with promoting access, social justice and equality, helping to overcome disadvantage. These latter roles are often less well understood. In addition, a number of VET providers are active in higher education, particularly dual sector institutions. The VET sector has been described as the educational "middle child" (CEDA, 2016) in Australia, permeable and squeezed from both sides by the secondary and higher education sectors.

Arguably, it has trouble finding its niche in the broader education family.

While seen as a legitimate part of the tertiary sector following the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008), VET suffers from a parity of esteem problem, in contrast to European countries such as Switzerland, Austria, Germany and Finland. In these cases the middle child is seen as equal but different to the other two, and no less loved.

The policy agendas that influence VET's roles are not only national in their scope, but also of local importance and even at times cross-sectoral. States and territories see the sector as both an economic tool and a means of addressing social issues confronting their jurisdictions (see NCVER, 2018). At the same time as this role is acknowledged, VET has suffered funding cuts (see the paper by Burke in this series) in stark contrast to the other education sectors. In addition, national and state and territory (jurisdictional) policy priorities can be at odds, and the ways they translate their respective interpretation of policies and initiatives from national concept to jurisdictional reality can differ. Likewise, local and regional issues can affect VET priorities and what its providers are called on to do to support their local community and employers. This diversity of its missions and potentially competing policy agendas and priorities can be problematic as policies are implemented.

## What policy is

Public policy can be defined as:

... the expression of what a government wants to achieve – whether it be about the 'means' or the 'ends' or both. In other words it provides the rationale or the driver for [g]overnment initiatives and programs. 'Public policy' refers to policy by governments, as distinct from the policy of a business or other organisation. (Department of Premier and Cabinet, South Australia, 2015, p. 2)

Governments implement policy through new or revised laws, regulatory processes, programs, budget allocations or by tasking agencies or other organisations with particular functions that will effect the policy.

Australian governments, both state and federal, have guidelines for policy development (for example: Commonwealth of Australia, 2014; Department of Premier and Cabinet, South Australia, 2015). These represent ideals. We contend, however, that the rhetoric of these policy ideals is often not matched by the reality of their development, implementation and management. Indeed, Terry Moran, a former head of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the inaugural head of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), has described Australia's delivery of policy as "in palliative care" (Moran, 2017).

Moran's thesis is that policy development and implementation are too disconnected from what people really want, are economically driven, focused on the short term and outsource delivery too much. Policy, he suggests, needs to be bolder and more focused on long-

term challenges. On the other hand, he was reported by Banks (2009, p.19), then chair of the Productivity Commission, as saying that:

... for civil servants, a capacity to analyse problems rationally and empirically and to advance options for action by [g]overnments is a basic ethical duty.

He is talking about an ideal that calls for provision of frank and fearless policy advice devoid of politics and spin.

Another former senior bureaucrat, Peter Noonan, now a professor at Victoria University's Mitchell Institute, has raised concerns about the efficacy of some VET policy. Policies fail, he contends, because those developing and implementing them do not 'war game' them. He means that there is too great a concentration on desired outcomes and too little on how organisations and circumstances may subvert what at first appears to be a noble policy intent. The most recent and classical example of this is the rise and fall of the VET FEE-HELP scheme (Saccaro & Wright) and its re-engineering. On the other hand, and more positively, Jones's paper in this series "reimagine[s] vocational education in Australia as it could be to increase inclusivity, innovation and prosperity."

## The 'ideal' policy development process

Policymaking by government is a dynamic process in terms of policy's development, implementation, review and change. The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet suggests the following six building blocks: governance, managing risk, engaging stakeholders, planning, resources; and monitoring, review and evaluation, as the basis of active policy management. The foreword to the Commonwealth Government policy implementation guide (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014) contains a series of messages about how to ensure that policy development and implementation are as effective as possible:

- The criticality of strong leadership, no matter whether implementation is the responsibility of one agency or several
- Successful implementation requires an inclusive approach, sound processes, the effective use of resources and the consideration of implementation at every stage of policy development.
- The assessment and management of risk needs to be [ongoing], and
- Policies and programs, when implemented, require active management to be successful. This requires measurement, analysis, consideration of feedback and complaints, evaluation and review, calibration and adjustment.

The Department of Premier and Cabinet in South Australia (2015, p. 9) asked the question: What does a good policy process look like? Their answer was that it:

- fits the circumstances and issues

- provides the opportunity for analysis from all important perspectives
- involves appropriate consultation and transparency
- is publicly defensible in terms of how the process proceeded and who was involved
- leads to informed decision[-]making, and
- builds in the best opportunities in the circumstances to ensure commitment and implementation.

These ideals will be used as the basis for not only drawing some conclusions later in the paper, but also raising a series of propositions and issues relevant to VET policy development and implementation in Australia. If anything, the experience of those charged with implementing policy at the grass roots level of the VET sector is in dramatic contrast to these ideals. Rightly or wrongly VET policy is often perceived as piecemeal, short-term, disconnected and enacted to 'put out fires' that better and more evidence-based approaches would have avoided lighting in the first place.

## Australian VET policy over the past 20 years

The NCVET has developed a timeline of VET policy at both the Commonwealth and jurisdictional levels, and presents this through its VET Knowledge Bank in the Centre's international tertiary education research database, VOCED Plus (NCVER, 2018). It covers the 20 years from 1998 to 2017. The timeline is searchable by state and territory, as well as nationally.

As well as being searchable, the timeline offers information in a number of topic categories. These include VET reform, economic imperatives, regulation, participation, VET in schools and apprentices and trainees. It also charts government events at both the federal and jurisdictional levels.

The policy issues over this period are many and various, including:

- national agreements through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), including skills policy and workforce development
- VET sector reform at both federal and jurisdictional levels
- training initiatives directed at particular groups and sectors, including Indigenous people, small business, green skills, international education, regional needs, women and young people, and
- numerous initiatives directed at apprentices and trainees.

## Players in the policy game

The stakeholders in vocational education are diverse. They include:

- politicians, policymakers and planners and government departments and agencies, including not only those with responsibilities for vocational education but others whose remit and clients may be affected by VET policies
- industry, a broad group with diverse interests that includes peak employer and employee representative bodies (including teacher unions at the national and jurisdictional levels), but also bodies with more focused interests whose views on particular policies and practices may be in conflict with those of other industry bodies
- individual employers, whose views on policies, practices and their implementation may be even more specific and may conflict with the group immediately above
- professional and regulatory bodies, which advise on the content and focus of VET programs, and monitor their quality
- regional development and community bodies, which are keen to ensure that appropriate VET programs are available to meet local needs
- education and training providers, including those in the public and private sectors, in the community, and in universities, enterprises and schools
- teachers and trainers, no matter what type of provider they work for
- students, apprentices, trainees, and their families, carers and other advisors.

This wide range of stakeholders have a diversity of interests and views on policy and how it is put into practice. The challenge for the VET policymaker is reconciling an often diverse set of views and coming up with policy solutions that are workable. This reconciliation process, too, is problematic. The reason is not only the diversity of voices but the weight each voice should be accorded by policy developers. Particular voices may be silent, or there is a deafness to their views, or their views are not sought, although their advice would be most relevant. In part, this may be due to the difficulty of identifying and engaging with a spokesperson or group who can offer a comprehensive and coherent view on a particular issue.

Of all the groups above, those whose views tend to be under-represented or ignored are those at the bottom of the VET policy food chain: the community and VET providers, practitioners and students. Paradoxically, however, these can be the groups most directly affected by policy, and whose advice might help to ensure sound and enactable policies are developed: especially when providers and VET practitioners are the organisations and individuals that actually have to turn VET policy intents into viable practices on the ground.

## Propositions about VET policy development and implementation

In this section we raise and attempt to suggest, and defend, a series of propositions. Some of these might be seen as provocative, but have a ring of truth. Banks (2009) suggests that half the problem in developing and implementing policy is understanding the nature of the problem needing a policy solution. Added to this is understanding complexities, as well as costs and benefits, in framing potential solutions.

### **VET policy development and implementation are often too rapid and focused too much on the short term**

In its 2012 policy discussion paper, the Institute of Public Administration Australia (IPAA) advocates a business case approach to public policymaking. By this they mean gathering facts and known views, identifying alternative policy options, weighing their pros and cons and sharing those findings with stakeholders to get their reactions before taking a final policy position. However, they point to a spectrum of practice in policy development (IPAA, 2012, p. vi). On the one (and worst) extreme it is represented by:

Policies ... developed 'on the run' and introduced 'by fiat' often to exploit or react to a burning political issue – developed in haste and secrecy without proper investigation and designed to get maximum publicity without genuine stakeholder engagement.

Yet these sorts of mistakes continue to occur, perhaps because they give the appearance that politicians, policymakers or government departments are reacting and that something, even something less than adequate, is being done. Policy developed and implemented in such a way may not be as sustainable as policy developed through more rigorous and comprehensive processes. But such processes often take longer, and so the downside is that they may not have the appearance of timeliness.

Banks (2009) points out that a rapid approach to policy development often relies too much on 'quick and dirty' surveys or focus groups, or a reliance on overseas studies where the contextual detail underpinning the work and the initiative is not fully understood. In short, it may over-consult, but under-

design (see later). It may also ignore collective knowledge and experiences of certain key and knowledgeable stakeholders, and the history of previous related policy initiatives. In addition, Banks (2009, p. 5) points out that, without evidence:

... [policymakers] must fall back on intuition, ideology, or conventional wisdom – or, at best, theory alone. And many policy decisions have indeed been made in those ways. But the resulting policies can go seriously astray, given the complexities and interdependencies in our society and economy, and the unpredictability of people’s reactions to change.

An example of this proposition is VET FEE-HELP, where there were clear lessons to be learned from a previous review of international education (Baird, 2010) and concurrent practice, including the Victorian Training Guarantee (see Guthrie et al., 2014 in relation to service skills qualifications), and South Australia’s Skills for All program.

### **There is a nexus between national policy and initiatives and their jurisdictional implementation.**

This proposition also applies to the implementation of national policies in local jurisdictions. (See Shreeve & Palser in this series of papers) While other papers in this series examine this proposition in greater detail, it is worth highlighting a few instances here. The first is the adoption of competency-based training which, while widely accepted, has probably been most questioned in New South Wales. For example, in 2011 the Board of Vocational Education and Training (BVET) commissioned a paper by Wheelahan and Moodie, which focused on the development of personal capabilities rather than occupational competence (Wheelahan & Moodie 2011).

The move to more market-based models for VET delivery was also promoted nationally, and taken up with considerable zeal in both Victoria and South Australia. Yet other jurisdictions, and again particularly New South Wales, dragged their feet on implementation. This proved wise, as they did not suffer the VET budget blowouts of the two leading jurisdictional early adopters.

Another example is VET in schools, where close inspection of the approaches adopted in different states shows significant differences in policy and implementation approaches. The range is described in a review of VET in ACT public schools (CIRES, 2016).

### **VET policy and programs tend not to be developed holistically, compromising their likelihood of successful implementation**

In a paper on VET teacher education and professional development the authors (Clayton & Guthrie, 2013) drew on a quote from *Yes, Prime Minister*. Hacker in the episode ‘A real partnership’ (vol. 1, p. 140) laments: “In government, many people have the power to stop things happening but almost nobody has the power to make things happen. The system has the engine of a lawn mower and the brakes of a Rolls Royce.”

Sadly this is true of many policy initiatives: in that particular case, teacher education, training and development in Australian VET. What we argued there, and believe is more broadly applicable, is that the same issues emerge time and time again with no apparent progress in terms of coherent policy or tangible outcome. We suggested that the issues, while recognised, never seem to be really resolved. Rather those solutions proposed involve tinkering at the edges of the policy issue. They do not address the root causes of the policy problem. One of the reasons we put forward for this is that:

... no one body or group has the power to make things happen, or to enact comprehensive solutions. Rather, any attempted solutions have been piecemeal, or have turned into battles between jurisdictions or a variety of interest groups over whom, precisely, has responsibility for carriage of the issue. (Clayton and Guthrie 2013, p. 8)

### **There is a critical lack of effective policy analysis, program monitoring and evaluation**

Policy analysis is about clear specification of issues and identification of the range of choices that government might consider. This requires bureaucrats and associated advisory bodies to formulate briefs on the issues and in particular on the consequences of enacting the choices available to them. To do this effectively, they need technical know-how that they may not have or be able to lay their hands on. The other things they need are good data and information.

Gary Banks in his paper on evidence-based policymaking (2009) pointed out that good data is prerequisite to effective monitoring and evaluation:

A major failing of governments in Australia, and probably worldwide, has been in not

generating the data needed to evaluate their own programmes. In particular, there has been a lack of effort to develop the baseline data essential for before-and-after comparisons. (Banks, 2009, p. 12)

Banks also suggests that policy must be monitored and evaluated, as required, and then over time corrected or terminated if it turns out to be a failure. The issue here is that, on occasion, by the time decision-makers realise that corrective action is needed, the cure they propose is as bad as, if not worse than, the disease. Examples of this are, again, VET FEE-HELP and the marketisation of VET in Victoria.

The way to proceed, Banks suggests, is to start gradually, learn by doing, and monitor a trial of policy before full implementation. Increasingly, however, policy trials have been skipped in favour of immediate, full roll-out. This is, most likely, because those in government believe they have just one shot at getting the budget they need to implement the initiative fully. Moreover, a monitoring and evaluation process needs to be established and funded at the start. This requires an evaluation and research capacity within government, or the use of outsourced services with which government works closely. When staffing cuts are required, however, such research and evaluation resources within government are often the first casualty as they are not seen as core business. Once lost, such capability takes time to rebuild.

### **Policy initiatives and changes come so hard and fast that there is incomplete implementation and change fatigue**

Those charged with implementing policy at the coalface report that they are often part way through the process of implementing a policy or initiative when another becomes flavour of the month. The previous initiative is downgraded in priority, with two important consequences. The first is that the previous policy may not have been completely implemented, reducing its effectiveness. The second is that the continual change and realignment of policy and priorities leads to change fatigue among those charged with turning policy conception into reality.

Constant policy change and change fatigue are an outcome of poorly informed VET bureaucrats, under-consultation and too little listening, or a lack of understanding about what exactly they are being told. This is compounded by a serious lack of policy analysis, monitoring and evaluation activity and skills. Thus, throwing the baby out with the bath

water or just tinkering at the edge of a policy issue become easier than tackling the problem comprehensively. They also fail to monitor the program and its attendant risks effectively. In sum, those charged with management of policy implementation lack the breadth of experience and knowledge to translate policy conception to reality. This issue is explored in the next proposition.

### **VET policymaking is in the hands of officials and others who lack contextual knowledge, especially of the VET system and how it actually works**

Both authors have worked in vocational education for over 30 years. That period has seen considerable changes to those in government who are required to develop and implement policy. First, the number of officials and advisors making a long-term career in vocational education has declined dramatically. Impermanence and rotation are now far more evident than permanence. This has led to a significant loss in corporate knowledge and expertise, which means that policymakers may lack contextual knowledge and appreciation of the consequences of the VET policies they develop. This lack of knowledge and understanding of the sector comes into play in internal policy analysis and decisions about what policy instruments to use (for example, the carrot, the stick, or both) and the implications these may have in effective implementation by those on the ground. In short, they cannot 'war game' effectively without a strong knowledge base or access to those able to provide dispassionate advice. Some of these advisors, having or representing vested interests, provide advice that needs to be balanced with that of others and/or treated with extreme caution. Thus the quality of the people researching and helping to formulate policy is critical. As we have already suggested, these research skills are, regrettably, often the first casualty when the public service cuts staff.

Contracting work out to consultants is increasingly employed to help develop or advise policy. This process often involves the use of large consultancy organisations. Banks (2009, p.16) argues that there are positives and negatives to this approach:

... new ideas, talented people, on-time delivery, attractive presentation and, possibly, cost — although some of the payments have been surprisingly large. But there are also some significant risks. Consultants often cut corners. Their reports can be superficial. And, more fundamentally,

they are typically less accountable than public service advisers for the policy outcomes.

Academics are potentially more dispassionate, but have their drawbacks too: policymakers may believe their ability to understand the policy is developed and enacted in the real world an impediment to engaging them. Policy advice is often, however, drawn from wise old former bureaucrats acting as consultants, and this may be the more preferable approach. Indeed, these 'wise old bureaucrats' are often associated with these larger consulting organizations as experts. A final issue is the extent to which they and other consultants just do the consulting job. Preferably, however, part of their consulting role should be to help educate the current crop of politicians, advisors, policy developers and bureaucrats. Carefully defining the task and choosing the right consultants with a strong reputation in the field are fundamental (Banks 2009).

### **VET policy involves over-consultation for some, but still be under-designed**

There has been an increasingly heavy emphasis in recent times in the VET sector on consultation. There is clear evidence of consultation overload for both industry bodies and representative bodies, such as TAFE Directors Australia, and the Australian Council for Private Education and Training. They are small organisations with limited personnel and financial resources, yet this consultation process places a substantial burden on them. In addition, often the same people and voices always seem to be consulted, and this may mean that new ways of thinking and doing are not considered.

There is also increasing use of e-consulting with its associated problem of what weight to give which voices. As we have already suggested, not all respondents, groups or industry spokespersons are legitimate representatives of their particular segment of the VET community. Finally, "[P]olicymakers should not presume they already know the issues or the answers" (Althaus, Bridgeman & Davis, 2013, p.130). So consultation is important in the policy process, but who, how, how much and about what are also important considerations.

### **VET has become over-regulated**

Many stakeholders in VET complain frequently of the level of regulation in the sector, and the regulatory burden of being a provider or offering a service. Programs funded under particular policy initiatives

have their own reporting requirements on top of broader sectoral ones. This imposes additional regulatory burden and is compounded when data definitions and requirements differ from those of the national VET collection.

To be fair, there have been attempts to reduce regulatory burden and its cost to the sector. Also, the national regulator, the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA), has an exceptionally difficult task given the number and diversity of providers it must monitor. ASQA's approach to regulation is criticised, however, for being a compliance-based process rather than focusing on real quality and its improvement (especially the quality of teaching, learning and assessment – the core business of the sector) and for ASQA's auditors taking varied approaches.

The final issue here is that governments, whether state/territory or federal, contract out services. While this issue is covered elsewhere in this series, the point here is that these contracts also have a regulatory component. Agencies should and do monitor that contracted services are being delivered properly. The ineffectiveness of this monitoring, however, has led to a number of policy failures. These require strong corrective action once the extent of the policy failure or budget blowout is recognised. This, in turn, can be harmful to the sector in two ways: first, erosion of public confidence through media exposure of scandals, and second, detrimental effects on organisations who act ethically but are nevertheless caught up and punished in the net with those that have not.

## **Conclusions and ways forward**

Our first conclusion should be that all is not doom and gloom, despite the tenor of this paper. There are successes, but regrettably they go unheralded. Policy development and implementation might also be regarded as a something of an experimental process, so it is the effectiveness of the experiment, its development and implementation, which determines on which side of the 'pass or fail' ledger the policy finally rests. However, the number and frequency of policy and implementation failures resonate with VET's stakeholders. These create an image of the sector which suggests that it is unusually susceptible to poor policy decisions. Actual or perceived policy failure conveys a widely held sense of crisis in the policymaking system (IPAA, 2012) and in the sector itself.

Second, the ideals of policy development outlined earlier in this paper (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014; Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2015) suggest the process needs to be well led, inclusive, analytical and actively managed – including management of risk – to be successful. It also needs to be collaborative, forward and outward-looking, innovative and creative, and learn the lessons of history: what does and does not work. This requires continuity of capacity. In addition, success involves gaining the commitment of stakeholders and effective processes of implementation and review.

We believe, however, there is a general view among many with a long history and deep regard for VET and all it does, that the sector is being let down by many of those in politics and government charged with making it successful and helping it to do its work effectively. This requires they understand the diversity of the sector and its missions, and properly weigh all the stakeholder voices and lobby groups involved in, and affected by, a particular policy or initiative. For this policymakers need to be engaged and inclusive.

We would argue, however, that at present Olympian detachment and secretiveness appear more common than deep engagement. Policy is also more effective when it is strategic not tactical, and when its intents are clear, transparent and well communicated. It really is an information-intensive process, but it can be argued that well-informed and well-grounded intuition has its place too.

### **Some ways forward**

We believe that policy development and implementation have to become less secretive and more transparent. Policy makers also need to take the time necessary to do it once and do it right. They need to define what policy success looks like, build the measures and collect the data and other information needed to establish that evidence base. They need to have ‘carry through’ rather than chopping and changing their policy priorities.

A second way forward is to rebuild a policy capability, and enrich government with VET knowledge as well as research and evaluation skills, to set up effective monitoring and evaluation processes from the beginning of the policy cycle.

More radically, we believe it is time for a comprehensive review of the sector, including its role and place. We envisage ‘Kangan revisited’, and a review process that will provide a strong basis for making the necessary changes to ensure that the sector survives, grows and develops in positive ways. If nothing else, this is required to repair the

reputational damage which is as much the responsibility of poorly conceived and executed policy as those who have exploited the loopholes poor policy and its implementation have opened.

Finally and most radically we contend that winding up the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) was a mistake. We propose that the sector would be well served if an agency with a role similar to that of ANTA were to be re-established. If nothing else, this would ensure that there was a national agency devoted exclusively to the VET sector. It would be a basis for rebuilding a strong national foundation of VET knowledge and policy expertise. It would also be a tangible acknowledgement of the importance of the sector in much government and other stakeholder rhetoric, and help ensure that rhetoric better matches reality.

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