

# **How markets distort decisions to undertake education, vocational knowledge, provision & qualifications**

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## **Introduction**

This paper argues that neo-liberal market-oriented reform to vocational education and training (and also other sectors of education) is much more than a tool for intensifying the work of VET teachers, through making them more ‘responsive’ and their institutions more ‘effective and efficient’. The aim of these policies is the creation of the ‘market citizen’. This leads to transformation of subjectivities and the way in which individuals develop and shape their sense of identity, their orientation to their vocation, their relationship to knowledge and practice, and the way in which they recognise themselves and others (Bernstein, 2000; Ball, 2003). The ‘generic skills’ sought by government and employers are market-oriented skills. This changes the focus of education and training from preparing students for a *vocation* to preparing them for *markets*. As a consequence, vocational knowledge is downplayed. Market reforms also distort the nature of provision, the structure and focus of qualifications, and the way in which employers decide to provide, and individuals to undertake, further education and training. This paper presents an alternative model, which argues that learning *for* work needs to go *beyond* work, that learning needs to be oriented to a vocation, and that learning needs to occur over a variety of contexts (and not just learning at work).

## **Neo-liberal reforms**

Since the 1980s in Australia and other Anglophone countries, education reform (and particularly VET reform) has been driven by a neo-liberal agenda which reconstructed education systems according to the principles of human capital theory: the role of education and training was recast as an instrument of micro-economic reform within a broader program of reform that redefined (and reduced) the role of the state, marketised many areas of public provision and commodified social relations through the development of consumer sovereign models of citizenship (Priestley, 2002; Wheelahan, 2002). Young (2001: 9) cites Tony Blair as saying that education is “the best economic policy that we have.” This in the context of less “public ownership and even less direct forms of state intervention in the economy.”

The creation of a national, industry-driven VET system based on a competitive training market has been a long-term goal assiduously pursued by both conservative and Labor Commonwealth governments since the late 1980s. Creating a national system was a key component of their attempts to transform VET into a lever of micro-economic reform, and to underpin industry restructuring and reforms to industrial relations. As well as supporting a deregulated market and privatised social provision, governments sought to transform education and training systems themselves into markets, as a way of making them more ‘responsive’ to the needs of industry, particularly through subjecting the public provider of VET – institutes of TAFE – to competition from private providers and competition with each other. The provision of education becomes a ‘service’ like all other services, in which the ‘client’ stipulates the outcomes. In this way, VET would become a ‘demand-driven’ and not a

‘producer-driven’ system, much more responsive to the needs of ‘industry’ (Goozee, 2001: 90).

The most recent reforms announced by the Howard government following its re-election in October 2004 will further change the settings of the VET ‘market’. The government has introduced reforms into the Parliament that defines (and consequently limits) the role of VET as a national industry driven system, the aim of which is to strengthen Australia’s economic base through developing a skilled work-force. These reforms aim to increase responsiveness, reduce ‘producer capture’, regulate supply and demand, and instil ‘entrepreneurial’ qualities in education institutions and teachers. While the broader role of VET as a second-chance provider of general education was a defining feature of TAFE following the Kangan reforms to TAFE in 1974, this was reduced to a residual role following the Dawkins reforms of 1988 which redefined the role of VET primarily as the vehicle for developing skills for work (Anderson, 1998: 17). However, even this residual role is now defined out of existence, and will only be included if labour market outcomes can be demonstrated.

Moreover, these reforms and the associated policies and administrative arrangements will give the Commonwealth government unprecedented power over VET, which constitutionally and historically is a state government responsibility. The Commonwealth will use its 30% minority-funding stake in the national VET system to increase its control over TAFE institutions’ staffing policies, qualifications, curriculum content, fees, and occupational and disciplinary focus (Wheelahan, 2005). This demonstrates Ball’s (2003: 217) point, that “...it is a mis-recognition to see these reform processes as simply a strategy of de-regulation, they are processes of re-regulation.” Indeed, despite the belief underpinning neo-liberal reforms that markets are the ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ regulator of social and individual life, the government must introduce reforms that continually *reconstruct* markets and compel market behaviours through policy.

At the heart of the Commonwealth’s policy is a seemingly incompatible tension: on the one hand it uses the rhetoric of markets, but on the other it seeks to impose centralist Commonwealth levels of control but without the funding obligations associated with full responsibility for the system. The rhetoric of markets is that they manage exchanges freely entered into between purchasers and suppliers, and that the operation of the market makes partners increasingly responsive to each other’s needs. This is not what has happened in Australia in either VET or higher education. Trow, in analysing the development of higher education in England, noted the same fundamental tension. He explains that two different policy frameworks co-existed under the Thatcher government: on the one hand, market-oriented policies that emphasised institutional autonomy as the precondition for responding to market signals, and on the other, central government management and control exercised through quangos. He explains that:

"But ultimately the managerial policies won out - and what the universities got was the rhetoric of the market with the reality of firm central government management, down to a very fine micro-management of student numbers by subject, the funding of individual departments, the salaries of academic staff, and increasingly detailed criteria regarding approved modes of instruction. Along the way, some of the specific policies were discarded or modified in the

face of manifest failure and untoward effects, resulting in a pattern of policy that resembled a somewhat unskilled automobile driver who parks by ear.” (Trow, 2005: 8-9)

Ball (2003: 215) provides a framework for understanding this apparent contradiction. He explains that education reform is: “...embedded in three interrelated policy technologies; the market, managerialism and performativity.” Together this ‘package’ overrides the “older technologies of professionalism and bureaucracy” characteristic of public systems and the “state-centred, public welfare tradition of educational provision” (Ball, 2003: 215-216). He argues that these three ‘technologies’ “play an important part in aligning public sector organizations with the methods, culture and ethical system of the private sector” (Ball, 2003: 216). This helps us to understand that market mechanisms are being used to *discipline* TAFE institutions and TAFE teachers, to elicit competitive and entrepreneurial behaviour. The combination of centralist control casts TAFE as supplicant to ‘industry’, while market mechanisms are used to elicit ‘responsive’ behaviour contextualised by a culture of performance against externally derived outcomes (what the ‘customer’ wants) and accountability through audit focussed on performative worth (Ball, 2003: 218). Ball explains that:

“Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic).” (Ball, 2003: 216)

### **The ‘natural’ market, human nature & changing subjectivities**

Neo-liberal reforms are premised on beliefs about human nature that argue that human beings are by *nature* rational self-interested actors who base their decisions on instrumental calculations about likely returns. Because individuals are by nature acquisitive and competitive, markets emerged as the social mechanism to regulate these behaviours (Hobbes, 1985). The market provides the framework for economic and political freedom because it regulates exchanges between equal individuals free from coercion (Friedman and Friedman, 1982: 12). Consequently, market behaviours are *natural* behaviours, because they provide the context for the exchange of information, goods and services in which individuals can pursue their own self-interest to maximum advantage.

Macpherson (1962: 3) explains that the liberal individual is premised upon a conception of individuals as *owners* of their capacities and themselves, who owe nothing to society for the conditions of their existence or the development of their capacities: “The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself.” In other words, individuals are *proprietors* of their persons, and the relationship between individuals is a relationship “of exchange between proprietors” (Macpherson, 1962: 62). However, as Bourdieu (1992: 124) explains, the actor of human capital theory is an ethnocentric universalisation of a historically specific concept of human motivation:

“All the capacities and dispositions it liberally grants to its abstract ‘actor’ - the art of estimating and taking chances, the ability to anticipate through a kind of practical induction, the capacity to bet on the possible against the probable for

a measured risk, the propensity to invest, access to economic information, etc.  
– can only be acquired under definite social and economic conditions.”

Bourdieu (1984 [1979]) explains that individuals’ world views are shaped by their *habitus*, which are the historical and culturally specific dispositions inscribed in the bodies of individuals from similar social, economic, and cultural backgrounds, arising in response to engagement in a world of socially differentiated opportunities and obstacles. While the habitus does not *determine* beliefs, strategies and values, it helps to structure them through shaping perceptions of the possible, the impossible, the normal and the natural, and is the means through which individuals naturalise their perceptions of the world and guide their understanding and practice in the world.

Consequently, in criticising neo-liberalism one does not need to invoke conspiracy theories to explain the pervasiveness of the transformations to social life through neo-liberal policies. Rather, the interlinked legislative and policy changes are undertaken by neo-liberal governments because they seem to be the obvious thing to do, driven by a habitus which naturalises the rational, instrumental, self-maximising actor. For example, when he was the relevant Minister, David Kemp (1999) spelt out the neo-liberal agenda explicitly in a speech delivered to an overseas audience on the education and training policy lessons that could be learnt from the last 20 years:

“In Australia we have seen it important to emphasize values of adaptability and entrepreneurship, civic mindedness and a recognition of our mutual obligations within a community, leadership and a willingness to take personal responsibility for our decisions and actions. Conversely, it would be damaging for the future of our youth if they were to grow up imbibing an attitude of welfare dependence, immersed in a culture of blame and victimhood, or inheriting a conservatism resistant to innovation.

In Australia as in a number of other countries, we have concluded that the institutions and ideology of the aging welfare state inherited from the post World War II era, as it impinges on young people, can breed or reinforce such attitudes.”

Bernstein (2000: 59) explains that the current human capital discourse within the ‘official’ education and training fields is based on a new concept of work and life in which every area of life is perpetually transformed, and that the concept of trainability (or more generously, learning to learn) is now the key principle governing the construction of curriculum and pedagogy. Rather than specific knowledge and skills, the new paradigm calls for ‘generic’ competencies (in VET) or ‘graduate attributes’ (in higher education). He explains that the process of perpetual re-formation “Is based on the acquisition of generic modes which it is hoped will realise a flexible transferable potential rather than specific performances” (Bernstein, 2000: 59). He says that in this way knowledge is divorced from knowers, and “from their commitments, their personal dedications” (Bernstein, 2000: 86).

Neo-liberal reform emphasises ‘generic skills’ and ‘graduate attributes’, because the skills and knowledges to which they refer are the skills and knowledges sought by the market. Because the *market* is the naturalised regulator of human relations (and not vocations or occupations) education and training seeks to produce the market

individual, or the economic citizen (Marginson, 1997). These marketable skills and knowledges are thus decontextualised from the vocations in which they were originally embedded. It is not the occupation or vocation that defines what is necessary, it is the market, and it is assumed that because the market transcends most occupations, that these marketable skills also can be unproblematically translated from one context to another. The rhetoric is that vocations change, but the market endures.

As a consequence, vocational knowledge recedes and is downplayed and regarded as transient and ephemeral. Vocational knowledge is reduced to processes of knowledge creation that emphasises the situated and contextual nature of knowledge, rather than complex and difficult bodies of knowledge and skill, acquired in the process of becoming a member of a community of practice, and used as a tool to transform practice and create new knowledge. As a consequence, qualifications, curriculum and provision are distorted because preparation for markets takes precedence over preparation for vocations.

Bernstein (2000: 59) explains that the generic capacities to be taught and ‘trained’ cannot be considered independently of the vocation or occupation for which individuals are preparing, because it is this that provides their *identity* and the *context* they need to make sense of these ‘meta-thinking’ and ‘meta-learning’ strategies. He explains that:

...the ability to respond to such a future [perpetual ‘trainability’] depends upon a capacity, not an ability. The capacity to enable the actor to project him/herself *meaningfully* rather than *relevantly*, into this future, and recover a coherent past. This capacity is the outcome of a specialised identity and this precedes ability to respond effectively to concurrent and subsequent retraining... It is not a purely psychological construction by a solitary worker as he/she undergoes the transitions which he/she is expected to perform on the basis of trainability. This identity arises out of a particular social order, through relations which the identity enters into with other identities of reciprocal recognition, support, mutual legitimisation and finally through a negotiated collective purpose. (Bernstein, 2000: 59)

The neo-liberal model emphasises the exchange-value of knowledge and not its use-value. This leads to the transformation of subjectivities based on inner commitment to knowledge or a field of practice to market-projected identities in which identity becomes a reflection of external contingencies, in which “contract replaces covenant” (Bernstein, 2000: 69). While Ball (2003: 217) is below talking about the transformation of teachers’ subjectivities, the point he makes applies to both teachers and students – these are the outcomes sought from education:

“Within this ensemble, teachers are represented and encouraged to think about themselves as individuals who calculate about themselves, ‘add value’ to themselves, improve their productivity, strive for excellence and live an existence of calculation.”

Bernstein argues that the concept of ‘perpetual trainability’ is socially empty, because it robs actors of the capacity to identify themselves within a field of practice defined

through its use-value and not its exchange-value. Vocations (in Dewey's sense) provide the ontological grounding for individuals and links individuals to the broader notion of an occupation that encompasses the role of that occupation in society, the values that underpin it and the knowledge and skills that are needed to engage in problem solving. In contrast, if identities are to be formed in and through markets, Bernstein (2000: 59) asks:

“...how does the actor recognise him/herself and others? By the materialities of consumption, by its distributions, by its absences. Here the products of the market relay the signifiers whereby temporary stabilities, orientations, relations and evaluations are constructed.”

### **Further market distortions**

The consequences of neo-liberal reform go beyond work intensification, market disciplines, and external accountabilities. In addition to the intrinsically distorting effects that ensue through focussing on preparation for markets and not vocations, further distortions occur in the nature of qualifications, curriculum and provision, and in the decisions by employers to provide, and individuals to undertake, further education and training. The consequence is that while the new subjectivities that emerge from these reforms may be market-oriented and the objectives of the reforms successful to this extent (from a neo-liberal perspective), it is doubtful that these reforms will succeed on their own terms.

Qualifications are distorted because they are transformed from a coherent and relational whole oriented to a field of practice or field of knowledge, to a commodity to be exchanged and traded in the market. A qualifications market needs to be able to specify the goods to be purchased, and this means that outcomes must be specified in advance, and broken down into marketable units (individual subjects or units in programmes) so that they can be transported and reconstituted to make a full qualification. Outcomes-based education systems emphasise the importance of competency or learning outcomes as signifiers in the market of specific and precise skills. From the neo-liberal perspective, this has the dual benefit of first providing employers with greater capacity to specify the outcomes they seek to purchase, and second, qualifications putatively act as signifiers to potential employers of the knowledge, skills and capacities of potential employees. This is necessary in liberal market economies like those in Anglophone countries, which use labour markets to co-ordinate demand for labour through high labour mobility and hiring and firing, in contrast to ‘co-ordinated market economies’ of Northern Europe which co-ordinates demand for labour through dense networks of interdependent relations between employers, and employers and education and training providers, and characterised by more stable patterns of employment (Hall and Soskice, 2001).

VET market reforms interact with the broader industry and labour market environment to distort the decisions of employers to invest in training and the decisions of individuals to undertake education and training. In areas of high labour mobility it is less likely that people will invest in developing industry-focussed high-level skills if they cannot be sure that they will be able to obtain sustainable work as a consequence. Moreover, employers are loathe to invest significantly in skills development in areas of high labour mobility because of poaching by other firms, and

because it may not be possible to realise that investment through offering individuals relatively secure and attractive employment (Hall and Soskice, 2001).

Supply and demand settings in the VET market do not encourage the development of close inter-dependent links between employers and education providers, because the markets in which both operate are contextualised by competition based on signals of price, supply and demand. In other words, the exchange value of qualifications takes priority, and not their use value. The co-ordinated market economies of Northern Europe use non-market co-operative relations (such as industry clusters and collaborative networks) to achieve the same outcome and employers do invest in high-level industry skills, because they can be reasonably confident of a return on their investment. In contrast, the prudent approach for *individuals* in liberal-market economies is to invest in general skills and not high-level industry skills, while for employers the answer is poaching (Hall and Soskice, 2001). This partly explains Australia current dilemma with the putative ‘skills shortage’, and demonstrates why current market policies contribute to making this problem worse, rather than providing a solution.

A focus on the precise specification of learning outcomes is intrinsically reductive and robs qualifications of the capacity to incorporate the open-ended and process-oriented learning outcomes needed for societies undergoing perpetual economic, cultural and social change (Young, 2001). Young (2001: 10) argues that the pace of change means that “new kinds of learning may need to be encouraged that cannot easily be predicted in advance and may not be readily assessable for qualifications.” In other words, specifying specific skills emphasises what the person has demonstrated they can do in a limited range of contexts, rather than their capacity to respond to challenges in the future. This means we need to place less emphasis on the prior specification of learning outcomes, and more “on learning processes and the judgements of different stakeholders” (Young, 2001: 10). However, as Young (2001: 11) explains, the purpose of Anglophone reforms to qualifications frameworks was move to qualifications away from the:

“...shared practices of teachers and trainers in different crafts and trades, professions and academic disciplines, each with their specific skill and knowledge requirements, to a system of qualifications based on agreed national criteria which underpin all qualifications within a single framework.”

Young (2003: 208) explains that, while the credibility of a qualification may *partly* depend on the knowledge and skills it claims for its bearer, in the end, the credibility of a qualification depends on the extent to which it is *trusted* by those who use it – society in general and employers in particular. In Australia we have a good example of the way trust in a qualification can collapse when the emphasis is placed on competency outcomes at the expense of *processes of learning*. The certificate 4 in work-place assessment and training was brought into such disrepute because of the number of weekend ‘quickie’ training programs that it was eventually replaced in 2004 by the new certificate 4 in training and assessment, which specifies in far more detail the *inputs* of training. Those who use graduates of a qualification must have confidence in processes of learning as well as learning outcomes, and this can only be achieved if learning is not divorced from the assessment of outcomes. The current emphasis in government policy on reducing apprenticeship training times and

ensuring that progression through apprenticeships is on the basis of competence and not time-served in response to skill shortages, runs the risk of a collapse of trust in apprenticeship training, in the same way that the certificate 4 in work-place assessment and training lost the confidence of the VET sector.

Moreover, such an approach assumes that a qualification is the *aggregation* of discrete outcomes, not a relational model in which the *connections* between different elements of a qualification matter as much as the specific learning outcomes it contains. Under existing policy, qualifications can consist of different aggregates, in which units of competency are stacked in different combinations. Employers and individuals can ‘purchase’ the skill sets they need, or they can undertake a whole qualification. This assumes that the learning outcomes specified in a qualification express completely the nature of learning and what is to be learnt. However, it is impossible to do this, and attempts to do so are premised on reductive behaviourist learning theories, based on observable performance in a limited range of contexts. For example, in undertaking apprenticeships students learn far more than the specific skills they need to undertake specific tasks. They also learn about what it means to be part of a community of practice, how to negotiate their way, how to be and relate to others. This is particularly important for young people who need an entry level qualification into the work-force, while older people already established in the work-force and part of a community of practice may only need to acquire specific and focussed skills. While it may be appropriate to provide training in specific skill sets, particularly for those already in employment who do not need an entry-level qualification to obtain employment, a *whole* qualification needs to be more than the sum of its parts, and needs to provide individuals with socially valued credentials which help them to develop their sense of identity in their vocation.

Educational provision is distorted because the Taylorist notion that it is possible to divorce the specification of outcomes from teaching transforms the process of teaching and assessment. Australian training packages are the mandated form of provision in VET, and they contain qualifications, the industry-derived units of competency that comprise them, and the assessment guidelines. Teachers have had little input into developing these outcomes, and policy emphasises the role of ‘industry’ in specifying qualification outcomes. Units of competency must be *directly* related to work-place performance or roles. Teachers must teach to competency standards and assessment must be *directly* against these standards. While units of competency must now include underpinning knowledge, policy stipulates that they should not be *entirely* knowledge based “unless a clear and assessable workplace outcome is described” and such knowledge should only be “included if it refers to knowledge actually applied at work” (ANTA 2004: 5).

There are two problems with this approach. First, assessment drives learning and teaching and is a key structuring principle of both (Biggs, 1999). Stipulating that outcomes must be directly work-related and assessment directly against those outcomes shapes the nature of curriculum and the process of learning because, in the end, providers and teachers are audited to ensure they teach to these outcomes, and that they use the evidence guides included in training packages in the process. If ‘the test’ that teachers teach to is intrinsically reductive, processes of learning will also be reductive. Even if teachers develop creative and holistic ‘delivery plans’ (as many do) in the end “Students learn what they think they will be tested on” (Biggs, 1999: 141).



The second problem is that it assumes it is possible to identify discrete skills and associated knowledge and teach and assess them. This emerges from the ‘supply and demand’ model that conflates the skill needs of employers with the learning needs of people who must exercise these skills. The assumption is that industry needs specific skills and the role of education providers is to provide them with these skills. However, the skill needs of employers and the learning needs of individuals are not the same. An assumption that the two are synonymous leads to abstracting skill from the bodies of the people who must exercise the skills. Providers are not teaching skills, they are teaching people. The capacity to exercise skill at work is an emergent property of more fundamental, complex and wide-ranging knowledge, skills and abilities, and this relies on the full development of the individual – an individual who has the capacity to live within and make connections between their personal, working and civic lives. So while employers may need *specific* skills, the condition for securing these skills rests upon individuals’ capacity to exercise them, and this capacity cannot be developed by limiting teaching to those skills. This is one reason why competency-based training paradigms in VET is particularly problematic, because in ignoring the wider contexts in which people live through focussing only on skills for work, the result is an impoverished education that is not able to develop the high-order skills needed for work, let alone for work and life. It is appropriate for employers to pay for their staff to be taught specific knowledge and skills that the employer needs just for their business and just for now (which may be limited to specific skill sets and not full qualifications). However, it is not appropriate to limit publicly funded education and training to these skills, because qualifications that prepare individuals for specific vocations need to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills and capacities to live in their whole world, while the *focus* of the qualification must be necessarily on the vocation for which the person is preparing.

### **What is the alternative?**

Education and training *for* work needs to go *beyond* work to develop the complex knowledge skills and capacities individuals need as a precondition for exercising skill *at* work. Moreover, the knowledge that we need does not always arise from our practice, and we need to go beyond our practice to learn new knowledge, transform that knowledge in the process of application, and creatively apply it to new contexts. This restores the importance and complexity of vocational knowledge, by not reducing knowledge to the situational and contextual (and ultimately ephemeral).

Finally, if learning is to go beyond the contextual and situational, it must involve learners in processes of recontextualising over many different sites. This means that processes of learning should not be restricted to the work-place *or* to the educational institution. *Both* sites are needed if individuals are to learn how to be a member of a community of practice, and enrich that community through incorporating new knowledge, understandings and creative application. This means that employers and educational providers must be *partners* in developing learning outcomes *and* curriculum, in contrast to current models in which ‘industry’ develops competency outcomes in which they *may* (if they choose to do so) take advice from educationalists. However, this can in no way be construed as an *equal* partnership between the two. Rather than market mechanisms, policy should encourage co-operation between employers and providers, based on an equal partnership that also

includes social partners that have a stake in the outcomes of education and training and in the economy.

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