



Victorian TAFE
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Educational Autonomy

TAFE and Autonomy – Beyond Corporate Governance

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VICTORIAN TAFE ASSOCIATION (VTA) MONOGRAPH SERIES

This paper is the first in a series of short Monographs that the Association is planning to produce in the next twelve months. The series has been initiated for a number of reasons, the primary one being that it is timely in the context of both a new State Government and, indeed, a new century, to revisit some of the conceptual issues and philosophical principles underpinning the TAFE sector.

The sector has undergone radical transformation over the last few decades since the recommendations of the iconic Kangan Report were transformed into public policy. Rapid and sweeping changes have led to continued confusion about the roles and practices of contemporary TAFE which, in turn, has led to an undervaluing of the crucial role TAFE plays to the community and economy. This Monograph Series is one part of the Association's strategy to initiate public debate and comment on these issues.

In conjunction with this series, a longer, more wide-reaching research project with a similar purpose is being planned, which is expected to be available for distribution around the beginning of 2001. After the release of each Monograph, a forum will be held during which the Monograph issue will be discussed thus enabling the Association to get feedback and stimulate debate.

If you would like to comment on this paper, contribute to the larger project or suggest other issues for comment, please feel free to contact the Association's offices.

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July 2000

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Introduction

The concept of autonomy has been debated extensively in the Victorian TAFE sector since its inception. TAFE developed in a cultural context in 1970s Australia that was in many ways contradictory. It can be broadly characterised as a period of widespread cultural and intellectual distrust of authority which coincided with an equally widespread call for a more interventionist type of Government.

At the same time as authority of all forms - including Government - was being called into question, increasing public interest in social justice issues and thus growing support for a “welfare” state, necessitated a Government with more power to enter the so-called private space of its citizens. More than ever in recent history, Government was expected to play a role in issues that were previously considered “personal” such as, for example, the mental and physical health and educational attainment of its citizens.¹

TAFE developed in this context and while it certainly served other purposes, was undoubtedly a large part of the Government’s social welfare policy. To a certain extent, and alongside the purpose of providing industry with skilled labour, TAFE was set up to provide educational opportunities to many citizens who would otherwise not engage with formal education – most of whom were socio-economically disadvantaged.

TAFE has always been premised on the recognition that learning extends well beyond the formal structures of education. This includes recognition of the different sites of learning as well as styles and content. The TAFE conceptualisation of learning does not preclude those citizens who are not labelled “academically intelligent”.

As with the cultural trends in which it emerged and perhaps as a consequence of them, TAFE seems to have developed a somewhat schizophrenic conceptualisation of autonomy.² That is, the culture of TAFE is such that it is often positioned in opposition to authority partly as a result of the sector being positioned on the fringes of the broader education sector

¹ This is not meant to imply that the State did not intervene in the personal lives of its citizens prior to the 1970s, examples of this abound – two being conscription and the forced removal of Indigenous and other children from their families. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the 1970s can be characterised as a period when the public/private distinction was radically undermined in Australia and elsewhere.

² The term “schizophrenic” is deployed here in its colloquial sense . The author does understand that its clinical application is quite different from its colloquial one and does not intend to confuse the two.

in Australia. At the same time and even in the context of recent developments which have seen the Victorian TAFE sector become more corporatised and privatised, TAFE culture has always been built firmly around the fact that TAFE as an institution is a Government or public education body.

It should come as no surprise then that this cultural schizophrenia has led to significant debate about the concept of autonomy. In particular, in recent years there has been much debate about the rights and responsibilities of Institute Councils in Victoria. In general terms, Victorian TAFE Institutes have argued cogently for increased autonomy from Government control in matters relating to the Corporate Governance of their Institutes.

Such arguments were based on a number of principles but they were also based on the fact that Government was/is asking Institutes to function as two distinct entities. On the one hand, Government expects TAFE Institutes to provide standardised public education to Victorian citizens and Industry. On the other hand, it expects them to be flexible to the needs of their *local* communities and to be commercially competitive – that is, to be more like private businesses.

Such tension has arguably produced both good and bad results; it is not the intention of this paper to make that judgement. What this paper does aim to do, is to examine how that tension has been played out in relation to autonomy.

The crux of the paper is to look at these debates about autonomy and to go beyond the single issue of corporate governance. To a certain extent, that battle has been won and Victorian Institute Councils have a relatively high degree of autonomy. Instead, this paper will focus on the broader picture in terms of how autonomous the *sector* is on the whole, that is, how the outcomes of the Victorian TAFE sector are controlled (or not controlled) by various key stakeholders in the system.

PART 1: What is autonomy?

Autonomy: noun, right of self-government
The Australian Oxford Dictionary

This definition of autonomy is straightforward in that it confines the concept to self-government. While such a definition can be usefully applied in various contexts – the self, individual or organisation for example – it is ultimately limiting on two levels.

1. the assumption that autonomy is a noun alone; and
2. the exclusive focus on Governance

a) Autonomy is not just a noun

In essence, any understanding of autonomy is underpinned by a concept of freedom. Again, while freedom seems to be a relatively simple concept, it too has been the subject of much political and philosophical debate. This debate can be characterised by two broad streams in classic political philosophy, particularly in relation to models of government – freedom *from* power and freedom *to* exercise power which are negative and positive understandings of freedom respectively.³

b) Freedom From Power

In broad terms, classic Liberal political philosophy is based on a model of the State in which the rights of the individual to live her/his life free from the interference of the State are paramount. That is, this model of governance is one which prioritises freedom *from* others.

c) Freedom To Exercise Power

Models of the State, which are more social-democratic than Liberal, understand freedom and hence autonomy as something which is more active, that is, something which is exercised rather than passively accepted. In this sense, the State is granted a certain level of civil interference in that it has a set role to play in enabling citizens to exercise their rights.

A useful example of this distinction is the different understandings of access and equity. Under the *Freedom From* banner, access and equity issues are centred primarily on removing institutional barriers from participation. Conversely, *Freedom To* is more concerned with both removing barriers and *facilitating* the conditions in which citizens can exercise their rights to participate.

³ For further explanation, see two classic works on this subject: Isaiah Berlin. *Two Concepts of Liberty: an inaugural lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 31 October, 1958*. Oxford: Clarendon Press (1958) and; Erich Fromm. *The Fear of Freedom*. London: Ark (1984).

Freedom From acknowledges that barriers to participation are not simply institutional and are not necessarily overt.

Both of these understandings of power and autonomy are relevant in the context of discussing what this paper will call Educational Autonomy. The former is obviously relevant in that autonomy cannot be achieved when formal structures are in place which prevent operational freedom. The latter is equally important in that it demonstrates that autonomy is not merely a naming word or noun, but rather, it is something that can be usefully understood as being proactive, as something one does. Although it is a complex issue, it could be argued that autonomy is worthless unless actually exercised.

d) Autonomy is not just about Governance

Debates about autonomy in the VET sector focus almost exclusively on the rights and responsibilities of Institute Councils. That is, debate focuses on the right of the Institutes to govern themselves and be free from interference by state and federal bureaucracies. While there is no question that this is an important part of the debate, and while this debate has led to considerably greater independence for Institute Councils in Victoria, it is only one part of the overall picture. Indeed, there are much bigger issues at stake and the Victorian system is currently grappling with these.

PART 2: What is Educational Autonomy?

It could be argued that there are issues of far more reaching effect than the ability of Institutes to govern their day-to-day operations and these issues could be usefully grouped under the title of Educational Autonomy.

Bringing the preceding discussion together, it is important to understand that educational autonomy is as much a verb as it is a noun. That is, we must not confine autonomy just to *freedom from* outside forces, we must also understand autonomy as *freedom to do things* and in this sense it is as much about what we can do in the sector as what can be done to us. Focussing on increasing the arms length from Government is not necessarily useful, unless Institutes have the rights, capabilities and resources to do it better.

There are a number of issues at stake here and for the sake of clarity, the following divides them into *freedom to* and *freedom from*. However, it will become increasingly apparent that many of the issues could be put in both categories, depending on one's perspective.

a) Institutes arguably require more Freedom To:

- Govern
- Contribute to the development of curriculum and learning outcomes
- Serve the local community
- Compete

Govern

The right of Councils and CEOs to govern their Institutes is an extremely important one. The Victorian TAFE sector argued for increased autonomy in the area of governance essentially for two reasons:

- the granting of operational autonomy signals faith in and is an acknowledgement of the business and educational acumen of Institutes
- increased autonomy of Institute Councils allows Institutes to be more flexible and thus more responsive to their local communities and industries.

Contribute to the development of curriculum and learning outcomes

This is a complex issue and is particularly relevant at the moment in the context of the development and implementation of Training Packages, the development of which, many in the sector would argue, has excluded

educationalists and teachers.⁴ Arguably, educational autonomy must acknowledge the professionalism, expertise and skills of teachers and to this end, teachers as the paramount professionals in the sector must contribute to the determination of learning outcomes and to curriculum development.

Serve the local community

While an over-used phrase, many people suggest that Institutes must be given sufficient autonomy to promote and ensure flexibility. Institutes require operational and educational autonomy in order to be responsive to the needs of their local communities – including their contribution to the social and cultural life and to their local industries. Under the previous more centralised system in Victoria, Institutes were denied the many excellent partnership opportunities with local Industry because of time lags in receiving approval for entrepreneurial projects as well as a degree of a ‘bureaucratic fear’ of thinking outside the square. Critics of the centralised model argue that new and emerging industries do not enter into training partnerships with dinosaurs.

Compete

Changes in the Victorian sector in recent years have encouraged, if not compelled Institutes to become more competitive, both with one another and with other TAFE providers. Thus, one could argue that Institutes must have the autonomy to compete – enabling flexibility is one aspect of this. However, the Victorian TAFE Association has shown on previous occasions that the competitive field is not level, because of the inequities in community expectation and need (particularly in relation to offering courses and services which are not commercially viable but necessary nonetheless) as well as disparate industrial relations arrangements across the industry.⁵

Moreover, competition is a principle that could just as easily be placed in the *Freedom From* category. Even those in the sector who extol the benefits of competition acknowledge that competition can often preclude collaboration which, in the context of publicly owned and operated educational bodies, is potentially problematic.

⁴ This issue has been and still is being debated extensively in various forums including *Campus Review*. Two examples of articles that are critical of the development of Training Packages are: Kevin Peoples. “Training Packages: troubled centerpiece of VET system.” *Campus Review*. (March 15-21 2000) 10; and, Jozefa Sobski. “The pedagogue and the package.” *Campus Review*. (April 12-18 2000) 10. For an opposing view, see Moira Scollay’s (Chief Executive Officer of the Australian National Training Authority) article, “Pedagogy and the Training Package: the ideal learner’s combo.” *Campus Review*. (March 22-28) 12.

⁵ For further explanation see, Victorian TAFE Association. *Victoria’s Apprenticeship and Traineeship System: A Critical Analysis, A submission to the Review of the Quality of Training in Victoria’s Apprenticeship and Traineeship System*. Melbourne, Victoria: VTA (2000).

b) Institutes arguably require more freedom from:

- Industry
- Employer Needs
- Economic “Rationalism”

Industry

While industry is seen as one of the principal clients of the VET sector, it is also true that discussions about the responsiveness of the sector to the needs of industry are often perilously unclear and confused. So many assumptions are made in the context of many of these discussions, not the least of which is the identity of industry, let alone what it means to be “responsive” to it/them. Does this simply mean for example, that the VET sector should respond to the skills needs which are articulated by Industry Training Advisory Boards (ITABs)?

There is concern that “Industry” is interpreted to be ‘big business’ in actuality and that responding to industry amounts to catering to the short term labour needs of those more vocal enterprises. It is argued that if the underpinning knowledge and transferable skills of workers as a whole are not developed or catered for by this sort of system, then this will be ultimately destructive for “Industry.” A recent report on skill shortages in the retail motor industry by the Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce (VACC) identified this issue of narrowing the skills base of employees and pointed to employers’ concern that “broad generic training may be replaced by firm specific training...”⁶

Moreover, the narrowing of employees’ skills base is equally, if not more destructive, for the student/employee whose job mobility is severely compromised in an era of almost guaranteed job migration.

Aside from clarifying the terminology, it is timely to question the assumption that industry is the principal client of the VET sector as seems to be assumed at a federal level. While not wishing to undermine the importance of industry, many people in the sector argue that the VET sector’s principal client is the community. The community includes industry as well as students, non-students (including general community members and families/friends of students) government and employers. In this model of the public education system, industry should be duly acknowledged as *one* of many crucial clients. This is arguably not the case currently.

⁶ VACC. *Skill Shortages in the Retail Motor Industry: An Interim Report*. Prepared by the VACC for the Automotive Working Group (April 2000) 8.

Leading on from the previous section, there is also significant concern that the short-term needs of employers are driving large parts of the VET sector. New Apprenticeships continues to be an area of great significance in this regard and the suggestion that they serve more as a wage subsidy program than training is becoming increasingly widespread.⁷ Dorothy Kotz' research and, similarly, Kaye Schofield's research into the Queensland and Tasmanian VET systems, found that the policy focus of the systems has become confused.⁸ In her report on the Tasmanian system, Schofield points to the confusion generated by the seeming conflict between the employment interests of the Federal Government in relation to New Apprenticeships and the skills development objectives of the State Government.⁹

Exclusively on-the-job training is another related area of concern. There is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that in the absence of reciprocal monitoring by off-the-job training, many on-the-job traineeships and other schemes serve the needs of the individual employer rather than the broader skills needs of the "Industry". In many cases this may not be avoidable in that many employers do not have the skills, time and facilities available to train students thoroughly in the particular vocation. In other cases, this may involve direct exploitation where employers utilise training subsidies to obtain cheap labour.

Neither situation is acceptable and ultimately represents a de-skilling of the Australian workforce at a time when there is a global calling for higher skills. According to a recently released Australian Industry Group report, the skills of the Australian workforce "has long been internationally recognised as one of its key competitive strengths and is identified as one of the main reasons to trigger new investment."¹⁰ This skill level needs to be maintained and constantly improved for the benefit of the social and economic health of the state and the country.

⁷ See, *Ibid.* – especially, Part 2: "Growth and Diversification of the New Apprenticeship System." 8-10; Brian Donaghy. "Concerns New Apprentices will create 'welfare mentality' in business." *Campus Review*. 11:8 (March 8-14, 2000); and, Warren Osmond. "Traineeships abused: Carr." *Campus Review*. (February 24- March 2, 2000).

⁸ See, Hon. Dorothy Kotz. "Students and trainees in VET." *Market for Vocational Education and Training: who pays and who profits*. Adelaide: NCVER, p.302. Also see Ms Schofield's reports (listed in the Bibliography at the end of this paper) based on an investigation of the New Apprenticeship system in three Australian states.

⁹ Kaye Schofield. *A Risky Business: Review of the Quality of Tasmania's Traineeship System*. (December 1999) p.viii.

¹⁰ Australian Industry Group. *Training to Compete: The Training Needs of Industry*. Prepared by the Allen Consulting Group (1999) p.i.

Economic "Rationalism"

Obviously all organisations and infrastructures are bound by fiscal constraints. A particular problem with publicly funded bodies is that they compete with other "election issues" and the long-term financial commitment they require will often reap benefits in a time frame that exceeds the electoral cycle, thus making the investment less attractive for the government of the day. In this respect, economic arguments are frequently used to justify decreases in public expenditure on education. These arguments are always short-term in nature – that is, we will save \$x this budget. However, many educational commentators argue that this ignores the long-term benefits of public education, especially in related but separate areas such as the effects of educational attainment on the likelihood of avoiding welfare dependency.

Public expenditure on education in Australia at the federal level is dropping well below that of other OECD countries. In the most recently released OECD World Education Indicators, Australia ranked 21st out of 29 OECD countries in terms of the proportion of public expenditure on educational institutions.¹¹ In fact, Australia is one of the few countries resisting the trend toward increasing public expenditure on education which is arguably unjustifiable in light of the strong economic growth we are currently experiencing.

Educationalists suggest that this approach saves money in the short term but has dire long-term social and economic consequences. Again, one could suggest that this is especially the case for the TAFE sector which has a long-standing affiliation with, and a commitment to, educationally and socially disadvantaged groups.¹² It is widely understood that reducing educational and other opportunities to such groups has negative long-term economic ramifications – for the individuals involved and the community more generally.

¹¹ OECD. *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 1998*. (Paris) p.31.

¹² The Association has produced many discussion papers relating to our research in this area which found that equity groups are often represented in TAFE in excess of their representation in the Australian population. Indeed, this appears to be the case in other parts of the world, particularly in the United States. See. Victorian TAFE Association. "Part 1a: TAFE's social equity role." *The Quality of Vocational Education and Training in Victoria*. Melbourne, Victoria: VTA (February 2000).

PART 3: Autonomy and Accountability

This paper has attempted to canvass some of the arguments for increased autonomy in the context of the VET sector. However, one issue not addressed so far, is the issue of accountability. Ironically, while increased autonomy means greater freedom and distance from the power-holder (in the TAFE context, this means government and perhaps industry), it also means greater accountability. This is ironic in the sense that the more freedom accorded to Institutes, the more often they will have sections of the community knocking on their doors to ask what they are doing. Additionally, devolved responsibility means that there is no one else to take responsibility when things don't work out!

Generally, literature on the subject suggests that public education bodies are accountable to a community comprised of:

- students
- industry
- government
- employers
- citizens/ tax payers

It is impossible to say with any real surety to whom public education bodies are most accountable and indeed, to whom they should be most accountable. Of course, government is the obvious choice in the sense that it is the major shareholder, it owns the majority share of the capital stock, and it controls the disbursement of public funds. But arguably the primary goal of government is to serve its citizens, and education bodies are established as a part of that social charter to educate citizens for a diversity of reasons – including skills for industry and employers.

It is further difficult to determine the levels of accountability against which Institutes should be held, a situation that is in no small measure due to the confusion over who the primary client is. A popular suggestion is that Institutes should be held accountable on the basis of student outcomes. This is a notoriously difficult measure and it fails to acknowledge that many socio-economic factors outside of the Institute's control dramatically effect such outcomes. In many situations, participation itself is a credible measure of a successful outcome.

Should Institutes be measured on the basis of their responsiveness to industry and/or employers? The problems with such a suggestion have

been articulated earlier in this paper. How do we resist catering to the short-term needs of industry without being accused of arrogance and paternalism if we assert a role in the debate to identify skills needs, while suggesting that many industry clients are perhaps necessarily prioritising their short-term goals?

Institutes can be accountable to government but by what measures? What is the government actually purchasing? In Victoria the Institutes are essentially held accountable on the basis of the number of student contact hours that are delivered. This is clearly an inadequate measure. What is the relevance of the amount of training delivered if we are uncertain of the quality of the training much less the quality of the outcomes, particularly if it is not what the country needs or wants?

This brings us to the most vexed question of all – how to be held accountable to the community. How do we cope with the fact that the very notion of one community will always elude us because, as the saying goes, there are as many communities as there are individuals?

Conclusion

Clearly, autonomy is relevant to the Victorian TAFE sector on many levels. Traditional debates about Institutional autonomy from Government are an important part of the debate. However, it is the Association's position that a broader understanding of autonomy as it applies to the sector is required at this time. The challenges facing the Victorian TAFE sector in relation to what this paper has called Educational Autonomy are widespread and difficult and are part of the sector's drive toward due acknowledgement for its contribution to the social and economic fabric of Australia.

While debating these issues, it must be remembered that when one calls for autonomy on all levels except the financial – that is, when we seek increased autonomy from government, but retain a dependence on public funding – contradictions will abound. Such contradictions may well be workable, but they must be acknowledged if the debate is to be honest and productive.

One of the ways this contradiction manifests itself is that increased autonomy for the Victorian TAFE sector inevitably results in increased levels of accountability. This brings with it a myriad of problems, not the least of which is how to measure accountability and how to determine to whom we are most accountable. These are the challenges facing the present VET system in Victoria. The challenges are welcome despite their difficulties. Perhaps the first question to be answered is exactly what is being asked for and from whom and we hope this discussion paper is part of such a process.

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