If vocational education and training is the answer, what was the question? Theorising public policy and the behaviour of citizens

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Abstract

Australian technical and vocational training is an under-theorised, publicly-funded activity that is frequently contested between the State and Commonwealth levels of government, partly in response to the federalist nature of the Australian Constitution. In making policy and political decisions, training is irresistible to these governments. The Northern Territory of Australia provides the site for this narrative summary due to the parallel development of State-type government and the national system of vocational education and training as a sector separate from schools or universities. It is proposed that vocational education and training’s flexibility and useful social role has arisen because it was defined by what it was not.

This story identifies how a banal industry-led common sense system has been sanctioned by governments to enact a set of power relationships that conduct the behaviour of the Australian population in a manner that ignores the headline reason for its existence – the formation of technical and vocational skills required for national prosperity in a highly competitive globalised economy. The discursive formation of the unique Australian citizen-worker-consumer, who must make themself transparent to government, is also built upon a rationality of absence.

The training scheme demonstrates an extraordinary capacity to absorb and simultaneously hold a wide variety of theoretical positions that are frequently incompatible with each other. The system’s famous intricacy and usefulness in public policy arises from its ability to be ‘both-and’ rather than ‘either-or’. The vocational education and training system serves to mediate the complex web of power/knowledge relationships between the citizens and those who are elected to govern. These connexions, considered to be the best form of social welfare, are based upon a social contract in which governments ensure the availability of jobs and individuals must continuously train in order to be employed.
Declaration

I hereby declare that the work herein, now submitted as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by research of the Charles Darwin University, is the result of my own investigations, and all references to ideas and work of other researchers have been specifically acknowledged. I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis has not already been accepted in substance for any degree, and is not being currently submitted in candidature for any other degree.

Donald Zoellner

14 June 2013
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variety of French philosophers, ethnographers and historians – principally Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. Similarly, she also guided me into the use of qualitative research techniques. These serve as a counterpoint to more scientific and technical perspectives that had been instilled into my thinking as a result of my training to become a science teacher and through my employment as a senior manager and leader in a variety of publicly-funded organisations. This combination of theory and practice has opened the way for me to consider vocational education and training from a variety of different perspectives.
### Abbreviations and Acronyms

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACE</td>
<td>Adult and Community Education</td>
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<td>ACPET</td>
<td>Australian Council for Private Education and Training</td>
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<td>ACT</td>
<td>Australian Capital Territory</td>
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<td>Ai Group</td>
<td>Australian Industry Group</td>
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<td>ALP</td>
<td>Australian Labor Party</td>
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<td>ANTA</td>
<td>Australian National Training Authority</td>
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<td>AQFC</td>
<td>Australian Qualifications Framework Council</td>
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<td>AVETMISS</td>
<td>Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard</td>
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<td>AWPA</td>
<td>Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency</td>
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<td>CBT</td>
<td>Competency-based Training</td>
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<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
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<td>COAG</td>
<td>Council of Australian Governments</td>
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<td>CSO</td>
<td>Community Service Obligation</td>
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<td>DCC</td>
<td>Darwin Community College</td>
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<td>ECEF</td>
<td>Enterprise and Career Education Foundation</td>
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<td>ISC</td>
<td>Industry Skills Council</td>
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<td>LSAY</td>
<td>Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth</td>
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<td>NCVER</td>
<td>National Centre for Vocational Education Research</td>
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<td>NPM</td>
<td>New Public Management</td>
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<td>NQC</td>
<td>National Quality Council</td>
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<td>NSSC</td>
<td>National Skills Standards Council</td>
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<td>NT</td>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
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<td>NTETA</td>
<td>Northern Territory Employment and Training Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>RTO</td>
<td>Registered Training Organisation</td>
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<td>TAFE</td>
<td>Technical and Further Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
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<td>USI</td>
<td>Unique Student Identifier</td>
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<td>VET</td>
<td>Vocational Education and Training</td>
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<td>WEA</td>
<td>Workers’ Educational Association</td>
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Chapter One

The Theoretical Motivation
People in workplaces are our most important natural resource.

(Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 53)

How did it come about, how does it work?

This analysis is a narrative of vocational education and training (VET) arising from two research questions. How did VET come into being? And how does it do what it does? There is a purposeful focus upon ‘how’ rather than the more commonly descriptive ‘what is it’ or the speculative ‘why did this happen’ style of questions. While these are inevitably part of the story, this research uses ‘how’ to mean ‘in what manner’? How did Australia end up with this system called VET and how does it function?

VET was anointed in the early 1990s as a Commonwealth Government-sanctioned term to describe the system that issues certificates and diplomas purporting to represent achievement in technical skills attainment. Vocational education and training has demonstrated a voracious appetite by consuming Adult Education, Workers’ Education Associations, Mechanics Institutes, University Extension Courses (Whitelock 1974), Adult and Community Education (ACE) (Fitzgerald 2011) and the large, State-owned, providers of occupational training – Technical and Further Education (or, as it is better known, TAFE). In its current usage, VET also includes private commercial and not-for-profit providers of training.

The argument here proposes that VET is a style of relationship used by Australian governments to manage the conduct of the population. VET is based upon a rationality of absence – it has been defined by what it is not and is used to address population deficits. It exercises power in such a banal manner that it escapes critical comment and reflection. That is, VET’s very existence is stipulated by absent conditions assisting its under-representation in critical scholarship. In addition, VET is deeply implicated in the creation of a uniquely Australian ‘citizen-worker-
consumer’. This figure serves a number of symbolic functions; being a worker is integral to the Australian identity, because it defines the individual citizen while simultaneously providing the financial resources to purchase goods and services, a consumption that drives national economic growth. As described by Noble (2004, 235), “the essence of ourselves is realised through labour”. The tripartite forces of industry, unions and governments that dominate VET public policy demonstrate little concern for the transfer or acquisition of occupational skills in any forms other than those symbolised by formally recognised qualifications.

One further how-style question is addressed. How the research was conducted will be elaborated upon in Chapter Three. Summarised, it can be stated in a single sentence: the research reported here relies upon techniques borrowed from discourse analysis and autoethnography to produce a Foucauldian genealogy that is presented in the form of a narrative summary.

By using the Northern Territory of Australia (frequently reduced to NT), as a distinctive site of study, this genealogy describes the complex interactions of Federal and State levels of governments that have created a training system where the individual student is seldom visible to policy-makers.¹ The results re-affirm that a major outcome of this nation-wide VET scheme is to use tax payer funds, in the name of public good, to provide the skilled labour force required by industry’s quest for increased profit and private wealth. The additional analysis presented in this narrative demonstrates how this occurs and that VET is made up of an eclectic and inclusive set of practices that are not necessarily coherent. This formal system of training resembles the description of the French legal system given by Rose (1996a, 38):

¹ In order to provide consistency and clarity, when the word State or Territory commences with a capital letter, it is referring to a legally recognised geographical and self-governing jurisdiction as described in the Australian Constitution. Similarly Federal or Commonwealth refer to the national Commonwealth Government created by that constitution. Lower case uses of state, in particular, most often refer to a generic political unit that is frequently juxtaposed to the individual.
Full of parts that come from elsewhere, strange couplings, chance relations, cogs and levers that don’t work – and yet which ‘work’ in the sense that they produce effects that have meaning and consequences for us.

The VET system and its functions in society are not well understood because compliance with standards, reporting of vast amounts of data and struggles to talk loudest about the system are the primary pursuits of those who advise and promulgate government policy in the area. In spite of much public hand-wringing over supposed skills shortages in the labour market “funding per hour of training has fallen by 20 per cent in the last decade including 14 per cent from 2006 to 2010” and most State and Territory jurisdictions have reduced VET budgets in the current financial year (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 149-150). The rhetoric of skills shortages serves to mask industry’s influence and the scale of the public subsidy provided to support employers’ hunger for productive labour.

**Foucault’s perspective**

The gruesome description of a murderer being tortured and inefficiently dismembered in front of the main cathedral in 18th century Paris served as my initiation into the thinking of Michel Foucault (1979). The story he tells quickly moves into the next century and the role played by clocks and timetables as supervisory and disciplinary mechanisms directed at the people in prisons, workplaces and schools. I have added the 21st century vocational education and training system to this seemingly disparate grouping. They are all practices of government that establish the power relationships between those who govern and the citizens who elect them. Foucault’s thinking about these relationships also turns to the individual.

I settled upon a theoretical basis for my research using the work of this French historian and philosopher. His writings and lectures are simultaneously frustrating
and fascinating. Single paragraphs can occupy entire pages, the sentences can be extraordinarily long and he invents neologisms such as ‘governmentality’. Yet this allows for a gathering of apparently unrelated events into historical narratives that demonstrate how some of our most ‘normal’ assumptions have come about through bygone accidents, lucky timing or serendipity. According to Foucault (Oksala 2007, 3), social institutions, normal behaviours and contemporary ways of viewing the world are conditional rather than inevitable. The advent of European-style nation-states, for example, is a relatively recent occurrence in the history of humankind, only made possible by having numerical means of recording and measuring features of the population appearing at a time when sovereign rule was being challenged (Foucault 2007b; Hacking 1990, 16-34). To use another example, Foucault argues that the present-day uses of prisons and clinical medicine are comparatively fresh creations in western society and certainly have not been, nor will they remain, fixed for all time (Foucault 1975, 1979).

The art and activity of government has been the subject of much of Foucault’s attention. His approach is focused upon the day-to-day routines and methods used by governments to manage the welfare of the nation-state and the population (Burchell, Gordon & Miller 1991, 3-5). Government as we know it today is a social invention built upon an explicit rationality; one which Foucault questions in order to understand how power is exercised in contemporary democracies. The Australian VET system is a creation of the State, Territory and Federal governments, just like ‘correctional facilities’ and ‘public health systems’, rendering it susceptible to a Foucauldian analysis which exposes the unstated assumptions guiding VET policy and its use as a specialised practice of government.

I adopted Foucault’s exhortation to look at the ordinary and the mundane and only then decide what it is that you have examined (Oksala 2007, 85-86). This approach does not start with an overarching theoretical perspective, such as ‘human capital
theory' (Becker 1993), and then describe the aspects of VET that fit into that view of the world. VET may well contribute to an increase in the human capital of the Australian population, but this is not the focus of my inquiry. I take a less linear style of theorisation by asking how does this system of training come about and how does it work? Using a Foucauldian approach with its focus upon the quotidian operations and what others might bypass as irrelevant detail and minutiae (Law 2002, 147-150), this analysis describes how VET has come into being, how it operates and how it serves to produce the future, all the while without attempting to pigeonhole VET into a grand scheme. What emerges is an account of untidy and frequently contested policy developments and implementation. I focus upon differing conceptions of human beings – as citizens, workers, consumers or holders of qualifications – that have been mobilised at certain times and how such conceptions were made problematic. Foucault’s writings serve to guide this investigation of how the present has come together and how it might be altered (Miller & Rose 2008, 5-7) by exposing the relationships between the need to manage a population through training, the ways of knowing the individual and how these can change over time.

Alternate theoretical viewpoints

I did not begin with Foucault. The search for a theoretical foundation commenced with a study of organisational behaviour (Greenhalgh et al. 2005; Senge 1992; Stacey 1996). This was very comfortable territory for me as it re-traced previous post-graduate study in public sector management and personal experience as a senior bureaucrat and leader in education and training. The career trajectories of individual public servants (higher up or out of the bureaucracy), endless bouts of organisational restructuring and inter-departmental battles for increased funding and staffing dominated the material gathered by this approach. I had to cast my theoretical net more widely in order to pursue my interest in the how.
Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, philosopher and pioneer of the application of social, cultural and symbolic capitals to analyse society, offers a detailed and empirically-based view as to the causes and reasons for why people are who they are. The maintenance of the class system described in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Bourdieu 1979) explicitly delineates the hierarchical boundaries within which an individual, from an early age, will acquire attitudes and skills associated with their social class. Consequently, one's search for employment preferences (and related educational opportunities) is generally limited to the known and familiar. The volume of capital – “understood as the set of actually useable resources and powers, economic capital, cultural capital and also social capital” – determines class boundaries (Bourdieu 1979, 114).

Bourdieu believes class distinctions are maintained and reinforced by the formal education and training systems used in a given society (Grenfell 2007, 87). These systems ‘cheat’ those who attempt to move up the social ladder through a process of qualification inflation. The promise of an improved lifestyle associated with increased levels of formal qualifications never eventuates. Those in the upper classes will find and require ever-higher levels of qualifications, thus preserving relative differences. The mere provision of access to training does not change the overall relationships in society or the boundary maintenance operating between social strata (Bourdieu 1979, 133-154).

While constantly mindful of Bourdieu’s theoretical contribution, its overly deterministic nature (Noble & Watkins 2003, 524) leaves open the question of how it has come to be that VET is so convoluted and inclusive (Skills Australia 2011, 34), particularly if the outcome is predetermined by social class. If the point of the system is to maintain a differentiated society, how did VET come to be so complex?
Traditional Marxist and related socialist perspectives likewise did not guide me to a deeper understanding of VET even though they provide the longest and most frequently deployed analytic perspective on Australian training (Kell 1994; Marginson 1993b). The emphasis upon a constant struggle between capital and labour offered little explanatory capacity for the advanced market democracies like Australia where virtually all workers ‘own’ a portion of the nation’s capital stock through being indirect investors in the share and property markets because of compulsory superannuation. The political Left has been overwhelmed by the rise of individualism and the market society (Harvey 2005, 36-38) and the two major political parties in Australia share a bipartisan rejection of Marxist policy positions in favour of ‘market solutions’ (Pusey 2003). In addition, classical Marxist analysis overvalues the battle for power as a commodity and misses more subtle activities of governments and people (Coffey 2003, 233). While there can be no doubt as to the significance and influence of Marxism in determining the economic course of entire nations (Heilbroner 1999, 136-169), its position as a grand theory of economic society runs counter to Foucault’s rejection of all-encompassing narratives. Driven by neo-classical economic concerns, the broadly bipartisan approach to Australian VET policy development that has existed since the end of World War Two does not lend itself easily to an old-style Marxist interpretation.

At the other end of the politico-economic spectrum lies neoliberalism. This group of political and economic practices is based upon the belief that human well-being is

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2 The generic term Left will be used throughout this story to indicate more Marxist/socialist leanings while Right will represent the liberal/neoliberal end of the contemporary Australian political spectrum. While I acknowledge the reductionist impact of these labels, they represent a dualism that has currency for VET actors and the VET narrative.

3 This phrase borrows from Nikolas Rose’s (1996a) description of ‘advanced liberal democracies’. It is argued that my adaptation more accurately describes the current Australian style of representative democracy operating in a market-driven economy.

4 Superannuation is an arrangement that provides for an income stream for those who retire from the workforce at a specified age. Both employers and employees are required to set money aside in superannuation investment schemes in order to reduce the numbers of recipients of government-funded old age pensions. These funds are invested in the stock market and, often, in the direct ownership of buildings and other large infrastructure.
best achieved within a framework of strong private property rights, uninhibited capitalist markets and free trade supporting individual entrepreneurial possibilities (Harvey 2005, 2). Government’s role is to establish and preserve this framework. Some commentators believe that the neoliberal emphasis upon individual responsibility and independence has come to dominate political and economic considerations on a global scale (Harvey 2005, 1-2; Heilbroner 1999, 41; Ong 2007). It might even be considered to be a “travelling idea” (Bacchi 2009, 240), one whose intrusion into matters educational has been described as “economics imperialism” (Allais 2010, 10). Neoliberalism is also seen as having a “promiscuous capacity” to move into non-economic fields and even surfaces in Communist China (Ong 2007, 7).

One of Australia’s most influential educators, Headley Beare (2010, 11-16), believes that ‘economic rationality’ and its focus upon choice, competition and markets was attractive to ‘governments of whatever persuasion’ and dominated education and training policy developments through the 1980s and 1990s. For Beare, economic rationality ‘imposed useful disciplines’ on the education sector while, paradoxically, giving rise to “large scale national intervention” by governments into education in the pursuit of a supposed free market (Beare 2010, 13). But for my purposes, if neoliberalism has the ability to both travel and alter its form in a variety of situations, everything to do with VET is already explained. Given the contested nature and complexity of VET policy, this level of certainty needs to be questioned.

The benign Australian version of neoliberalism, tempered by the lingering impacts of a welfare state, has been designated ‘economic rationalism’ (Pusey 1991). Critics believe that economic rationalists dominate pivotal roles in government agencies, particularly treasury and finance, and operate against the interests of social equity (Blewett 1982; Pusey 1991, 2003). The reliance upon individual choice and responsibility and the retreat of government from direct service delivery are central
features of economic rationalism. Those with a socialist bent argue strongly against the introduction of markets and competition into education and training, because they believe social equity is only capable of being addressed by governments in order to moderate the worst excesses of market exploitation (Kell 1994; Kenway 2006; Marginson 1993b, 1997b).

While many terms associated with economic rationalism have been observed in the discourse of VET policy and programs (Dean & Hindess 1998; Marginson 1993b; Ryan 2002), critics virtually always position neoliberalism as some sort of vague, often unrealised, threat to the public provision of training. Amalgamated, their concerns about the introduction of individual choice, market-based mechanisms and performance indicators have seemingly been rolled into another grand theory which one could reject on Foucauldian principles, as will become evident shortly.

However, neoliberalism is too slippery and restless to allow for such a purely theoretical dismissal. The decision not to use an analytic critique of neoliberalism is based upon a more straightforward proposition – when it comes to vocational education and training, Australia has not fully embraced neoliberalism in lieu of its penchant for governmental action (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982).

The electoral disaster that befell Opposition Leader John Hewson in the ‘un-losable’ 1993 Federal election resulted from the closest thing to a neoliberal agenda that was ever put to the Australian voting public (Kelly 2011, 75). Although the ruling Labor Party and Prime Minister Paul Keating were deeply unpopular, neoliberalism as a basis for government action was even less well-liked. Political commentator Paul Kelly (2011, 75) asserts that electoral rejection of the Coalition parties’ policies to introduce a broad far Right social and economic agenda into the country permanently removed untempered neoliberalism from serious political relevance for future governments. Australians had voted in favour of a traditional reliance upon the capacity of governments to be active in many areas of peoples’ lives. While
neoliberal thinking currently dictates many economic considerations globally, it is only one way of framing government activity (Scott 1998, location 2207). Australia’s historically unique positioning of government as problem solver has not fully embraced a more radical neoliberal stance, such as that undertaken by Prime Minister Thatcher in the United Kingdom or President Reagan in the United States in the 1980s (Hill & Hupe 2002, 110-112), thus limiting its explanatory possibilities. This is especially true for the Northern Territory, a case study site demonstrating a pristine environment for the introduction of VET and an illustration of governments’ will to train the population. The Australian propensity for active government will be further explored in Chapter Five.

This does not mean that neoliberal ideas have had an insignificant impact upon Australian governments and the way they function but, on its own, neoliberalism does not dominate. When undertaking a study of government actions, it is too easy to make a permanent, uncritical link between contemporary government rationalities and the ubiquitous citing of neoliberalism (Rose, O’Malley & Valverde 2006, 95). The advantages of a Foucauldian approach that does not rely upon fixed and immutable principles became fully apparent towards the end of my research. Future focus, the national workforce development plan, contains major shifts in policy positions on the part of the Commonwealth Government department with responsibility for skills development (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013). Having taken several years to construct a discourse that envisaged a free market in VET and the central role to be played by individual students as consumers of training exercising unlimited choice, the agency abruptly did away with the individual consumer, reverting to centralised planning and resource allocation. These changes and their implications are addressed in the final chapter.

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5 When ‘location’ is used in a reference citation, it refers to a position in an electronic version of the book that does not have page numbers.
Previous VET theoretical policy research

Very few Australian researchers specifically address VET matters from a theoretically-informed position:

. . . given the paucity of informed conceptualisation, there is an urgent need to provide for frameworks, justifications that elaborate vocational education’s purposes and elevate its standing as a vibrant and important sector of education (Billett 2011, viii).

A considered and useful theoretical criticism of specific reforms to VET, including the introduction of competency-based training (CBT), and the role of training in providing generic skills has been undertaken (Stevenson 1992, 1994, 2007). Stevenson charges the reductionist assumptions supporting the competency-based systems of assessment with ignoring educational theories of learning – particularly styles of adult learning and the social and personal benefits that accrue from a broader education as opposed to narrow technical skill attainment. Yet, while it is critical of policy outcomes and VET’s official pedagogy, this work is not a comprehensive overview of governments’ use of contemporary VET policy.

Much of the theoretically explicit consideration of VET’s place in government policy formation has made a dualistic distinction between viewing training as educational in nature (Schofield 1994; Wheelahan 2008) as opposed to it being one of many economic considerations (Productivity Commission 2012a; Skills Australia 2009). This well-rehearsed, set piece argument pitting education against economics ignores other potential uses and roles that are played by VET and that are brought to light by a Foucauldian perspective. By its very name, VET is an educational

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6 Competency-based training (CBT) and assessment is recognition of the performance demonstrated in an explicit set of activities rather than a more traditional time-served approach to apprenticeship training. CBT can possibly reduce the amount of time spent in training and take into account previous experiences and capabilities that have been demonstrated in both workplaces and training institutions. The reporting of CBT is dualistic – competent or not competent.
activity because it involves the transfer of information and skills; learning takes place. But this knowledge has been assigned a restricted role by many government officials who have limited it to the provision of technical skills required for the economic development of the country in a globalised economy. The pitting of educationalists against economists is a manifestation of a battle over VET policy and the substantial (although shrinking) public financial resources that are dedicated to training. As will be demonstrated repeatedly in this analysis, rival camps share a common rhetoric for very different reasons. The shared narrative used by the disparate proponents of VET is built upon an expressed belief that the sector is not valued as highly as school or higher education, has unique characteristics and is comparatively underfunded. I will return this ‘grand narrative of VET’ in Chapter Six.

As noted, several writers have deployed quasi-socialist or class-based theoretical positions in developing their commentary (Kell 1994; Marginson 1993a, 1993b, 1995). These analyses provide a useful level of detail about historical events concerning VET; yet the reliance upon social class to explain the observed behaviour of governments is inadequate for this examination of how VET has been created, its use in the surveillance of the population and its deployment both as a practice of government and the individual. I argue that these attributes have been masked by the dualism of education or economics within the VET discourse.

In his extensive description of the interactions of the State and Federal governments and the role played by individual government ministers and senior bureaucrats, Ryan (2002) also provides a well-documented account of the political and administrative history of VET. However, the theoretical identification of individuals and a singular focus upon the role played by the Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training, John Dawkins, as a policy entrepreneur (Ryan 2002, 39), limits our understanding of how governments operate. Admittedly, the political figure of John Dawkins will feature prominently throughout this narrative.
Those interviewed attested to his clarity of thought, single-mindedness of purpose and extraordinary grasp of government machinery and policy development. Dawkins is variously blamed or credited with creating the current unified university sector (achieved through the amalgamation of Colleges of Advanced Education and Universities in the 1980s) and the implementation of VET’s National Training Reform Agenda. Yet concentrating upon the high profile contributions of ‘great people’ and their actions diverts attention from the common mundane operations of government and the power relationships with the population. As I will show, the entrepreneurial role of one great person at a particular point in time does not illuminate the enduring, consistent and bipartisan attitude to training in Australia or how it has remained impossible to allocate sole accountability for training policy and implementation to either the State or Federal level of government (Tannock 1976).

Many politicians and their ideas have come and gone. The Federal Government (Parliament of Australia 2012) has had 18 different Cabinet Ministers with responsibility for training since the 1974 Kangan Report7 while the Northern Territory Government has had 23 such ministers (Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory 2012).8 Both governments have used multiple administrative and bureaucratic structures to deal with VET in this time period but a linear, chronological recounting of these structures does not address the deeper considerations of how governments continue to operate in the face of multiple changes of both personnel and institutional configurations. For a more distinctive and refined understanding, we turn to a one-off social theorist and philosopher.

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7 The Kangan Report (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974) is considered to be the foundation document for a national training system and was produced as the result of the State and Federal governments agreeing to a review of the funding of training in response to concerns about economic and social development being limited by a lack of appropriate technical skills on the part of the Australian workforce (Goozee 2001, 24-26). Commonwealth funds were given to the State training systems to improve facilities, teaching methods and inclusion of more students when many of the recommendations were adopted by the Commonwealth Government in 1974.

8 In early 2013, due to leadership instability, both the Commonwealth and NT Governments have appointed several new training ministers resulting in 20 and 26 respectively.
Michel Foucault

Foucault came to prominence in the second half of the twentieth century through his questioning of the existing social order beyond observations of racial, social and class-based inequalities. His concept of power/knowledge explains a complex web of relationships that exist between people, materials and institutions. Power is exercised in the form of an endless strategic game dependent upon knowledge of these relationships. Foucault rejected an economic view of power conceived of as a fixed commodity that could be hoarded, traded or removed from others. He sees power/knowledge as a force that can be both creative and productive while simultaneously attracting resistance (Oksala 2007, 67-68).

While Foucault was not alone in interrogating the current state of analysis, he did provide a unique and original set of tools with which to accomplish the task. His approach is characterised by its outright refusal to provide an overarching principle or dogma: “I would not want what I may have said or written to be seen as laying any claims to totality” (Foucault 1991, 73). His refusal to accept universal truth was based upon the belief that “philosophy was not a body of knowledge that accumulated, it was rather a critical practise that relentlessly questioned dogmatic beliefs and intolerable practices in contemporary society” (Oksala 2007, 5). He did not spare his personal corpus of work in this in-principle rejection. Furthermore, he emphasised that even the most strongly and dearly held beliefs about the present were socially constructed from highly contingent processes that involved historical accident, coincidence, political interference and luck (Foucault 2008, 3).

Genealogy

Foucault’s critiques of society are often described as presenting ‘a history of the present’ by asking ‘how did we get here?’ (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982, 118; Oksala 2007, 3). This approach involves identifying the characteristics of a political
technology that exists today, in my case the National Training System, and tracing its evolution and development over time. Because of his interest in the role of power in societal discourse, and his techniques for understanding history outside cause-effect notions, Foucault embraced the Nietzschean term ‘genealogy’ from 1977 onwards (Sheridan 1980, 116). The work of a genealogist involves “paying attention to that which conditions, limits and institutionalises discursive formations” while concentrating “on the relations of power, knowledge and the body in modern society” (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982, 104-5). This narrative pays careful attention to the tactics used by a variety of actors to direct the discourse of VET in their pursuit of using knowledge to structure relationships in society.

In order to understand power, not as a possession but as something only ever exercised as a strategy that is irrevocably linked to knowledge, one needs to decipher “the dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques and functionings” that exist inside a network of relationships that are in constant tension (Foucault 1979, 26). Genealogical studies accept knowledge as neither true nor false. Knowledge practices are better described as legitimate or illegitimate for a particular set of power relationships (Sheridan 1980, 220). Foucault’s tools can be used to understand different forms of power/knowledge instead of “creating a new schema or validating one that already exists” (Foucault 1991, 85).

A Foucauldian genealogy is best applied when looking for contingencies instead of causes and by being as sceptical as possible in regard to all political arguments (Kendall & Wickham 1999, 5). A genealogical approach does not lead to a historical accounting, but towards an explanation of the ways a modern regime of power regulates the behaviour of others (Rose 1996b, 11-12). This is not the outcome of a

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9 VET is formally known as the Australian National Training System (Skills Australia 2009, 2) and this phrase will be used interchangeably with ‘the VET system’ throughout this analysis reflecting contemporary usage. Technically, vocational education and training is delivered through the National Training System.
gradual enlightenment guided by science through which humans come to recognise their true nature, one form of grand narrative, but is the product of highly contingent and less refined practices. The genealogy presented here describes how certain aspects of human beings can be rendered problematic; therefore, requiring government intervention through the use of VET.

Foucault’s unique conceptualisation of power/knowledge provides a set of tools to expose and describe two distinctive types of power. The first is a disciplinary power used to ‘make’ individuals. It is not a celebratory power, but a modest, suspicious formation, characterised by “humble modalities, minor procedures, as compared with the majestic rituals of sovereignty or the great apparatuses of the state” (Foucault 1979, 170). The success of disciplinary power/knowledge arises from its simplicity – hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and examination. Governments gather knowledge about the population by collecting data from simple sources such as VET enrolment forms and then amassing it in a central place. As will be discussed shortly, numerical data can be treated in ways that give rise to precise versions of what it means to be ‘normal’, leading to observations of the population that can be used to classify, reward or punish individuals according to their behaviour. The second style of power described by Foucault moves beyond discipline to self-regulation in a ‘civil society’ where one conducts oneself in a “permanent matrix of political power” (Foucault 2008, 303). The power/knowledge relationships are conducted in ‘societies of control’ where one is never finished with anything and the processes of ‘lifelong learning’, ‘continual retraining’ and ‘ceaseless consumption’ replace disciplinary institutions (Miller & Rose 2008, 102).

As proposed by Foucault (Kritzman 1990, 155), the ability to criticise the actions of government through the use of genealogical methodologies opens different possibilities for understanding:
A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest.

**Governmentality or Foucault and the Australian VET sector**

A famous Foucauldian maxim is that government is the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Burchell, Gordon & Miller 1991, 48). In determining how to manage the behaviour of the citizenry, contemporary nations have embraced ‘governmentality’ which consists of three components (Foucault 2007b, 387-391). The first is the assemblage formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations and tactics allowing for power to be exercised. The target of this power is the population, with political economy as its predominant form of knowledge and apparatuses of security as its technical instrument.\(^{10}\) Secondly, the pre-eminence of ‘government’ over all other forms of power has been accompanied by the development of peculiar government machinery and a series of knowledges. Finally, the state of justice of the Middle Ages, which focused upon a virtuous resolution of disputes between citizens based upon highly localised feudal customary law, has transformed into the administrative state and gradually become governmentalised (Foucault 2007b, 108-9).

The emergence of ‘reasons of state’ in sixteenth century Europe moved the ‘conduct of conduct’ outside the boundaries of religious affiliation (Foucault 2007b, 191-216). Over time, the desire for prosperity and happiness became a link between the government and its citizens. The state could only achieve increased wealth and power through the strength and productivity of its population. Human capital theory (Becker 1993) would surface in the field of economics four centuries later to offer

\(^{10}\) Political economy is the theory and study of how political units are managed taking into account both social welfare and economic factors drawing upon methods from economics, political science and sociology (*Miriam-Webster Dictionary* 2012).
empirical support for this position. The modern art of government conjoins the lives and thoughts of individuals to the economic prosperity of the state (Burchell, Gordon & Miller 1991, 41-42). As government continued to colonise the state, a crucial nexus linked the “principles of political action and those of personal conduct” (Burchell, Gordon & Miller 1991, 12).

In particular, work and the workplace have been singled out as fundamental sites for developing and managing individual and group identities toward government ends. The calculating technologies of budgets, audits, standards and performance indicators use delimited measures of work productivity to link personal economic life to the national economy. Prosecuting such technologies forms a central activity of government (Rose, O'Malley & Valverde 2006). Former Australian Labor Government policy analyst and bureaucrat, Meredith Edwards, affirms the dominance of economic management as the priority of government when she recounts:

> Soon after joining the bureaucracy from academia, I became aware that more equity could not easily (if at all) be achieved unless the social policy agenda was fitted into the broader and more prominent economic agenda of the time (Edwards, Howard & Miller 2001, ix).

Foucault’s observation of a gradual governmentatisation of the state links the prosperity and security of the state to economically lucid, choice-making individuals. This linkage forms a paradoxical characteristic of advanced market democracies:

> This is simultaneously about individualising and totalising: that is, about finding answers to the question of what is in it for an individual and for a society or population of individuals, to be governed or governable (Burchell, Gordon & Miller 1991, 36).
Governmentalisation provided a rationale for those who administer the lives of others to develop plans and practices in a whole range of economic, ethical, spiritual and medical fields, based upon conceptions of what is good, healthy, efficient and normal (Rose & Miller 2010, 273). Expert knowledge about the population is vitally important to governments, as is the related need for expertise in the management of citizens’ behaviour. The government agencies inhabited by these administrative experts exist in order to convert events and phenomena into calculable data and information. An examination focused solely on these bureaucratic structures, often the target of government ‘reform’, does not fully portray the actions of government on its own. Exposing and analysing the assemblage of everyday “programmes, calculations, techniques, apparatuses, documents and procedures which embody and give effect to governmental ambitions” used in the machinery of government more richly describes the political rationalities in use (Rose & Miller 2010, 273).

These routines of government develop and refine linguistic practices that can be used to both create problems and also incorporate preferred solutions. The resultant “political rationalities are morally coloured, grounded upon knowledge and made thinkable through language” (Rose & Miller 2010, 277). Foucault felt that “we should attempt to understand the meaning, value and functioning of the discourses themselves and not ask what goes on in the head of those who wrote them” (Oksala 2007, 39). The development and use of a specialist VET vernacular, both dominating and symbolising this sector, will arise numerous times in this study. Suffice it to say that the need for a 130 page VET glossary of over 700 technical terms (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011g) indicates the importance of language in the creation of VET and for expressing its rationalities.
Making up of people

One further aspect of Foucault's idiosyncratic view of power/knowledge ascribes it the capacity to be productive (Foucault 1979; Oksala 2007, 70-71). From the 17th century conceptualisation of probability, accompanied by an improved capacity to count and record aspects of the population, the use of statistics has come to play a pivotal role in advanced market democracies (Hacking 1990, 1991).

The initial use of statistics by the state arose with the recognition of numerical regularities in describing deviancy: suicide, madness, vagrancy and disease (Foucault 2007b, 10). Because of the supposedly dispassionate nature of statistical information and the seldom-questioned need to monitor and reign in abnormality, governments have uncritically accepted “the notion that one can control – and improve – a deviant subpopulation by enumeration and classification” (Hacking 1990, 3). In the Foucauldian sense, this can be portrayed as a productive process – the ‘making up of people’ – through the application of statistical knowledge (Hacking 2006b).

VET is deeply implicated in the application of statistical reasoning to the population. The forthcoming Unique Student Identifier (USI) will serve to make the existing Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard (AVETMISS) more comprehensive by including data from private training providers. In fact, the USI provides the capacity to record data about each and every individual citizen over the age of 15 years. This system of enumeration is a technique that can achieve the conflicted goal of ‘individualisation yet totalisation’

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11 The USI will give each student who enrolls in a nationally accredited unit of VET study commencing from January 2014 an individual code that will remain with them for the rest of their life (Council of Australian Governments 2012). AVETMISS is a nationally agreed set of data fields collected from individuals and training providers. With the introduction of the USI, most training providers (private providers were previously exempt from reporting) will have to provide data to NCVER at AVETMISS standard. Both the USI and AVETMISS will be explained in more detail and feature regularly throughout the narrative.
required by governments to manage economic society and the often problematic populations that inhabit it.

VET has its own centralised organisation dedicated to the collection and calculation of statistics. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) provides the statistical analysis required to name groups deemed to have deficiencies that can be remedied by training. The USI will join AVETMISS and the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) in NCVER's feeding of governments' insatiable appetite for supposedly unproblematic knowledge in the form of statistics (Zoellner 2013b, 4).

One simple implication of the application of statistical (and consequently reductionist) styles of thinking comes from the development of measures to monitor the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) reforms aimed at increasing social inclusion. Adult literacy and participation in the labour market, both relatively easily quantified descriptors, will determine the amount of social inclusion in Australia (Productivity Commission 2012a, 18). Reducing the complex set of phenomena inferred by the notion of social inclusion to just two features that are most often reported as deficiencies (illiteracy and unemployment), allows for portions of the population to be identified and subjected to remediation because they are statistically different from an expected population standard. These people are not 'normal' and consequently require corrective intervention by governments as "part of the social hygiene of the consensus society" (Simons & Masschelein 2010, 598 emphasis in original).

Simultaneously, at least three distinct subpopulations are created in this process of defining the measures of inclusion – those who are socially excluded, the illiterate

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12 The heads of the State, Territory and Federal governments comprise the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). This group meets several times a year in very carefully stage-managed events to adopt or reject national policies in the whole gamut of government activities. In more recent times, these decisions are formalised in national partnerships and agreements.
and the unemployed. Governments must obtain knowledge about these now problematic groups in order to make them socially included. Through the processes of measurement and calculation, the members of these new groups can be singled out for training. They are not normal, having been defined and quantified by simplistic deficiencies, therefore, making them individually visible to the state as a remedial problem. In response, they will be made subject to the governmental technology of training that exposes them to hierarchical observation in order to determine their levels of inclusion. Likewise, the normalising judgement and language used by government agencies (and society in general) combined with ongoing examination of their literacy skills and employment status will determine if they are behaving in a manner deemed consistent with Australian citizenship.

**Normality**

Statistics and their close relative, probability, as seemingly neutral arbiters of normality in society, play an ever-increasing role in the ‘conduct of conduct’. The enumeration of people and their habits leads to ‘statistical society’, where social order is understood through the laws of probability carrying with it connotations of normalcy and deviations from the norm (Hunter 1996, 154). By the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of normal people had arisen, allowing for the regulation of social and personal behaviours built upon probabilities. Hacking proposes that “People are normal if they conform to the central tendency of such laws, while those at the extremes are pathological” (1990, 2). Over time, the ‘normal condition’ became a method to describe, in a supposedly objective manner, the nature of human beings, their social and economic affairs and the standard individuals should strive to attain, as determined by various calculations of social data and monitoring of behaviour (Rose 1999a, 131, 207).
“The very notion of normality has emerged out of a concern with the types of conduct, thought, expression deemed troublesome or dangerous” (Rose 1996a, 26). But normality can be described in diametrically opposed ways (Hacking 1990, 168). On the one hand, normal can be envisaged as a large middle consisting of the mediocre accompanied by excellence at one extreme end and inadequacy at the opposite end of Galton’s bell-shaped curve. This approach is most familiar in the grading systems used in schools, on scales such as A to E, or in the tertiary admission rankings used to grant access to university studies. On the other hand, normal can be the desired state occupied by the ‘moral majority’ with the abnormal, pathological minority consisting of those who deviate from the mean in either direction. The rationale for competency-based training – with its grading dualism of competent (normal) or incompetent (abnormal) – derives from the latter perspective.

The use of CBT in VET was contested from its introduction and remains hotly debated two decades after its implementation (Harris et al. 1995; Stevenson 1994), partly because the dualistic grading scheme does not facilitate the production of a normal curve of the VET population. Government schemes such as CBT also serve to verify social and economic inequality by “noticing who or what is unequal in current society where order is based, for instance, on qualifications or competencies” (Simons & Masschelein 2010, 596). This verification produces the exact opposite of democracy and equality.

The capacity of the individual to make rational choices in a free market makes the autonomous and responsible citizen normal, while those who either cannot, or will not, make rational choices are deemed abnormal. Their problematic behaviour demands government intervention because “The right and the good are to be found at the right hand end of the Normal Curve of talent or virtue” (Hacking 1990, 178). Being able to exercise free choice makes the individual personally liable for their position along life’s great bell curve.
In order for governments to most effectively monitor and manage the population, data must be collected about virtually every resident. This delivers an aggregate that gives form to the concept of the population – an act of totalisation. The use of the AVETMISS is one such mechanism because it is literally designed to provide statistical information that can be used to manage the VET system. However, abnormal, and therefore problematic, people must be made visible for government action – an act of individualisation that is enhanced by mechanisms such as the Unique Student Identifier and the registration of training providers.\footnote{In order to dispense formal, nationally recognised qualifications that vouch for the quality of training undertaken, each issuing body must be registered in their local State or Territory and subject to regular audits. These training providers are called registered training organisations (RTOs).} This simultaneous totalisation and individualisation, based upon normality and the creation of groups, determine the methods that are used to make the nation governable (cf Burchell, Gordon & Miller 1991).

However, the role of government and its procedures to collect information and monitor the training system has not always been automatically accepted. In an extraordinary outburst of candour, the Executive Officer of the NT Master Builders Association, Merv Elliott, wrote a letter headed ‘Bureaucratic Empire Building’ dated 25 July 1990, to the Northern Territory Chief Minister regarding proposals to have training organisations register with the government: “I seek your immediate intervention to put a stop to the exercise in stupidity, as there is no way that the private sector will accept this exercise as a valid activity of government” (Northern Territory Archives Service 1984-1991b).

**Two questions and two parts of this narrative**

The first half of the narrative explores the question of how the National Training System came about while the final five chapters address how VET mediates the relationships between the population and those who have been chosen to govern. I
argue that VET is a practice of governments that manages the population’s behaviour while providing a mechanism to supply public funds to meet the skills needs of private enterprise. In fact, there will never be a free market in training as governments of all persuasions find VET to be too useful to be left to the vagaries of free-wheeling capitalists and unpredictable consumers. Chapter Two describes the implications of thinking about and discussing VET from the dual perspective of absence: absence as a deficit and VET’s unavailability to deeper theoretical examination. Chapter Three describes the methodologies that support this genealogy drawing upon my personal experience of the sector, interviews with important participants in VET policy formation and the vast documentary record held in various libraries, government archives and the National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

Having dealt with these theoretical perspectives and methodological considerations, attention in Chapters Four, Five and Six turns to how governments do their work. Because Australia’s national system of training requires the cooperative effort of State-level governments and the Federal Government, Chapter Seven uses the Northern Territory of Australia as a case study of how VET policy has been ‘done’. To investigate the ‘how has it come about’ query, Chapters Eight and Nine examine the tactics and techniques that are used in the VET system and the attractiveness of VET as a ubiquitous policy and program option for governments of all persuasions.

The remaining five chapters will examine aspects of how VET is used in social power/knowledge relationships and was able to move from a ‘stupid exercise’ in the early days of the National Training System to a highly valued constellation of sub-logics that are constantly being renewed through processes of reform and debate. Here scrutiny turns to the unquestioned and repeated call for greater transparency in the VET system, exploring its implications and effects. Two further forms of absence, invisibility and the public secret are covered in Chapters 11 and 12. The
penultimate chapter draws this analysis together to propose that vocational education and training has been used to produce a unique Australian version of the citizen-worker-consumer. The final chapter demonstrates Foucauldian fortuity and happenstance with the policy transmogrification of the very recently revealed individual consumer of VET.

One does not apply Foucault’s theories to a phenomenon like VET. It is more accurate to use a phrase such as ‘inspired by Foucauldian thinking’. To use Foucault’s genealogical approach gives permission to question the seemingly innocuous techniques and tactics embedded in the technologies and practices used to ‘conduct the conduct’ of the Australian population.

Very early in the development of this genealogy it became clear that the expression of ideas in VET and the assumptions upon which they were built were either describing or alluding to what was missing. This occurred at the national level with reference to skills shortages, at the State level with the lack of training facilities or programs and at the individual and group level with multiple examples that include unemployment, low levels of technical skills and illiteracy. The discourses were framed in terms of absence. Absence thus provides the starting point to determine ‘how did this VET system come into being’.
Chapter Two
Absence
A novel concept

Following the Foucauldian injunction to pay close attention to ordinary detail, the real definition of VET came as a shock. Having ‘done’ VET for decades, it was inconceivable that I did not already know what it was. The discovery that VET is officially defined by what it is not – that is, it is not a school, a university or a college of advanced education (Education Advisory Group 1978, 6) – provided an unusual perspective from which the National Training System and, consequently, the work of governments could be investigated. By focusing upon what is absent and the deployment of vacancy and vacuity, I began to explore VET policy from hitherto uncommon perspectives.

In recognition of the difficulties of gaining participatory access to the ‘worlds of policy elites’, knowledge about the multiple and conflicting perspectives inherent in policy-making often have to be gained through other, less traditional, more genealogical means. “Government reports, speeches, official documents, minutes of meetings and newspaper reports” can serve as important sources of data to be analysed (Shore 2011, 170-173). Following this line of inquiry, I made numerous long trips to Darwin to explore the holdings of the Northern Territory Library, located in the bowels of Parliament House.

As part of State Square, Parliament House is an imposing white edifice overlooking Darwin Harbour, sitting atop the site where Japanese bombs destroyed the Post Office and killed a number of postal workers in February 1942. This controversial building serves many purposes, but most prominently as a symbol of representative democracy in the NT and as a reminder of this still frontier territory’s aspirations to...
statehood. Each time I passed through the airport-style security check point in order to study VET policy, there was a physical reminder that VET is clearly an activity of governments. This building, full of politicians, advisors, public servants and security guards, is where the policy actions of government are given legitimacy (Shore 2011, 171). Parliament House and State Square also serve as an expensive reminder of the ultimate democratic absence – a guaranteed right to vote on the same terms as the residents of the Australian States. Even though NT residents have progressively regained voting rights in NT and national elections, the terms of self-government can be repealed at any time by the Federal Government and any legislation passed by the NT Parliament can be ruled invalid by the Commonwealth. Because the NT is not constitutionally recognised as a State, Territorians have a different political status when compared to most Australian citizens. Chapter Seven will return to the flexibility that has characterised NT VET policy arising from this conditional construction of citizenship.

On the occasions the NT Parliament was in session, I would observe the sittings from the public gallery. The long tiered, leather-bound visitor benches look down onto the main floor from above and remain hermetically separated from the chamber by huge glass partitions. On most occasions, I sat alone in the gallery and would receive a cursory nod or hand wave from the various members, virtually all of whom I know personally. This acknowledgement invariably took place when the Parliamentarian looked up from the computer screen that occupied his or her complete attention while they studiously ignored the speeches being delivered by their parliamentary colleagues.

14 The Australian Constitution makes a set of clear distinctions between the relatively few responsibilities that were originally granted to the Commonwealth and the majority reserved for the six States. When the Commonwealth took over the NT from South Australia in 1911 (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1974), NT residents lost control of State-level functions. Many of these, including education and training, have been progressively returned to the NT under the provisions of so-called self-government from 1978. The constantly rehashed NT Government desire to become Australia’s seventh State evokes strong debate both in the NT and at the national level and is unlikely to be achieved in the foreseeable future, after being rejected in a NT referendum in 1998.
From my vantage point in the symbolically placed open gallery – the public looks down upon the members while they must look up to the public – I observed most members randomly roaming in and out of the chamber, always politely bowing to the Speaker upon entry and exit. Did their exits imply an urgent matter of state? Did they have to use the toilet? Were they just bored or hungry or inspired with an idea requiring immediate action? Except for attending during the theatrics of question time, a ritual associated with well-practised one-line quips designed for media reporting, the assembly seldom had every member in attendance. This indifferent behaviour on the part of the elected representatives to their role in the formal policy process only added to my curiosity, given that the NT Government had made a very determined effort, in the face of strong opposition, to obtain State-type responsibility for training. The proximity, yet odd juxtaposition, of documentary policy artefacts which had been approved by the politicians as part of the parliamentary process, made available in the library housed in this building, and real time displays of a distracted style of policy legitimation only raised more questions about how did we get this VET system?

The NT Library’s Northern Territory Collection is an eclectic mix of books, reports, government policy documents, original research, annual reports, NT and Commonwealth Hansards and a variety of other government publications. These are located on long rows of floor to ceiling shelving in Dewey Decimal order in the basement of Parliament House. One of my early lessons in VET’s manifestation through absence was that very little about vocational education and training is located in the ‘education section’ of the library. Those few materials filed under education were mostly produced by the major public training providers such as the former Northern Territory University or Batchelor College.

15 Hansard is the official record of the proceedings of Commonwealth and NT Parliaments.
VET policy documents were more commonly to be found in those sections dealing with economics, the public service or business and employment. As I came to appreciate, this was not the consequence of incompetent filing on the part of the librarians, but a faithful representation of the various groups who lay claim to VET policy ownership. Similarly, electronic searching of the NT Library holdings for VET, or its forerunner Technical and Further Education, gave very few returns. It was only due to my insider knowledge of the development and operation of VET that I was able to find hundreds of relevant documents. For example, the crucial policy decisions paving the way for NT participation in the National Training System were made by the Department of Labour and Administrative Services, whose documents were actually published by the Public Service Commissioner and catalogued accordingly. In the same manner, searching the NT Archives Service for ‘vocational education and training’ or ‘technical and further education’ effectively gave no findings. However, a search of the stored files of the Public Service Commissioner, as well as the business and employment agencies, yielded thousands of pages of VET-related material.

This interrogation of the documentary record of VET, confirmed by the interviews described in the next chapter, made it obvious that the National Training System could not be examined in isolation from the ways in which governments go about their generic business. Furthermore, while Australian governments have extracted themselves from the banking and airline businesses, for example, State administrations have stubbornly clung to the control of training (Northern Territory Government 1999, 23-26).

The prolonged gestation of a national training perspective

By the early 1970s, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the “confusion of institutional eccentricity” (Whitelock 1974, 269) represented by the chronically
disparate State training systems were producing neither the number of skilled workers nor the right skills for a national economy facing a global trading market driven by rapid advances in technologies. The States made the now customary case to the Federal Government that they did not have the resources to put into Technical and Further Education (TAFE) as their budgets had been stretched to meet the rapid growth in schools, colleges of advanced education and universities. They were under pressure due to both the post-war ‘baby boom’ and the Commonwealth Government’s massive immigration program feeding demand for post-school education (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, 205-217).

As the economic pressures built, the desire to train an appropriately skilled workforce caused the different levels of government to agree upon a review of the problems associated with the training sector. The ensuing TAFE in Australia: Report on Needs in Technical and Further Education in Australia (commonly known as the Kangan Report) provided the catalyst for the Commonwealth’s permanent entry into vocational training, with an initial $100 million allocation to the States for TAFE capital and recurrent expenditure in the 1974-1975 financial year (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974, xlv). The subsequent development of the National Training System has seen this initial allocation grow to a proposed $3 billion over the six year period announced in the 2011-2012 Federal Budget (Evans 2011a).

**Defined by absence**

Prior to the 1990s, virtually all formally recognised training was provided by State-owned and operated bureaucracies collectively known as TAFE (which also became

16 This report was produced by a committee with representatives from industry, TAFE and governments. It was chaired by Meyer Kangan, Australia’s foremost expert on personnel management as well as Australian and overseas labour market policies (Goozee 1994; Kangan 1964). Frequent reference will be made to this report as it is considered by many to be the foundation document leading to the development of the National Training System (Goozee 2001).
a colloquial acronym for training). However, with the entry of private registered training organisations (RTOs) into the quasi-market for training in the early 1990s, the phrase ‘vocational education and training’ embodied the entire training sector, with TAFE reserved for the public providers (Australian National Training Authority 1994c, 7-11). VET, however, retained the obviously utilitarian but distinctive definition which had initially identified TAFE. The 1977 Commonwealth Tertiary Education Act states:

*technical and further education* means education provided by way of a course of instruction or training that is or that is preparatory to, a course of a kind relevant to a trade, technical or other skilled occupation or that otherwise meets educational needs, not being –

(a) education provided at a university or at a prescribed Commonwealth institution

(b) education provided at a college of advanced education other than education provided by way of a course declared by the Commission, by resolution, not to be a course of advanced education

(c) primary or secondary education provided by way of a full time course in a school (Education Advisory Group 1978, 6 emphasis in original).

This defines VET by what it is not. It is not a school, a college of advanced education or a university. In other words, it is explained as an absence.

As long as the policy space was not occupied by a school, a college of advanced education or a university, VET could be anything. In the aftermath of the Kangan Report, adult education, mechanics institutes, university extension courses, TAFE and community education were progressively subsumed into VET. This absorption accelerated in the 1990s under the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Agreement (Australian National Training Authority 1996b).
bibliographic distribution of the documentary policy artefacts across such different fields as economic development, public management and labour market policy, in addition to education, can be partially explained by the rebadging of VET’s antecedents.

VET’s delineation by absence created a remarkably adaptable tool to be used in political, economic and, sometimes, education policy arenas. But even the official definition could not keep a powerful idea corralled. Although its generic predecessor, TAFE, had been defined as not being a school, proposals for VET to be incorporated into secondary school programs emerged with the new acronym (Carmichael 1992; Mayer 1992; Northern Territory Education Advisory Council 1992). Likewise, though it was not meant to be university-based either, a dual-sector higher education/VET organisation had existed in the Northern Territory since 1974 in the form of the Darwin Community College (Berzins & Loveday 1999).

Idiosyncratically Australian public policy

Before describing further implications of VET’s signification as absence, there are several unique features of Australian governments that serve to contextualise the creation of the National Training System. Social welfare services are a principal institution in the construction of the different styles of capitalism that developed in post-World War Two western liberal democracies (Esping-Andersen 1990, 19-31). In many of these countries, including Australia, public policy is dominated by an unwavering commitment to full employment as the mechanism to ensure adequate income security for the population. The labour movements in Australia and New Zealand, despite being powerful, never accepted the need for universal welfare programs so common in Europe. In the Antipodes, organised labour preferred selectively targeted, income-tested social benefits because they appear to be more distributive (Castles 2001, 4-5). This also reflects the strong bargaining position
enjoyed by the unions in economies with so-called 'permanent skills shortages' due to the full employment policies that were able to be maintained because the local markets were not ravaged during World War Two (with the exception of Darwin and several other northern Australian communities).\textsuperscript{17}

In describing the 'workers' welfare state' (Castles 1985, 2001), it has been argued the Australian unions believed that the requirement for social welfare could be equally, if not better, achieved through wage negotiations within a formal conciliation and arbitration mechanism. Therefore, the relative lack of generosity and universality of Australian social welfare payments (Castles 2001, 3; Esping-Andersen 1990, 68-77) was offset by a system of wages regulation ostensibly preventing waged poverty and delivering a reduced disparity between the highest and lowest incomes for male bread-winners. The non-discretionary means-testing for social welfare benefits excluded the well-off rather than focusing exclusively on the poor.

Even before federation in 1901, the British colonies in Australia demonstrated a broad political consensus that privileged paid work or self-employment. The political Right saw employment as a necessary precondition to economic participation as well as a means to reduce social welfare expenditure. The Left, as represented by the Australian Labor Party, accepted the proposition that citizens are personally accountable for determining their socio-economic position (Castles 1985, 99). It is the individual, rather than the community, that holds responsibility for poverty. The best sort of welfare is work, hence, the workers' welfare state.

This general agreement was demonstrated from the earliest days of nationhood. Following its limited introduction in 1907, the universal basic wage was substantially

\textsuperscript{17} The NT capital was bombed repeatedly in 1942-43 by the Japanese killing about 240 people and destroying many ships (http://www.ntlexhibit.nt.gov.au/exhibits/show/bod). The civilian population was evacuated and the city remained under military rule for the duration of the war.
in place by the early 1920s for men. In addition, the adoption and spread of widow's and invalid pensions from 1908 made Australia something of a social laboratory in the western economies – “in almost every sense, Australian welfare experience was contrary to most of Western behaviour” (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, 339). The bipartisan consent for Federal Government funding of social welfare benefits was reaffirmed and explicitly formalised in 1946 when the Australian Constitution was amended through the torturous national referendum process. In response to a ruling by the High Court calling into question the Australian Government’s ability to fund certain programs, this amendment removed any doubt by allowing the Australian Parliament:

| to make laws for the provision of maternity allowances, widow’s pensions, child endowment, unemployment, sickness and hospital benefits, medical and dental services, benefits to students and family allowances (Commonwealth of Australia 1946, 587). |

**Full employment**

Against this backdrop, we return to absence. Prime Minister Curtin delivered the 1945 *White Paper on Full Employment* (Coombs 1994) to propose a series of policies aimed at avoiding a post-war economic recession, as occurred after World War One. His paper reiterated the important economic and social role served by work. Employment was seen as a positive because it allowed for consumption and a general improvement in living standards. Full employment provides “a secure prospect unmarred by the fear of idleness and the dole” (Coombs 1994, 26). The interaction of constitutional expansionism into social welfare on the part of the Commonwealth and the centrality of work in allowing for economic consumption and protection from the malevolence of unemployment demanded a national approach to skills formation. Absence of consumption is bad for a growth economy, while the
absence of skills enabling employment-fuelled consumption can be remedied through training.

Curtin proposed to increase workers’ skills to “make good war-time arrears and deficiencies in production” through a wide-ranging training scheme for ex-service personnel as well as special national training plans aimed at industries demonstrating severe shortages of skilled labour (Coombs 1994, 53; Dymock & Billett 2010). Having recognised the constitutional and organisational limitations of the Commonwealth’s powers in vocational training by calling for better coordination of State training systems with national employment priorities, the 1945 White Paper on Full Employment’s mobilisation of absence (expressed as ‘war-time arrears and deficiencies’) provided one rationale for the Federal Government to become further involved in training. The co-operation exhibited between the States and Commonwealth for a national approach to training immediately following World War Two (Dymock & Billett 2010, 491) would only resurface some two decades later as an effect of the 1974 Kangan review.

**Absence as the rationality of VET**

The Kangan Report described the needs and priorities in Technical and Further Education, making extensive reference to what was missing by repeatedly identifying ‘omissions’, ‘deficiencies’, ‘inadequacies’, ‘closing the gap’ and ‘missing education’ as defining characteristics of both the Australian workforce and the training sector (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974). The Commonwealth’s contribution to rectifying these absences would be made through the supply of operational and capital funding to the State training systems. But with this provision of resources, the Federal Government predictably demanded an increased involvement in policy activity.
If the Kangan Report marks the birth of a national approach to training, the actions of the Commonwealth Government minister, John Dawkins, guided it through adolescence by unrelentingly driving a national VET policy agenda in the late 1980s and early 1990s. My research interviews and other sources show that Dawkins’s uninhibited drive and mastery of the policy process is widely acknowledged by training bureaucrats, academics and politicians from both the Left and Right. While they all do not agree on the motivations and directions taken by the Labor Government, the central role of Dawkins (as the representative of an economically reformist Labor Government) in delivering a national training system (Ryan 2002) is unambiguously accepted. In a Foucauldian sense, he was actively intervening in the complex web of power/knowledge relationships between the government and the population by being the purveyor of VET practices on a national scale. Dawkins is still very active in VET policy in his role as the chair of two influential national councils.18

Dawkins published several ministerial statements on training in the period 1983–89. These policy announcements reinforced VET’s total entanglement with more dominant employment and economic imperatives. VET would repair the deficiencies and plug the gaps in the economy, described through such terms as ‘boost the quality and quantity’, ‘lack of skills’, ‘social disadvantage’, ‘unemployment’, ‘equitable access’ and ‘skill shortage’ (Dawkins 1988a, 1988b, 1989a; Dawkins & Holding 1987).

The linkage of VET to the national economy by the deployment of the rationality of absence was, and remains, a bipartisan phenomenon. The election of the conservative Howard Coalition Government in 1996 did not substantially alter the previous Labor administration’s policy settings on training. The new government

retained the Australian National Training Authority whose functions included VET policy formulation, advice to the ANTA Ministerial Council\(^\text{19}\), implementation of national priorities, distribution of Australian Government capital and recurrent funding and national data generation. The purposes and objectives set out for the National Training System were aimed at addressing perceived deficiencies and included:

- increasing the competitiveness and productivity of Australian industry
- building a leadership role for industry
- increasing opportunities and employment outcomes for individuals
- encouraging the development of both a training culture and training market
- improving efficiency
- achieving the development of a skilled Australian community
- enhancing mobility in the training market and
- overcoming skill development and recognition problems for target groups

(Australian National Training Authority 1998b, 64-65).

ANTA used broad characteristics to describe the target groups identified as not participating appropriately in employment and the economy. They included those “people facing barriers to learning due to disability, age, gender, cultural difference, language, literacy, numeracy, cost, unemployment, imprisonment or isolation” (Mawer & Jackson 2006, 13). Having defined a wide range of absences, this assemblage of characteristics can be combined and re-combined to generate a vast variety of distinct groups of people made amenable to training as a solution to their perceived disadvantages or shortcomings (Zoellner 2012b, 87-88). The use of statistics and concepts of normality do the work of creating these problematic groups.

\(^{19}\) Comprising the State, Territory and Commonwealth ministers for training.
While VET’s adulthood was marked by the unilateral termination of the ANTA Agreement with the States and Territories by the Howard Federal Government in 2005, the prominence of framing workforce matters and training in terms of absence remains. Suggestions to deal with skill shortages, labour supply shortages, the disadvantaged, to keep Australia from losing further ground and falling behind and lack of participation in regional areas are all to be found in the recommendations of the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley et al. 2008).

The idea that training fixes things by filling voids, closing gaps and addressing absences is at the core of the way Australian governments conceptualise and promulgate VET. This absence-based thinking has a strong and unbroken link from the end of World War Two to the present. In addition, these notions and perceptions are aligned with a particular view about how society should operate.

**Active society**

Even though the method and rationale for the Commonwealth Government’s incursion into VET was idiosyncratically home grown, the political momentum to develop a national training system was a fully-imported model. In 1987, the then Federal Trade Minister, the very same John Dawkins, released a report on the Australian Council of Trade Unions Mission’s visit to western Europe to examine how several nations were restructuring their market-driven economies in response to global events. The mission was made up of two officers from the Trade Development Council and ten senior union officials. Their report, *Australia Reconstructed*, consisted of a comprehensive set of observations and recommendations that provided a plan for the revitalisation of the entire Australian economy and related social policies (Department of Trade, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) & Trade Development Council (TDC) 1987).
Labour market and training policies that would guide program development for the next decade are canvassed in Chapter Four of *Australia Reconstructed*. Yet again, the bond between work in the mainstream economy and training remains unquestioned. ‘Active labour market policies’ were to be the key tactical direction recommended by the mission. These policies demonstrate integration of skills formation, job placement, reduction of labour market segmentation (particularly related to gender) and the payment of unemployment benefits as a last resort. The mission reported that “The most striking aspect of active labour market policies is the emphasis placed on skill formation, skill enhancement, skill flexibility and overall training” (Department of Trade, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) & Trade Development Council (TDC) 1987, 107). By way of reaffirmation of the 1974 Kangan Report’s strong emphasis upon the European version of ‘recurrent education’ (Faure 1972), *Australia Reconstructed* (1987, 109) states: “Vocational education and training is not seen as a one-off exercise but as a process of life time learning”.

*Australia Reconstructed* (1987, 118-120) is built upon a long list of familiar deficiencies on the part of both individuals and programs intended to support full employment. Inadequate skills formation, non-existent on-the-job training, an unresponsive apprenticeship system, unlinked school to work transition mechanisms and low levels of management skills were singled out for special mention. Training was proposed to address these problems. Absence remained at the conceptual heart of thinking about VET, even if it did come in a sleek European guise. As global changes impacted on Australia’s domestic economy, the trade unions’ report and recommendations also entrenched the idea that the whole population would need to be involved in a life-long undertaking of self-improvement aimed at correcting gaps and voids in their skills. When represented as a tool to assist individual citizens with this personalised responsibility, the case for
governments to implement privacy-invasive schemes such as the Unique Student Identifier not only becomes possible but also so seemingly logical and rational that it escapes serious debate.

The active labour market policies recommended in *Australia Reconstructed* are also components of an ‘active society’ in which government policies supposedly deliver maximum individual participation in economic and social life. Active society strategies have guided Australia’s approach to labour market participation for decades and remain evident in the policy settings of both major political parties (Cooper 2011, 18). The Australian version of an active society arose from policy development undertaken by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Strategic elements include an investment by each individual in their own skill levels in order to gain employment, reduction and/or replacement of welfare payments and the development of private markets for the provision of services:

> Active social policies aim to get people off benefits and into work instead of perpetuating a state of dependency. Active social policies that work are: good social and employment supports, making work pay, requiring people on benefits to look for work or training and making the different public agencies work better. But it is not only about getting people into jobs; more effort needs to be made to help people keep jobs and to develop careers. Policy needs to move from the slogan *welfare-to-work* to that of *welfare-in-work* (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2005, 2 emphasis in original).

**A happy coincidence – the workers’ welfare state meets active social policy**

The political scientist Kathleen Thelen has compiled a cross-national comparison of the development of differing vocational regimes in the United States, Japan,
Germany and Britain demonstrating that each country’s tactics arose from distinctive political settlements between independent artisans, skilled industrial workers and employers in skills-intensive industries (Thelen 2004). State action (or inaction) determined the balance of power and influence among firms and between unions and employers. The evolution of distinctive national approaches to training and capitalism reflect the political and social composition of each nation-state and the perceived national interest served by government’s role in developing economically important skills in the population (Billett 2011). The Australian experience corresponds with these findings.

However, the coincidence of Australia’s idiosyncratic ‘workers’ welfare state’ and the OECD’s ‘welfare-in-work’ illustrates that some simple ideas “have a certain power of attraction” (Edwards, Howard & Miller 2001, 168). The proposition that appropriately remunerated employment removes the need for social benefits and reduces the need for government expenditure has joined the unacknowledged, but wide-spread, practice of framing the discourse about the labour market and training in terms of absence. This combination provides a remarkably resilient framework that guides Australian governments and their VET policy decisions in such a customary and pedestrian manner that it escapes theoretical consideration.

Governments are selected by the voters and must eventually bow to their will in elections. But, as revealed by my visits to the NT Parliament House, the legitimation process is tightly secured from direct public participation. Australia’s form of democracy is mediated through a market-based social contract between the people and government that clearly defines the expectations of both groups. This social contract valorises work, with welfare benefits being turned to as a last resort. It is the individual’s responsibility to obtain the skills and knowledge to be employable and governments’ task to ensure the availability of jobs.
As global financial and economic factors have impacted upon Australia, the nature of work has evolved from low-skilled labouring in mostly rural industries to more highly skilled technical and service jobs (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, 112; Ruthven 2012). The role assigned to formal training has also grown and evolved in response to the need for a more highly skilled population (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 25). Government cannot keep its part of the social contract by providing for full employment if the population does not have the necessary skills to undertake the jobs on offer. Serendipitously, by defining VET as an absence, training has become a peripatetic and agile policy option for governments. Not only can VET mean different things to different people, but defining the characteristics of the labour market and workers in terms of deficiency lends itself to quantification, calculation and presentation of the gaps and voids as problems. Foucault’s guidance to look at the ordinary and familiar helps identify absence as an unnoticed but seemingly crucial element of VET’s discourse.

**Methodological considerations**

Because of his imaginative capacity to question many of society’s ‘certainties’, it is not surprising that Foucault’s approach also attracted criticism. Walzer claims that “His account of everyday politics” is “often annoyingly presented and never wholly accurate or sufficiently nuanced” (1986, 53). Foucault is also accused of misinterpreting the rise of formal written examinations and ignoring historical timelines in pursuit of his points of view (Hoskin 1990). His critics hold that because Foucault glosses over some facts or misinterprets what has been reported, incorrect analyses have resulted (Hoskin 1990; Walzer 1986). Foucault’s permissive method is seen as a hindrance.

In order to address concerns about selectively using or ignoring certain sources of information, this narrative summary is based upon something that Foucault actively
refused to do (Oksala 2007, 5). It borrows research techniques from a recognised disciplinary field and its investigative and reporting procedures. The trickiness of these methodological considerations is the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter Three

The How of Research and Narrative
Expert systems develop their own esoteric languages, distinctive values and particular practices that can neither be fully articulated nor completely appreciated or understood by those who do not practise them.

(Tsoukas 1997, 834)

Borrowing from ethnographic perspectives

Given my experience as an action-oriented administrator, it would have been exceedingly easy to concentrate on sources of information that supported my favoured argument or description of VET. Foucauldian openness, on its own, would not have disallowed such an approach. In the messy operational world of policy and implementation, a leader’s role is to determine the corporate position, find as many supportive examples as possible and reiterate endlessly. Contrary information is very inconvenient, while soft-focus personal experiences provide powerful points in policy promulgation. A piece of policy rationale can be enhanced by anecdotal asides. While conducting the research for this analysis, I had to remain on constant guard to exorcise my previous work habits and address accusations of Foucauldian permissiveness.

Having come to the end of my professional career in VET, the realisation that I did not comprehend the arrangement that had been created caused me to seek different ways of understanding the Australian National Training System. Reviewing the voluminous, yet under-theorised, VET literature confirmed my suspicion that a poor understanding of this major area of public endeavour was not uncommon. To not understand how VET has come into being and how it operates has material consequences if the politicians and bureaucrats who legitimate its use and the individuals who use it do not comprehend or appreciate VET’s place in and/or its capacity to shape the web of relationships that comprise the exercise of power/knowledge.
The research analysis reported in this narrative summary does not seek to pass abstract judgement on VET even though I was a keen participant in the creation and implementation of the National Training System. Various leadership roles as a school principal, executive director of a training college and senior administrator in a dual-sector university gave me entrance into VET policy settings in the Northern Territory and nationally. A major activity of those organisations was to respond to various working parties, reviews, committees and advisory groups and their innumerable, predictably formatted and unavoidable gatherings. Meetings are the natural habitat of the VET insider.

Using absence as a reference point, my quest for more knowledge commenced by examining an area that was very familiar – policy. My final two decades of employment in VET were dominated by making new policy, changing policy in response to emergent operational or political insistences and reporting upon policy outcomes. It soon became apparent that further application of this familiar technorational paradigm would not yield significantly new views about VET policy.¹⁰

Using qualitative methodologies, I was able establish a bias-limiting research procedure for policy analysis that addressed criticisms of Foucault’s distinctive observations of the art of government. “Larger processes of governance, power and social change” are revealed by ethnographic styles of policy study (Shore, Wright & Pero 2011, 1). The ‘trick’ to gaining a more profound understanding of the way policy works is to combine the essential views of an insider with a critical vantage point that is not bound to a particular version of the policy process being observed (Shore, Wright & Pero 2011, 14). My research proceeded on this basis – operating from a questioning and critical post-retirement vantage point arising from no longer

¹⁰ Techno-rationality refers to a paradigm built upon technical solutions being available to solve every problem. The major form of understanding and expression is numerical, allowing calculation and recombination. It implies the use of the scientific method and privileges randomised controlled trials as producing ‘gold standard’ knowledge. Techno-rationality is often seen to be opposed to the ‘art’ of doing a task or philosophical and reflective approaches to professional work (Lipsky, 1980; Schon, 1983).
being beholden to vested interests combined with intimate insider knowledge of vocational education and training.

Focusing upon policy exposes “connections between actors, agents, discourses and sites and for exploring how the small details of everyday life” are implicated in the broader sweep of social and political agendas (Wright 2011, 30). Empirical data can come from a variety of sources including participant observation, interviews and documents. The analysis of documents is particularly useful in exposing “key concepts, embedded assumptions and nuances of meaning” as well as showing “power relationships in social, economic and political spheres” (Wright 2011, 29).

The multitudes of written VET policy artefacts are both visible and accessible through NCVER, libraries and archives rendering them ordinary and unexceptional. This plainness is exemplified by The Australian Financial Review’s summary of the VET policy work of the recently retired Commonwealth minister for training, Senator Chris Evans:

Oddly enough, Evans’s real contribution came in an area so unsexy, so messy and so complex that he never managed to package it up, stamp his name on it and take credit for the Evans Reforms (Dodd 2013a, emphasis in original).

Multiple sources of data (including my personal experiences), have contributed to the research results in this narrative. My approach is best described as “studies of public policies and policy processes, without formal training in anthropology, but informed by ethnographic methods and interpretive methodologies” (Yanow 2011, 300). Elements of autoethnography, which is “a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context” (Butz & Besio 2009, 1668), have been adopted into my research agenda. Being an autoethnographer entails some form of clarification of personal experience as a member of an identifiable group, based upon theory and
practices that will contribute to a body of disciplinary knowledge (McIlveen 2008). The particular value of this style of organisational autoethnography lies in its ability to “tell stories that are otherwise silenced” (Doloriert & Sambrook 2012, ii). The real reason for intergovernmental bickering over VET is never acknowledged in the policy documents and the ways governments choose to create problems in VET. This contest is conducted in a manner that actually hides how this practice of government mediates and legitimates certain types of power/knowledge relationships that are simultaneously disciplinary and transformative.

The autoethnographic insider, or ‘complete member researcher’, has the potential to provide a narrative that moves beyond the “spatially bounded and temporally static” position of the classical observer to reveal “flows, assemblages, networks and other associated ontological formations” (Butz & Besio 2009, 1667). While he was no ethnographer, this approach aligns with the technique recommended by Foucault: “Interrogate it first from within, find out how it came about, how it was established and justified and, only then, deduce what it was” (Foucault 2007a, 130). His approach has infrequently been used to explore Australian VET (refer to Hodge 2009; Rowan & Shore 2009), and my use of Foucault’s tools allowed the further analysis of VET as a practice of governments that encourages individuals to behave in ways that produce self-regulating, normal citizens (Foucault 2008, 296-313).

These styles of studies and their resulting narratives have been criticised for their potential to be non-replicable, atheoretical and non-analytical (Greenhalgh et al. 2005, 77-79; The Cochrane Collaboration 2009). Concerns have also been raised about the replicability of research results by different groups of researchers (Greenhalgh et al. 2004, 613). Matters of access to settings under study without disturbing the natural condition and the uncritical acceptance of insider knowledge that glosses over key issues have also been used to critique non-statistical research styles (Denscombe 2008, 73). The idea of autoethnography raises even more
spirited commentary exhibiting a “hatred” of the research technique that attracts descriptions such as “essentially lazy”, “intellectually lazy”, “egotistical”, “academic wank” and “a narcissistic preoccupation with an Auto-affection of the Self” (Doloriert & Sambrook 2012, 4-5).

Replying to these strongly expressed concerns, it is suggested that autoethnographers “use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience” and it is cautioned that “the autoethnography must contribute an understanding to the greater culture (i.e. not auto/graphy)” (Doloriert & Sambrook 2012, 5). While this narrative summary relies upon my placement in the social milieu of vocational education and training, it is not my story. It is a recounting of VET from an insider’s perspective. Borrowing from autoethnography produces accounts that allow some ignored and dismissed experiences to become known and understood. VET’s oppressive ordinariness invites disregard and autoethnographic techniques can bring to the surface those things that are commonly overlooked.

Three further advantages of autoethnographic tools have been identified (Anderson 2006, 389). Firstly, the researcher has multiple incentives to spend time in the field as this is a natural setting. I have remained on the ground and maintained knowledge of insider meanings through being a director of a group training company, continuing attendance at VET conferences and policy briefings and having my work station on a Charles Darwin University dual-sector campus, literally surrounded by VET practitioners. Secondly, my long experience in the sector and continued involvement ensures knowledge of “insider meanings” (Anderson 2006, 389) and what these include and surreptitiously exclude. Finally, as a VET insider there is “an added vantage point for accessing certain kinds of data” (Anderson 2006, 389). The ability to gain access to materials held in the NT Library and NT Archives was only achievable because of my personal knowledge of its existence,
the people controlling availability and the local and national historical practices and events associated with the VET system.

This narrative summary is not an independent or superior observation seeking to determine good, bad, success, failure, incompetence or conspiracy. The strength of this research into the mundane nature, yet productive capacity, of VET to serve as an intermediary in a web of complex relationships stems from the interpenetration of my former employment and personal life. While still ‘doing’ VET in some ways, my retirement from paid employment allows for a “continual oscillation between insider and outsider perspectives, which makes critical reflexivity possible” (Shore, Wright & Pero 2011, 15). The research analyses presented here emanate from three major sources – personal experiences in the National Training System which gave extraordinary levels of access to the inner workings of VET, human ethics committee approved interviews with 13 key informants selected for their contribution to VET policy development, plus data gleaned from the extensive documentary archive associated with VET.

The outcome is purposely not intended to be a comprehensive historical accounting of VET, as others have already made significant contributions to chronicling the past (Kell 1994; Marginson 1993a; Ryan 2002, 2011). Rather, this story reports upon both how the VET system has come into being and been so liberally applied to society’s problems, while simultaneously and systematically escaping ongoing analysis or robust theoretical consideration. The result is a narrative that adds a new dimension to a field of endeavour, whose story is seldom told other than through disembodied statistics (cf National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011c), while also addressing methodological critiques of Foucault.
The research interviews

Those selected for interview were determined by a process of ‘personnel exhaustion’. Based upon my professional experiences, their sponsorship and/or authorship of key documents and the recommendations of other VET researchers or interviewees, the same familiar set of names surfaced time and again. Of the initial distilled list, two were unable to be contacted despite extensive efforts and two refused to participate, leading to thirteen formal interviews. The interview participants have each been intimately involved in the development and implementation of training policy and include politicians, bureaucrats, training administrators and industry-based leaders. Their individual names and a brief outline of their public contribution to VET policy are listed in Appendix One.

In spite of the hyperbole surrounding lack of privacy and the ease of using world-wide web search engines, virtually none of this group could be simply contacted using electronic means. The people who have enacted VET policy value their privacy and wish to limit their availability. An extraordinary amount of energy, time and calling in of favours was expended in attempts to contact the former Secretary of the NT Education Department, Geoff Spring. In spite of his domination of VET-in-Schools policy as a Commonwealth Government bureaucrat and being CEO of three Education Departments and, rather more notoriously, for implementing massive reductions of government education expenditure in both the Northern Territory and Victoria in the early 1990s, he seems to have completely disappeared.21 Two others simply declined to be interviewed despite repeated polite, but insistent, requests. In the end, one of those two suggested interviewing a former NT Government Cabinet colleague who was already on the list. Of those interviewed, when final permission was sought from each of those who would be

21 In chronological order, Spring lead the education departments in the Northern Territory, Victoria and South Australia.
directly quoted (as per my ethics clearance procedure), one individual requested that the interview comments not be directly attributed but instead treated as background information. This request was honoured.

The most significant non-participant deserves special mention, given his near continuous role in the establishment and ongoing operations of the National Training System. The former Commonwealth Government minister, John Dawkins, is widely acknowledged as having been uncompromising in his pursuit of the Labor Government’s move into VET policy (Kell 1994, 119; Ryan 2002, 1-2). His decision not to participate remains undetermined. In a rather Byzantine manner, Dawkins’s refusal could not even be attributed to him. The Chief Executive of the Australian Qualifications Framework Council, chaired by Dawkins, indicated to me that having not heard from him ‘by now’, it could be assumed that he had declined an interview.

In spite of not interviewing Dawkins, his formal views on VET and its place in society have been compiled from detailed notes on his frank and wide-ranging commentary delivered in a research forum in late 2009, access to his correspondence to politicians (from the NT archives) and from his landmark ministerial statements and other speeches. Comparing all of these sources with my interviewees’ recollections makes it unlikely that the things spoken and written by Dawkins are anything other than as represented when first delivered.

The interviews took place in four different capital cities at a time and place nominated by the respondent, usually their workplace. Other than a telephone conversation requiring three different sessions to complete, the interviews were conducted face to face. These were performed individually, with the exception of their preference for a joint meeting on the part of the Chief Executive and Chair of
Each individual’s replies and observations were electronically recorded and extensive notes were made during the consultation, later re-written and expanded upon in the hours immediately following the interview. The standard semi-structured interviews (Denscombe 2008, 176) were preceded by giving each participant an information sheet, exemplar questions and the signing of a consent document conforming to Charles Darwin University’s ethics clearance procedures. While the fourteen questions in Appendix Two guided the direction of the interview, participants were given free range to fully explore their thoughts in a more conversational style.

Each meeting was programmed for an hour, but most went for at least 90 minutes. Without exception, each person prefaced their statements with a reference to being unsure if they could either “remember”, “recall”, “know”, or “be sure” about their VET experiences and knowledge. Equally uniformly, these protestations turned out to be false modesty. There was no lack of confidence or ability to be quite exacting with their replies. Whilst some interviewees required prompting to clarify detailed points, there was never a gap in the conversation.

The use of the interview material is based upon the premise that the personal experiences, knowledge and motives of those interviewed do not provide definitive answers to research questions (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 1995, 215). The responses, however interesting and relevant, are simply another source of observations that add to the depth of understanding that develops in this analysis. The interviews tended to repeat the contents of public policy documentation and added a very few ‘new’ perspectives or pieces of information not already on the public record.

Skills Australia ceased operations in mid-2012 and became the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (AWPA). AWPA is an Australian Government Department for operational purposes but retains the broadly representative board from Skills Australia, most members of which have experience in industry and unions. Both institutional names will be used in this analysis indicating the arrangement in place during the time period being discussed.
Narrative summary

In order to address the concerns about Foucault’s lack of comprehensiveness as well as generic misgivings about qualitative research techniques, explicit steps were undertaken to ensure ample and wide-ranging sources of information were accessed and that the methods used to analyse the research data were robust. This augments Foucault’s anti-truth claims style of inquiry with the ability to describe the method of identifying sources of information and telling the resultant story in a systematic and bias-limiting manner.

As a synthesis method, narrative summary aligns with a Foucauldian attitude to research that rejects universals and actively seeks out a broad representation of human activity. Given VET’s inbuilt propensity to reductionist (a near obsession with statistics) and dualistic thinking (competent or not competent), I purposely targeted an expansive range of sources to overcome situations where “the reduction of ongoing social life to variables and to dichotomies tends to produce a radical decontextualising and destruction of local meanings” (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 1995, 112). I wanted to avoid acting like Karmel and Roberts (2013, 35) who had to “go to considerable trouble to create two variables that reflect some aspects” of workplace culture by resorting to employer size and the social background of apprentices.

Bringing alternate theoretical perspectives to VET required paying strict attention to the identification of reductionist representations and sought both methods and more inclusive information to counter their limiting impact.

A story is capable of being crafted from personal experiences, interviews and documents. My introduction to narrative summary came through reading a systematic review of the theoretical and empirical impacts upon the diffusion of
innovations in the British health system (Greenhalgh et al. 2004). Having brought together a diverse range of conceptual and methodological studies deemed relevant to the implementation of health programs, the results were synthesised into a much richer story through the use of narrative summary:

Narrative summary typically involves the selection, chronicling and ordering of evidence to produce an account of the evidence. Its form may vary from the simple recounting and description of findings through to more interpretive and explicitly reflexive accounts that include commentary and higher levels of abstraction. Narratives of the latter type can account for complex, dynamic processes, offering explanations that emphasise the sequential and contingent character of phenomena. Narrative summary can integrate qualitative and quantitative evidence through narrative juxtaposition (Dixon-Woods et al. 2005, 47 emphasis in original).

Two major types of syntheses can derive from a narrative summary (Dixon-Woods et al. 2005). The simpler integrative synthesis combines data, whereas interpretive synthesis subsumes concepts from multiple sources into higher theoretical structures. It is the latter style I strive for in reporting upon my research findings:

The defining characteristic of an interpretive synthesis is its concern with the development of concepts, and with the development and specification of theories that integrate those concepts (Dixon-Woods et al. 2005, 46).

23 In choosing the research methods to be used, a closely related synthesis method called realist review (Pawson et al. 2005) was also examined. It was rejected because its primary usage is testing for an all-encompassing theory of why a particular intervention works in multiple sites and uses. VET is much more than a fixed procedure subject to replicable, standardised applications, although it is used in a variety of settings.
Typically, an interpretive synthesis avoids specifying concepts, or fixing their meanings, prior to synthesis. The analysis is conceptual in process/output and the main product is theory. Crucially:

it is important not to caricature an interpretive analysis as therefore floating free of any empirical anchor: an interpretive synthesis of primary studies must be grounded in the data reported in those studies (Dixon-Woods et al. 2005, 46).

With this approach, intricate issues should only be explained by complex forms of evidence. Excluding any type of evidence based upon personal belief in the efficacy of a particular methodology removes potentially important sources of information. This very inclusiveness, however, leads to criticism of the methodology due to a lack of clarity about selection criteria possibly leading to bias. As a nascent methodology, narrative summary has not been tested in a variety of fields of study over lengthy periods of time and might lead to unsound conclusions (Popay et al. 2006, 6). The initial selection of relevant studies has been singled out as the time where bias, or lack of clarity regarding relevance, is most likely to occur (Greenhalgh et al. 2005, 35-36; Pawson et al. 2005).

Traditionally systematic reviews commence by establishing unambiguous inclusion and exclusion criteria. This allows peers to propose additional studies that fit the criteria and for other researchers to replicate the findings of the review. This initial moderation is often considered necessary as there can be a vast literature and source studies must be made manageable due to cost and time pressures. Policy documentation, such as the landmark reports described below, seldom lend themselves to scrutiny through the use of high status randomised controlled trials (Popay et al. 2006) or econometric analysis. Ironically, these same public policy documents create the settings in which statistics can be used in the pursuit of
Having initially chosen to use a genealogical narrative methodology to examine VET policy, the search phase was guided by Foucault’s insistence on looking for both the anomalous and the mundane. To rule out a source of information prior to examination could lead to important descriptors being missed altogether. In order to overcome potential criticism, all 81 of NCVER’s landmark national reports were included. By using such an ‘exhaustive review’, the need to develop and defend explicit exclusion and inclusion criteria was avoided. Supporting this action, there has not been a single suggestion from anyone associated with training policy and its implementation that these reports are other than what they represent – key influences upon the Australian VET system (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011g, 65). They reflect governmental thinking and policy intent in the time period when they were produced.

The initial examination of the landmark reports used ‘snowballing’ (Greenhalgh et al. 2005, 53) of the major headings, topics and references (if present) to identify recurring themes, people and theoretical concepts appearing in other related documents. This process was continued until no new relevant information was discovered that would serve to extend or contradict the ideas presented in the landmark reports (Dixon-Woods et al. 2005, 52) and a point of ‘theoretical saturation’ was reached. This ‘snowball-until-exhausted’ method, based upon both

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24 In a personal communication, NCVER’s Rose-Anne Polvere described the process for a report to be considered landmark. “The original set began with a compilation that the librarian at the Australian National Training Authority put together several years ago. We built upon that by getting some expert opinions both within and external to NCVER, and undertaking a special project to digitise the collection. Now we tend to add on an ongoing basis any significant reports, such as the Bradley Review, although we recognise that the newer reports have yet to have a ‘landmark’ effect on our education and training system. However, we like to add these here as they represent key education and training policy/research”. During the research and writing phases of this study the number of these reports has increased from the initial 81 to 90 (http://www.voced.edu.au/index.html).
documents and a wide variety of personal informants, was also used to develop the initial interview list.

**Systematic reviews in vocational education and training**

One further preparatory activity determined what type of synthesis, if any, had been previously undertaken in VET. By using various combinations of the search terms ‘narrative’, ‘summary’, ‘systematic’, ‘review’ and ‘synthesis’ in the VOCEDplus tertiary education research data base, four records were identified out of the approximately 48,000 entries.\(^{25}\) The first two related to overseas studies of local program implementation and the remaining two described an Australian National Training Authority-funded project undertaken by NCVER in 2005. Of these two related Australian contributions, one reports on training for mature-aged workers by summarising the content of previous reports on the subject and the other describes the systematic review process developed by NCVER used in the same project.

*An aid to systematic reviews of research in vocational education and training in Australia* is described as “the first systematic review of research in vocational education and training (VET) in Australia on mature-aged and skill development activities” (Anlezark, Dawe & Hayman 2005, 8). The Cochrane-style review activities commenced by “using explicit and rigorous methods that follow a standard set of stages” (Anlezark, Dawe & Hayman 2005, 8). These steps included the participation of 42 individuals working on four different committees guiding “the first systematic review of research conducted by NCVER” (Anlezark, Dawe & Hayman 2005, 6). As it turns out, this also appears to be the last use of a systematic review in VET research in Australia.\(^{26}\) Importantly, NCVER’s aid to systematic reviews contains a


\(^{26}\) In a personal communication, one of the authors of this guidance and NCVER employee, Alison Anlezark, confirmed that she was unaware of any use of systematic reviews or narrative summaries in VET, other than their publication. This came about due to the excessive costs associated with the process and the demise of ANTA.
very telling statement demonstrating the teleological reasoning within VET literature that provides strong support for the use of a Foucauldian genealogy and narrative summary to investigate the under-theorisation of VET:

Policy documents were not useful in the first review because they did not provide evidence to answer the review question and generally were based upon an assumption that training would lead to improved attachment to the training market (Anlezark, Dawe & Hayman 2005, 21).

NCVER’s systematic review of VET research projects eliminated key policy documents as they did not conform to their specialised conception of evidence. This conclusion begs to be interrogated in search of the conceptualisations that would immediately and emphatically eliminate the landmark national reports. To an organisational ethnographer, these policy artefacts provide an important addition to traditional fieldwork by allowing the productive nature of policy to be scrutinised. For institutional and policy ethnographers, bureaucratic documents “embed a particular vision of normative ruling relations between decision-makers and clients” (Shore, Wright & Pero 2011, 13 emphasis in original).

The unquestionable link between training and employment sits at the core of many of the general, often unstated, assumptions about VET and governments’ ‘will to train’. I have taken a position in direct opposition to NCVER’s systematic reviewers by including the landmark policy documents as key cultural texts. One of the more striking features emerging from an exhaustive review of the VET policy documents is the desire of governments to train the population. This deceptively simple proposition was further reinforced by the interviews. Governments find training irresistible. But how does this infatuation with training arise and express itself?
Chapter Four
The Will to Train
The functions of the state will be much more than merely keeping the ring within which the competitors will fight. Our social and industrial laws will be increased. There will be more law, not less; more control, not less.

(Menzies 1942, 5)

Two views of government

According to the spiritual father of capitalism, Adam Smith, the least government is the best government because the market will provide for all of society’s requirements if it is left to its own devices (Heilbroner 1999, 68; Smith 2009). While governments should ensure the security of the nation, administer justice and provide public works that are unprofitable in a market-driven social order, Smith believed that governments should not meddle with the free market system. Alternatively, markets fail for a variety of reasons, thereby demanding government intervention. This is the position taken by John Maynard Keynes, the great British economist, in prescribing solutions to economic depressions (Heilbroner 1999, 274). In fact, Keynes felt that, rather than the market, government is much better at managing economic society because it is capable of taking “the long view in matters of economic management” (Roberts 2010, 20).

Sitting somewhere between these two extremes, Australia’s longest serving Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, believed that for the great mass of unskilled labourers “one of the prime objects of modern social and political policy is to give them a proper measure of security, and provide the conditions which will enable them to acquire skill and knowledge and individuality” (Menzies 1942, 2). The aspirant Prime Minister was staking his political ambitions on the essential entrepreneurial activity of job and wealth creation envisaged for the middle class in the continuance of the workers’ welfare state.
Australian governments have yet to resile from Menzies' World War Two-era exhortations to train the population for paid employment. The objective of the most recent *National partnership agreement on skills reform* is to establish:

- a VET system that delivers a productive and highly skilled workforce
- which contributes to Australia’s economic future, and to enable all working age Australians to develop the skills and qualifications needed to participate effectively in the labour market (Council of Australian Governments 2012, 5).

**The will to govern**

Even the strongest of free market advocates recognise an important, if limited, role for government (Hazlitt 1979, 211; Heilbroner 1999, 69; Smith 2009). Advanced market democracies require governments to provide or regulate the optimal conditions for the operations of free markets in such areas as national security, monetary integrity and legal structures (Harvey 2005, 2). Even though it has been fashionable to characterise many government activities as being guided by neoliberal principles (Marginson 1993a; Ong 2007; Pusey 1991), it would be misleading to describe the Australian experience as dominated by neoliberalism. An advanced market democracy did not result from a “coherent and elaborated political rationality” (Rose 1996a, 53). The existing Australian amalgam arose from classical liberalism’s unrelenting criticism of state-imposed limits being placed upon individual freedoms fusing with the belief that the state is a vast public utility in the service of individual and corporate interests (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, 321). Australians accommodate this tension by accepting the use of mundane techniques of enumeration, accounting and regulation as a valid activity of government. These practices render the objects of government attention “thinkable in such a way that
their difficulties appear amenable to diagnoses, prescription and cure” (Rose 1996a, 53).

Yet the work of government is never done. The problems created by governments constantly defy solution (Pressman & Wildavsky 1984, 135) because of policy failure (Hill & Hupe 2002, 171) or the continual discovery of issues demanding the intervention of the economic state (Foucault 2007b). A similar, more provocative, view is that “governments are congenital failures” but “the failures of one mode of governing are opportunities for the formulation of another” (Miller & Rose 2008, 17). This could explain how it has come to be that we have a National Training System. For example, the alleged inability to provide training that was responsive to national imperatives of the 1970s at the State level of government provided the impetus for the Commonwealth Government to become involved in training through funding that was proposed in the Kangan Report. The consequent continual reform of VET (cf Australian National Training Authority 1994b; Ryan 2011, 3) can plausibly be explained as a necessary reaction to this consistent ‘failure’ of government.

This leads to a paradox where an even stronger ‘will to govern’ grows from the continual critique of government failure which, in turn, stimulates the demand for problematising activity leading to yet more techniques and programs.27 This is because “many new problems are themselves caused by the solutions to previous problems” (Hogwood & Gunn 1984, 77 emphasis in original). Government bureaucracies also have self-sustaining processes that demand action, such as ceaseless proposals for better coordination, in the seldom realised and often forlorn hope of solving long-standing problems (Lea 2008, 103-107). This ‘will to govern’ is the rejoinder required on the part of governments in order to manage the regulated and accountable choice-making of autonomous agents cast in the sometimes

27 Problematisation is the focus of the next chapter. Creating problems that demand government action is a major function for those who develop and implement public policy.
simultaneous, often conflicting, roles of citizens, clients, consumers, employees, employers, investors or entrepreneurs. The freedoms and responsibilities associated with advanced market democracies “have been constructed out of an arduous, haphazard and contingent concatenation of problematisations, strategies of government and techniques of regulation” (Rose 1996a, 61).

The will to empower

As an extension of their ‘will to govern’, governments in advanced market democracies have also embraced a ‘will to empower’ (Cruikshank 1999). The proposed good that can follow from empowerment has been identified as an important precondition for a more just society (Freire 1996, 30). Problems associated with a variety of educational settings, such as schools (Mulford et al. 2008), adult education (Lee & Wickert 1995) and VET (Stevenson 1992), have all been identified as potentially benefiting from increased devolution of decision-making powers to local levels. The bipartisan promotion of empowerment as an important lever in advanced market democracies reflects a productive capacity to join seemingly opposing views to arrive at an agreed need for action. For example, in the case of the ‘will to empower’, Cruikshank (1999, 28-34) argues that the Left uses empowerment to generate political resistance and the Right to produce economic and entrepreneurial actors. However, they share the same political strategy. Both see a valid role for government “to act upon others by getting them to act in their own interests” (Cruikshank 1996, 68). By enabling citizens to be self-governing, governments attempt to reduce the need to exercise power in a physically coercive manner. Foucault (1979) refers to this as disciplinary society and believes it to be a key rationality guiding contemporary western governments.

The relationships that encourage empowerment have four characteristics (Cruikshank 1999, 72). Initially, empowerment is established by and through
expertise. This expert knowledge can either be professionally acquired from training or be accumulated as an outcome of living in a disempowered situation. Secondly, the relationship is initiated by one group (those who are already enabled) seeking to empower another. The third characteristic has two components: the targets for action can either be self-described or they can be identified from social scientific models of groups thought to need empowerment. Finally, relations of empowerment are simultaneously voluntary and coercive.

In another example of ‘making up’ people, the powerless do not pre-exist the government technology devised to empower them, but are made evident because of the ‘will to empower’. The characteristics of those requiring empowerment must be transformed into “a calculable, knowable grouping or category” (Cruikshank 1999, 76). This is the same logic that creates the discourse of lifelong learning. These newly constituted and now problematic groups must be made to act in accordance with the logic of empowerment – exhibiting a commitment to be active citizens for their entire productive life.

The rationality of absence features prominently in the ‘will to empower’:

From the *discovery* of the absence of the thing, social scientists have created a tangible vision of a *state of esteem*. In short, social scientists have helped produce a set of social relationships and causal relations where there were none before (Cruikshank 1999, 237 emphasis in original).

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28 It has been argued that the term ‘lifelong learning’, a vast set of personal activities, has been uncritically and incorrectly accepted as being the same thing as lifelong education, an institutionalised process (Billett 2010). The National Training System, with its focus upon qualifications, the disadvantaged, administrative processes and bureaucratic structures, ignores ‘personal fact’ in favour of ‘institutional fact’ leading to demands for greater central regulation (Billett 2010). These views add further weight to the propositions advanced in this narrative that the manner in which Australian VET policy is enacted ironically ignores the distinctive natures of teaching, learning and skills acquisition.
This manufacture of citizens is a permanent political project for advanced market democracies in pursuit of the ‘will to govern’ and, accordingly, “we have different kinds of citizens who are recognised not for what they do or what they have been made into but for what they lack” (Cruikshank 1999, 123). The ‘will to empower’ is built upon problematising activities arising from the rationality of absence.

The will to train

The unique Australian experience and practice of a market-driven democracy has developed due to the population accepting, even expecting, a ‘will to govern’ on the part of its public institutions (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, 4). In exercising their authority, the various State, Territory and Federal governments have developed the ‘will to empower’ the population using a rationality of absence as the predominant means of conceptualising distinct groups of people. In a classic example of Foucauldian productivity arising from power/knowledge, both activities create an insatiable demand for data and information about the population that leads to the creation and subsequent problematisation of groups which then must be acted upon. In this well-established activity the unemployed, the illiterate, youth, Indigenous Australians, the socially excluded, migrants, women, welfare recipients and those who do not constantly invest in their own training, have been produced and reproduced using the information gathered by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

For each of these now problematised sub-populations, training has been proposed as a method to redress their particular absence or deficiency (Australian National Training Authority 2003; Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013; Dawkins 1988a). It is this intersection involving expectations of government action, individual choice through empowerment and the world of work that has established a ‘will to train’ on the part of governments in advanced market democracies. The
individual can be problematised as a potential worker in this space, where private profit meets governments with a will to empower and train. The problems to be addressed and rectified are presented in ways that incorporate ideas about productivity, democracy and the rights and obligations of economic citizens, producing “an enterprising individual in search of meaning, responsibility and a sense of achievement in life, and hence in work” (Miller & Rose 1990, 195). The purpose of training is to produce individuals who willingly participate in the ‘workers’ welfare state’ and are responsive to active social policy agendas.

Foucault’s early theoretical concept of biopower incorporates this ‘will to train’. Biopower is a practice of governments to conduct behaviour through “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault 1976, 140). These economies require a stable and competent labour force and “an entire administrative and technical machinery” is needed to maintain discipline in this newly conceived population (Foucault 1976, 126). According to Foucault (1976, 139-40) “This biopower was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism”.

One of the initial acts in the return of State-type rights and responsibilities to the Northern Territory following the resumption of civilian rule after the end of World War Two included the establishment of a semi-elected legislative body consisting of a minority of popularly-elected members and a majority of government appointed bureaucrats. Their actions demonstrate that governments are keenly interested in supporting and maintaining the link between jurisdictional workforce development and the needs of employers. The notions that would be labelled biopower, following conceptualisation by Foucault, featured prominently in their considerations. The first piece of legislation ever passed by this Legislative Council (Northern Territory of Australia 1948) marked the commencement of the NT Government’s ‘will to train’. The original legislators in the Northern Territory gave an excellent demonstration of
biopower when justifying the need to establish the Apprenticeships Board in 1948. Indeed, the very word “machinery” was used to describe this new board (Northern Territory of Australia 1948, 93) and its functions to oversee standards of training and “to keep lads in the Territory”. A government-regulated apprenticeship system was seen, if not overtly described, to be a mechanism to prescribe the skills and knowledge to be held by certain classes of citizens, but also to establish limits to geographic mobility.

Because Australians prefer to create bureaucratic governmental structures to implement social programs (Blewett 1982, 38), biopower guided the creation of State and Territory education and training systems:

Perhaps the foremost instrument and effect of this historic development was the education bureau, through which states conceptualised and organised that massive and ongoing programme of pacification, discipline and training responsible for the political and social capabilities of the modern citizen (Hunter 1996, 163 emphasis in original).

These systems made self-realisation and self-responsibility into central objectives of the various levels of government. The governmentalisation of empowerment and training has been accepted as an appropriate way to conduct the conduct of Australia’s population. But these systems of control have come about through a “piecemeal series of exchanges” between the administrative state and the Christian pastorate producing a fragile “series of improvisations at the level of architecture, pedagogy, administration” (Hunter 1996, 164).

Training has come to mean more than just an extended form of schooling that focuses upon specialised institutional sites and disciplinary normalisation used to produce social citizens. The newly constructed and trained citizen is:
required to engage in a ceaseless work of training and retraining, skilling and reskilling, enhancement of credentials and preparation for a life of incessant job seeking: life is to become a continuous economic capitalisation of the self (Rose 1999b, 169).

My use of the term ‘newly’ implies a recent event, but it is also relative. Australia’s discourse about training, particularly post-school training, has included reference to lifelong learning since the Walker Report during World War Two (Tannock 1975, 81). This permanent obligation was badged as recurrent training in the Kangan Report (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974, xvii). Lifelong learning reappeared as a key policy driver for ANTA (Australian National Training Authority 1995a, 11) while, more recently, renewed emphasis has been placed on the contribution lifelong learning can make in “re-engaging disengaged learners” (Skills Australia 2011, 75). These ideas are currently expressed in terms of ‘individual transitions’ based upon “the need for lifelong career advice” (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 99-100). The Australian ‘will to train’ may be built upon a ‘new’ type of citizen that was constructed in Western Europe over the course of several centuries but it nevertheless directs present-day Australia’s inability to relinquish the use of biopower to manage the behaviour of the population.

As the now conflated issues of democracy, market economies and individual behaviours have been problematised in terms of knowledge and skills or, more accurately, as a lack of knowledge and skills, the machinery to produce and regulate the workforce must utilise training. The governmentalisation of many aspects of social and economic life, along with a politically palatable and electorally popular quest for full employment to maintain the workers’ welfare state, provides ample space for the ‘will to train’ to take hold and flourish. Because of the constitutional contestation between the Commonwealth and State governments, a
wide variety of interests can be made amenable to the wills to govern, empower and train. Problematising social and economic issues leads to training becoming a pervasive option available to governments and it will be explored in Chapter Nine.

Another how-type question

How do governments with the ‘will to govern’ set about exercising their wills to empower and train? They make policies. And to make policies they create problems. Problematisations not only reduce complexity but “are central to governing processes” (Bacchi 2009, xii). Governments design and generate problems and problematic groups that can be addressed through known and tested processes of empowerment and training. Understanding the process of problematisation exposes how the policy process operates as well as how we are governed (Bacchi 2009).
Chapter Five

Problems
The problem of unemployment has been a major concern for governments. One State which has published a steady stream of labour market analyses is South Australia; all reports have included training implications for the Department of Employment and TAFE.

(Hall 1999, 319)

Government as problem solver

“That’s a shit of a definition,” replied the former Chief Executive of the NT Department of Employment, Education and Training, Peter Plummer, in responding to the proposition that the work of governments was to solve problems. In a characteristically impish and disarming manner, this denizen of the bureaucracy was pressing his view that the actions of governments should be measured against “relevance and effectiveness” rather than as solutions to problems. The former Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Australia and ultimate education and training policy insider over three decades, Denise Bradley, similarly cautions against defining governments as problem solvers. For Bradley, it is “dangerous” to cast matters solely as problems because this allows for simplistic representation of complex issues so beloved by the media. Bradley believes governments bring their own agendas to office and cites the example of the State minister appointing her as Chair of the South Australian Training and Skills Commission to drive a vocational education and training reform agenda because “I was recognised as a tough bird”.

In spite of their contrarian initial replies, both Plummer and Bradley acknowledged that governments can and do respond to problems. A more common view is that public policy “implementation is always connected to specific policies as particular responses to specific problems in society” (Hill & Hupe 2002, 5). Or the object of Australian public policy has been described a process of identifying “what is the problem, and how is government trying to address it?” (Colebatch 2006, 1). Each of the other policy participants interviewed for this research project acknowledged
government as problem-solver. When summarised, the interview contents nominate industrial and economic skill shortages, desirable behaviour of citizens and ensuring employment for the population as problems capable of solution through training.

A comprehensive reply to the question framing government as a problem-solver came from former adult educator, senior VET administrator and commentator, Kaye Schofield. When asked about government’s inclination to use training to solve problems, she retorted, “It cures cancer. Training is a rescue remedy for every problem. It is an easy option that gives the appearance of doing something while doing nothing”. Over her long career, Schofield observed the attractiveness of VET to governments as new problems were generated. At the national policy level, VET was utilised to reduce youth unemployment and address low levels of international competitiveness in the 1980s. The 1990s had problems arising from the shift to a knowledge economy supplanting manufacturing industries and the need to lift levels of productivity. Currently, Schofield sees VET being deployed to deal with a two-speed economy and related decisions about skilled immigration and the future size of Australia’s population. According to Schofield, while the problem defined by government can change, VET is a permanent part of the solutions proffered by governments.

Problems and governments

This chapter draws heavily upon Governing the Present: Administering Economic, Social and Personal Life by Miller and Rose (2008) which, in turn, traces its lineage back to Foucault. Two cautionary notes are required. The first is that Miller and Rose do not claim to be making an application of Foucault’s views; rather their work reflects a broad alignment with his writing and lectures. Second, in common with

29 This term is frequently used by the media (in the preference for simplification pointed out by Bradley above) to describe the Australian economy driven by two opposing forces. The first is a very successful export business mainly operated by large mining companies and the second is the steady demise of the manufacturing sector and constant problems in the agricultural area such as drought and the Australian dollar’s exchange rate.
Foucault, they directly reject any attempt on their part to represent a general theory that is applicable to all situations. Their conceptualisation of problematisation is only one analysis of current government operations in advanced market democracies but is not a universal theory or immutable set of rules.

The major impetus for governments to direct the conduct of the population arises because something appears to be problematic to someone. In describing the expansive range of problems addressed by governments through training, former NT Minister for Education and Training, Syd Stirling, described in his interview how “training changes behaviour to a desirable state of affairs”. In addition to problems of a behavioural nature, former NT Commissioner for Public Employment, David Hawkes, stated in conversation, “Training is necessary to ensure longer term workforce needs are satisfied. Training needs to respond to satisfy skill needs across the economy otherwise major gaps will occur”. In other words, the way individuals conduct themselves and the skills they possess (defined as absences) are perceived as problems by the people who have occupied the highest political and bureaucratic levels of government. Training is seen as a mechanism to bring these problematic individuals into better alignment with the economy. These themes recurred consistently in each interview.

Problematisation describes a process of bringing a problem into existence. Problems are not lurking in dark, hidden spaces waiting to be found and exposed. They need to be constructed in a way that makes them knowable to governments (Miller & Rose 2008, 14-15). In commenting upon the application of absence in this analysis, the former head of TAFE in New South Wales, Gregor Ramsey, remarked that: “Definition by vacancy can explain how a whole variety of educational activities can be made rational to governments”. These governments display a strong propensity to use “gap analysis” to frame policies because it lends itself to quantification (Hogwood & Gunn 1984, 72). Miller and Rose’s (2008) description of
problematisation contains about five phases, although these do not necessarily occur in a linear pattern or in chronological order and can have frequent iterations.

Firstly, a single issue gains more traction with governments if it is assembled to appear problematic in different ways, at different locations and by different participants. Something must be represented as a problem to someone or, preferably, to multiple constituencies. The current NT Cabinet Secretary for the Country Liberal Government and former departmental head, Col Fuller, demonstrated this broadening of the problem when interviewed: “The main problem being addressed by training is one of skill shortages. Particularly in the early days of the NT, there was a need to build a critical mass of businesses and population”.\(^{30}\) In a single nondescript sentence he joined VET to matters of population growth (which includes interstate and international immigration as well as birth and death rates), support of private business enterprises and the creation of markets for their goods and services. In this initial phase of problematisation, finding a problem and a related solution, which can be represented as government doing something appealing to a wide range of interests, is always perceived as clever politics by public officials. If a single policy solution, such as the provision of training, demonstrates action in more than one area, governments will be attracted because a resolution can ‘kill two birds with one stone’.

The second stage of problematisation requires governments to link the various views held by different groups of a now problematic issue by identifying common characteristics that can in turn be used to explain and devise strategies to address the problem. Peter Shergold, Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in the Howard Government, when interviewed, confirmed this linking by

\(^{30}\) The Country Liberals were elected in August 2012 following 11 years of Labor Party rule in the NT. The Country Liberal Party had been repeatedly re-elected from the time of self-government in 1978 until Clare Martin became the first female Chief Minister leading the Labor Party to government in 2001. Col Fuller had been the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a number of Country Liberal Government agencies and left his role as a CEO upon the election of the Labor Government.
referring to skill shortages, “However, this problem [skill shortages] always intersects with immigration policy with varying degrees of intensity depending upon the stage of the economic cycle”. A government seeking to address the problem of skill shortages through increased skilled migration programs would attempt to build a supportive coalition of parties. Backing might be drawn from mining companies seeking a more flexible workforce, construction companies wishing to build more houses for an increased population, State governments who then have to pay less for training the workforce and retailers who would benefit from an increased market size. The political nature of this process intervenes at this stage, because there would be counter arguments raised about training local people to gain employment, thereby avoiding the provision of unemployment benefits, overcrowding of major cities and over-consumption of scarce resources such as water that could result from more residents.

The next phases of problematisation are interrelated. Thirdly, problems must be framed in a common language that allows for a dialogue between the various agents and in a variety of physical locations. Accordingly, a specialist language has accompanied the development of the National Training System. The technical vernacular’s content is so extensive that it must be translated for the uninitiated in a lexicon (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011g). This jargon assists phase four – stabilising the problem and making it subject to expertise. VET experts have created a techno-rational language for VET that meets the objective of problematisation by allowing communication across a diverse range of interests, but it simultaneously has created VET insiders and outsiders, speakers and non-speakers of the expert vernacular.

Even the seemingly most straightforward concept, such as describing the appropriate skills set required for employment in a given vocation, has been colonised by technical experts. In the VET system, skills are prescribed for over
3,300 qualifications by 59 nationally recognised training packages that have been produced by the experts on the Industry Skills Councils as well as in 1,600 expert-accredited courses (National Skills Standards Council 2013a, 3). Competency in each prescribed skill is measured and recorded through complex processes specified in competency-based training and recognition of prior learning guidelines. In many fields additional actions associated with occupational licensing and registration (Queensland Department of Education and Training 2011b), each overseen by industry and government experts, are used to further structure problems in ways that require the use of technical language. The greater the number of people and organisations using this specialist vernacular, the more seemingly natural it becomes.

Stabilisation not only allows for the application of expertise, it also involves identifying individual or collective responsibility for the problem. For example, the Chair of the NT Employment and Training Authority at the time of its demise in 2001, Andy Bruyn, opened his interview by stating his belief that training “fixes problems that are deemed as someone’s fault” and “fixes issues for those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder”. From a different perspective, the fifth Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, Shane Stone, claimed, “It is normal for politicians to get seduced by the bureaucrats who actually frame the problems and the agenda”. Stone’s view provides a convenient excuse for government ministers to use in the face of policy and program failure – blame the problem on public servants who developed the proposals agreed to by government.

This apportioning of responsibility exposes the underlying paradigm used in problematisation. Inferences made during this assignment of answerability can be transferred into moral judgements about now problematic individuals (Lakoff & Johnson 2003, 250). The problems can easily be translated into lack of moral fibre or deficiencies in personal motivation and then generalised onto the entire group.
Australia’s belief in work as the best form of welfare (Castles 1985), lack of sympathy for ‘dole-bludgers’ (Eardley & Matheson 1999, 10-11) and the setting of unemployment benefits at comparatively low levels (Esping-Andersen 1990, 68-77) all demonstrate stabilisation of a problem by identifying the unemployed as being responsible for their own predicament. The expert micro-economic analyses that “conceive unemployment as essentially a voluntary phenomenon” are well accepted in the theorisation of the Australian labour market (Whitfield 1987, 41) and frame both the problem and proposed solutions.

For example, in his 1981 submission to the NT Cabinet regarding school-to-work transition, Education Minister, Jim Robertson, described the problems of unemployed youth as a series of deficiencies that included not being well-prepared for life beyond school or able to adapt to a world of work by responding to changing technologies. Not providing training to these unemployed young people would be “leading to seeds of juvenile crime, drug taking and other anti-social behaviour” (Northern Territory Archives Service 1977-2003b). In this paradigm, all unemployed young people behave dangerously and are a problem unless they receive skills training allowing them to gain employment. This employment gives them the financial resources to become consumers who are welcomed in public spaces such as shopping malls, “while their ‘have-not’ peers are not really wanted at all” (Collins et al. 2000, 77).

Finally, the fifth phase of problematisation requires that the conduct under question has to be framed in a manner that makes it amenable to intervention. “Since a problem exists, we assume that there must be a solution and that it is embodied in the program” according to Pressman and Wildavsky (1984, 125). A favoured government intervention relies upon problematising an absence that can be

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31 This disparaging term [dole-bludger] reflects a belief that there are individuals who prefer to live off of unemployment and other welfare benefits instead of being gainfully employed. They are seen to be parasitic in nature and are treated with derision in the mass media.
remedied by building infrastructure. Erecting training facilities is an attractive alternative for governments as it provides a mechanism to gain the support of a wide-ranging set of expert interests. Architects, suppliers, investors, construction companies, RTOs, potential students and members of the community can readily perceive the suggested benefits of a physical asset. The costs and timelines can be reasonably well predicted and controlled if the project is not too complex. Target communities can be singled out for action. Politicians can be photographed opening the facility and mingling with the grateful recipients of the public’s largesse. The social usefulness of training has become so indisputable few would question such an investment. Even symbolising training as bricks and mortar does not detract from its perceived benefits. In describing the envisaged advantages of establishing the Northern Territory Rural College, it was noted, “We likewise see the provision of technical and vocational courses as part of the solution to the problem of these isolated communities” (Katherine Rural College Planning Committee 1976, 17).

The Commonwealth’s provision of capital funding has been used repeatedly to exert influence upon the education and training policies of the States. The post-World War Two Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme (Dymock & Billett 2010, 491) and the provision of school libraries and science laboratories by the Commonwealth in the late 1960s (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, 208) plus TAFE infrastructure funding allocated to the States following the 1974 Kangan Report (Goozee 2001, 26), paved the way for increasing levels of Federal Government influence in education and training matters that were constitutionally reserved for the States. In the pursuit of VET-in-Schools policy objectives in more recent times, the Howard Government favoured building stand-alone Australian Technical Colleges while the Rudd/Gillard Government focused upon building trade training centres on existing school grounds.
Problematising intrinsically links the problem, as constructed, to the development of remedial programs. In fact, governments draw upon a fairly limited range of responses. Erecting physical infrastructure, paid for from the public purse, is one of the more popular actions available to governments. But this requires the problem to be framed in a format that inevitably leads to building something as the solution.

Unemployment in remote NT communities has frequently been linked to a lack of skills on the part of the Indigenous population in these locations, due to an absence of training facilities (Northern Territory TAFE Advisory Council 1986, 100, 104). The inevitable solution to unemployment was to construct places where training could be undertaken. This is in spite of considerable evidence that the provision of facilities has had little impact upon remote unemployment rates (Arbib, Macklin & Ellis 2011).

“Problem understanding and problem resolution are concomitant to each other” according to Rittel & Webber (1973, 161). Like building things, training people is one of the few policy and program options that remain in the hands of State and Territory governments. Former VET leaders Gregor Ramsey and Kaye Schofield were quite animated when explaining why the States and Territories have continuously rebuffed attempts by the Commonwealth to take over the funding of the VET system, as had been done for universities. Training is very useful to governments because it allows problematisation to proceed in a manner that is agreeable to many interest groups while demonstrating government’s responsiveness to social and economic problems. Training is also seen to be a comparatively inexpensive panacea for a broad range of problems.

However, given the inseparable link between solution and problem formulation, other answers can be rendered inconceivable. Due to historical and culturally ingrained reasoning in organisations, many options that could be available are literally ‘unthinkable’ (Hogwood & Gunn 1984, 172). While the idea surfaces now and again, resolving youth unemployment through compulsory national service
programs or the establishment of government-sponsored enterprises to be staffed by the unemployed are ‘unthinkable’ as serious policy options. Because active society policies conjoin a wide variety of economic and social issues with training, the various solutions presented to governments each come with their own, often unstated, paradigmatic views, making training an inevitable reaction while hiding other potential responses. The five phases of problematisation used by Australian governments frequently provide training as a solution because the problem can be created that way.

**Rationalities and technologies**

Miller and Rose (2008, 15) complete their analysis of problematisation with reference to rationalities and technologies. They propose that these two categories “indicate the intrinsic links between a way of representing and knowing a phenomenon, on the one hand, and a way of acting upon it so as to transform it on the other”. Rationalities are styles of reasoning that make matters thinkable and thus subject to calculation and programming. I believe that absence is one such rationality. Direct measures or proxies for types and amounts of absence can be developed and many different agents can understand the concept of absence. Voids suit problematisation. A building can be presented to the community, skills can be measured by the number of qualifications issued and unemployment can be calculated. Absence is a rationality, a “form of reasoning” (Miller & Rose 2008, 16), that dominates the way Australians think about VET.

Conversely, the interventions and solutions to problems are represented as the human technologies used for the conducting of conduct. These “assemblages of persons, techniques, institutions and instruments” (Miller & Rose 2008, 16) are required to make the rationalities operational and supply the solutions to problems. VET is one such technology used in the practice of government.
Thought, as represented by absence and intervention conceived of as VET, constructs an interwoven pairing that can be used to analyse and describe how governments direct the social and what it means for the Australian population. Absence and VET are the major research queries – how has the national training system been created and how does it frame the population’s relationships with the governments it has democratically elected?

**What is the problem represented to be?**

This brief synopsis of problematisation does not imply a simplistic knee-jerk reaction. Governments do not rush out and build something or train people on a problem-based whim. The framing of the problem is highly specialised work that requires expertise in order to recruit support and clarify responsibility for the issue. The complex considerations that go into operating an advanced market democracy are supported by a considered process of problematisation. Developing an understanding of ‘what the problem is represented to be’ can expose how governments operate (cf Bacchi 2009). Different views about the nature of the individual have framed policy problems at various junctures. The examples that follow have each contributed to the development of the National Training System but are based upon vastly different assumptions about the nature of ‘the problem’ and its implied solution. None of them have been fully accepted or completely rejected; therefore, complex political adjustments and compromises have been built into the technology of VET to accommodate these conflicting paradigms, in a further demonstration of the absorptive and inclusive nature of vocational education and training.

Human capital theory considers the individual as a person whose investments in training “usually are rational responses to a calculus of expected costs and benefits” (Becker 1993, 17). Government interventions, based upon human capital theory,
therefore, respond to problems associated with market failure or imperfect markets (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011e, 54). In a related manner, ‘self-interested’ individuals, constructed as choice-making consumers of training services (Skills Australia 2011, 37), give rise to problems of provider image, service levels or pricing. From another perspective, members of the public are considered to be partners in a social contract with government as envisaged in an active society, or the ‘workers’ welfare state’, making space for problems to do with anti-social behaviour, poverty and social exclusion (Cooper 2011, 18; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2005).

Additionally, individuals that have been categorised by economic and social class find they have stereotypic and problematic access to trade or professional qualifications resulting in solutions designed to increase access to training (Bourdieu 1979, 132-133). Alternatively, proponents of the Unique Student Identifier conceive of the individual as a numerically labelled commodity to be assembled, measured and re-assembled. The problems that accompany individual student identification focus upon the reliability and consistency of systemic processes and structures, replicable and accurate data capture throughout the nation and accounting matters. Accordingly, the solutions that accompany each of the perceived problems are different. More importantly, in the real, messy, highly contingent and politicised world of VET, these are not mutually-exclusive categories. They can and do co-exist rendering vocational education and training philosophically incoherent but highly adaptable technology for managing behaviour and self-transformation.

In determining ‘what the problem is represented to be’, the object of study shifts from the means of solving the problem to a focus upon how the problems come into being and are made amenable to government action. Understanding the thinking used to construct the problem, rather than the chosen solution, is much more
instructive about how Australia is governed (Bacchi 2009). Different paradigms frame problems and their linked solutions for governments. The rationality of absence invites an examination of the unstated assumptions, the silences and the effects of the representation of the problem, in order to expose the motives and the underpinning conceptual base of those who propose the problem. One of the contributing factors to the complexity of the National Training System (and its need for its own specialist language) arises from the use of different paradigms in framing the problems for government action and the consequent need for different groups to be able to communicate about the National Training System.

**Enacting vocational education and training**

How do governments manage the various paradigms that impact upon their problematisation of VET? Is the variety of legitimate views that flourish in a democracy a problem in itself? In what might be considered to be a more sophisticated description of power beyond Foucault, ontological studies reveal that ‘realities and condition of possibility’ are not fixed as they vary between practices and understandings (Law 2004; Mol 2008).

In her ethnographic study of a complex phenomenon Mol (2002) proposes that having ‘multiple’, simultaneous understandings of an object serve a useful purpose. In fact, “things and people are always multiple” (Bowker & Star 1999, 297). Therefore, it is not unusual, or a difficulty, for multiple versions of VET to exist that might simultaneously reflect human capital theory, active social policy or biopower. Various technical experts can ‘enact’ their version in order to function in their daily organisational routines based upon the paradigms derived from their occupational backgrounds. By using an agreed technical name for the phenomenon, one set of experts can communicate with another by using it as a “boundary object” (Mol 2002, 138):
The concept of the boundary object grows out of the idea that there are different social worlds. These different social worlds each have their own codes, habits, instruments and ways of making sense. But they share something: the boundary object. The specific meanings each of them attaches to this object are different. It is a common object, shared by various social groups. Thus it facilitates collaboration across boundaries and thereby makes these boundaries less absolute (Mol 2002, 138 emphasis in original).

Mol (2002, 33-36) describes the circulatory disease arteriosclerosis as one example of a multiple and boundary object. Inside the same hospital, the patient perceives the disease as pain in the legs and describes this to the general practitioner who envisages a condition that can be controlled by diet, exercise and other lifestyle factors. If the disease is advanced enough, the surgeons conceive of the need to use invasive techniques to remove blockages in the body’s circulatory system and, if all else fails, the laboratory technicians see microscopic sections of the deceased person’s blood vessels that have been stained with various dyes to confirm the cellular causes of death. Each of these individuals is ‘doing’ arteriosclerosis differently, but they can use its name in order to communicate with each other despite their alternative assumptive views.

I argue that vocational education and training is a multiple object as well as a boundary object thus allowing it to be enacted differently by a variety of interested parties. Consequently, the technology known as VET can be ‘done’ differently in RTOs, workplaces, at NCVER and in government agencies. Not only does VET’s rationality of absence (not a school or university) make it a highly attractive and flexible option for governments to use, it serves a crucial technical role in the process of problematisation by having multiple versions that facilitate communication, coalition building and deriving apparent solutions.
Getting under the skin of VET’s banality by taking ‘stubborn notice’ (Mol 2002, 33) of the techniques used by those enacting the multiple object exposes the ways in which training is made visible, audible, tangible and knowable. The product is a story about practices and events originating from separate scenes, which when put together, describe the object and its uses in a more complete form. For this narrative, the strength of using this approach is its ability to explain multiple, often conflicting problematisations experienced in the National Training System. Training’s extraordinary capacity to even ‘cure cancer’, in addition to addressing skill shortages, unemployment, unskilled youth, lifelong learning, juvenile crime and drug-taking, can be explored through the study of the various scenes where VET is enacted by different people and then drawing it together into a single story.

**An emerging theoretical perspective**

If VET is the answer, we have the tools to examine what question was being asked. By changing the focus from the structures and processes of formally recognised training to the manner in which governments create and use problems, alternative theoretical examinations of VET can be undertaken. Having argued that the entire field is under-theorised, the ability to portray the technology of VET as a multiple object, aided and abetted by the rationality of absence, explains its appeal to the problematising activities of governments. VET serves as a boundary object because it allows for communication between a diverse range of interests, assisted by its own technical language and the influence of experts. One consequence is that many different groups can lay claim to legitimate participation in problematising a diverse range of social and economic concerns, with VET as a shared solution.

As confirmed in my interviews there is little to indicate that any of these claimants have been able to progress beyond a simplistic and reductionist discourse that determines much of what is thought and said about VET. The use of VET as a
technology of governments, the crucial role played by absence and related analyses of how this has come about, have remained unreported because problematisation is conducted in cramped theoretical conditions. The problematisation of formal training in Australia has been limited and directed by ‘the grand narrative’ of vocational education and training – a notional dualism pitting highly esteemed economists against under-valued educationalists.
Chapter Six

The Grand Narrative of VET
Traineeships are more about employment than training.

(Karmel, T & Cully 2009, 9)

The easier they are to use, the harder they are to see\textsuperscript{32}

It is not difficult to hide something if no one is looking for it. Due to under-theorisation of the Australian predilection to governmentalise a wide variety of social phenomena, the technology of VET does not have a high profile. But that does not mean that it is unimportant. The various Australian governments remain engaged in decades-long skirmishes and campaigns over funding and direction of the National Training System. The drawing of the battle lines, a process of problematisation, has positioned traditional analyses within highly restrictive confines.

Advanced market democracies have accepted a superficial, dichotomous debate about the purpose of education and training in society. In one corner stands the Scottish Enlightenment’s conception of a democratic, egalitarian society inhabited by free-willed individuals who have gained moral and intellectual integrity through a formal process of education (Herman 2003, 26). In the other, the preparation for active participation in the workforce is represented as the purpose of education (Grenfell 2007, 72-73; Winch 2002, 109).\textsuperscript{33} In contemporary Australia this simplistic stoush is being held in a ring solidly constructed with only two corners. One is occupied by those who argue the enlightenment value of education (Stevenson 2007, 28; Wheelahan 2011b, 22), while the other accommodates those who argue the instrumental nature of education and training (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013). This is exactly the type of social commotion that might have attracted the attention of Foucault and exercised his ability to move beyond

\textsuperscript{32} (Bowker & Star 1999, 33)

\textsuperscript{33} Many writers, particularly before the creation and designation of vocational education and training as a sector, generically use the word ‘education’ to include training. Unless otherwise specified, the use of ‘education’ is considered to be inclusive of TAFE, VET or any of the various forms of adult, vocational or technical education that have existed over the years.
the simplistic and dualistic to a more nuanced understanding of how governments in advanced market democracies problematise, use specific rationalities and adapt the power/knowledge relationships that have come into being between the state and its citizens.

Education and a democratic society

The preparation of a democratic citizenry has been debated at least since the time of the ancient Greeks (Foucault 2010b). Schooling can provide an opportunity to escape from lower social groups by teaching a set of general inquiry-based skills to all students, thus enabling them to participate in a democracy as self-determining individuals (Dewey 1916, 320; Mayer 1992, viii). Such ‘progressive education’ does not perpetuate unfair privilege or deprivation because of its focus upon generic aptitudes and social skills. To justify the provision of publicly-funded universal education, Australia has traditionally drawn upon both American ‘progressive education’ beliefs and English ‘Oxbridge’ notions of classical liberal educational values aimed at producing an all-round, balanced citizen (Marginson 1993a, 17). The historical antecedents to VET were also pushed in a similar direction by another British institution, the Workers’ Educational Associations (WEAs) (Whitelock 1974, 174-201). The provision of cultural enrichment for the individual, as well as distributing social justice and equality, guided production of the autodidacts emerging from these organisations.

The privileging of one class’s values can give rise to a diametrically opposed view of the role of education and training, however. Rather than as sites of liberation, formal education systems can equally be portrayed as tools of oppression (Freire 1996, 59). State-mandated education, community development programs and government-sponsored leadership training have been described as schemes designed to maintain social divisions and to ensure inequality by retaining existing
socio-economic differentials (Bourdieu 1979, 147; Freire 1996, 122-123). This range of standpoints is evident in contemporary public policy debates. Education can either be framed as the great equaliser and key to promoting social mobility or as the ultimate normalising institution aimed at taming the ‘feral’ working class and reproducing social hierarchies (Bacchi 2009, 209). Australia has reached a consensual accommodation of these two positions by combining both an expectation for government to do something with a belief in individual accountability.

For those who believe education to be the prodigious leveller, problems amenable to government intervention are most often portrayed as the lack of services or at least inadequate access to facilities and programs. From the point of view of the oppressed, problems arise due to the heavy-handed, unresponsive nature of education and training systems and their constant reinforcement of social position, leading to calls for social welfare programs and the redistribution of wealth (Bacchi 2009, 208-209; Bennett 1982, 161).

Regardless, these opposed views enigmatically combine to support the need for governments to continually ‘reform’ the systems of education and training. The ‘New Right’ believes that public education and training systems produce unskilled, unemployable and ill-disciplined graduates (Kenway 1990, 188), while the Left sees a system that has yet to address greater social and economic equality (Bennett 1982, 178). The questions put to governments do not concern the existence of a guiding rationality and its related technology, but deal with tweaking the existing system in the name of better coordination (Lea 2008, 62-67; Pressman & Wildavsky 1984, 134), whole of government approaches (Ryan 2002, 36) or further reform (Council of Australian Governments 2012). Australians have accepted a bipartisan, yet paradoxical ability to join differing views to build an expectation for government to do something, anything, rather than just get out of way.
In addition to education’s role in the development of society, it is also linked, policy-wise, to the art of government through political economy (Foucault 2007b, 76-77). Despite the effort of many VET commentators to credit (or blame) the Commonwealth Government minister, John Dawkins, with the responsibility for re-positioning training from an educational to an economic discourse (Kell 1994; Ryan 2002), education has always played a prominent role in economic considerations associated with the free market democracies.

In his seminal 1776 book, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith (2009) explicitly describes the crucial need for a well-educated citizenry to participate successfully in political life and serve as a check upon the rapacious nature of unrestrained capitalists because “Smith knew that a modern capitalist society without a decent system of education was committing suicide, politically as well as culturally” (Herman 2003, 214). Smith’s ideas reflect the Scots’ extension of middle-class liberalism to all citizens. Even though Smith viewed government as inefficient and spendthrift, he believed universal education to be one of the few endeavours best undertaken by civic institutions (Heilbroner 1999, 68-69).

This conception of a democratically active citizenry was antithetical to the concepts of ‘social efficiency’ that linked education to industrial competency and narrow occupational preparation (Dewey 1916, 299-301):

> There is danger that vocational education will be interpreted in theory and practice as trade education: as a means of securing technical efficiency in specialised future pursuits. Education would then become an instrument of perpetuating unchanged the existing industrial order of society, instead of operating as a means of its transformation (Dewey 1916, 774).
Having been defined by what it was not allowed for an easy appropriation of VET into political economic considerations, built upon its contested role of either supporting the *status quo* or providing the opportunity for an individual to change their socio-economic position. While this limiting, superficial debate continues without resolution, it is clear that VET, as a technology or machinery, cannot be understood without reference to the national economy.

**VET and the economy**

The ‘conventional wisdom’ espoused by many of those who work in the sector is that VET has been hijacked by economic values, the subject of continual change and is always viewed as inferior to schools and universities in public and political opinion (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974; Billett 2011; TAFE Directors Australia 2004). When expressing these views, the speaker invariably rolls his or her eyes and adopts a world-weary expression. The sharing of this grand narrative allows the listener to immediately bond with the messenger as a true VET insider. Those ‘in the know’ have accepted the dominant narrative marking the advent of the National Training Reform Agenda in the 1990s (Australian National Training Authority 1994b) as the start of VET being guided by economic imperatives (Kinsman 2009) as well as one manifestation of the introduction of economic rationalism into Australia (Marginson 1997b).

However, I have argued that more detailed scrutiny of policy documents shows that VET has been subject to political and economic decisions made by Australian governments for decades (Zoellner 2011, 7). For example, Curtin’s 1945 *White Paper on Full Employment* (Coombs 1994) makes explicit links between training and the economic future of the nation as does Kangan (1964) in his widely circulated mid-twentieth century book, *Personnel Management for Australia*. This is the same Myer Kangan, the nation’s leading expert on personnel management, who
would go on to chair the influential inquiry that allowed Commonwealth Government funding to flow to Technical and Further Education in 1974.

When the historical record is analysed more closely, not only is the re-telling of constant change in VET moderated to administrative tinkering, but a long-standing pattern of consistent behaviour in the pursuit of elusive social and economic goals is exposed as well. Since World War Two the governmentisation of VET has moved along a predictable, if often convoluted, trajectory that positioned training as a core policy option to be used in economic considerations. That is, for all of the superficial change, invariably associated with many reviews and announcements of so-called reforms, the underlying rationales for the use of publicly funded training have remained remarkably consistent.

In spite of the constitutional difficulties, the Commonwealth has long demonstrated a keen interest in education and training matters. In 1943, in the midst of World War Two and an acute awareness of Australia’s weaknesses in a new global order, an Inter-departmental Committee on Education34 was convened to:

not only review the whole area of Commonwealth responsibilities in the field of education, but also to recommend administrative machinery which might be established to facilitate the future development of Commonwealth education policy (Tannock 1975, 4).

The seldom reported work of this committee was being undertaken because “The political future and unity of the country depends very largely on the use we make of general education, especially for adults” (Tannock 1975, 17). An intriguing early sign of the rationality of absence in VET was noted in the submission to the committee by Dr W. G. K. Duncan, Director of Tutorial Classes at the University of Sydney, when he not only described adult education as a ‘difficult problem’ but additionally

34 In keeping with government convention, this is also known as the Walker Committee.
wrote, “The people least willing to define Adult Education are those who have the most experience in it” (Tannock 1975, 80).

Duncan had been separately commissioned by the Commonwealth Government to report upon the merits of a national adult education system and made a very detailed set of recommendations for the creation of a national bureau for adult education in 1944 (Whitelock 1973). Familiar arguments of improved industrial efficiency, an agreement between the States and Commonwealth on the funding of training and the creation a research and materials development capacity were all canvassed. The more rapid adoption of the use of modern technologies (gramophones, movies and radio) was suggested as a benefit of a nationwide adult training system. Duncan’s proposed comprehensive Federal intervention was rejected by Prime Minister Chifley on the basis of not wanting to have a constitutional argument with the State premiers over their responsibilities for education, plus the budgetary constraints faced by the Commonwealth due to the war effort (Whitelock 1973, introduction).

Another part of VET’s grand narrative, the common belief that Kangan’s Report brought the concept of ongoing and recurrent education of individuals to the Australian VET scene, is not supported by Duncan’s 1943 submission to the Walker Committee when he wrote “There is widespread agreement nowadays that education should be a continuous and lifelong process” (Tannock 1975, 81). Similarly, his proposed national system for adult education was premised upon the economic and social need for a population that would undertake lifelong learning (Whitelock 1973). Although the Commonwealth’s activities in VET may have been rather timid and related to war policy, these reports, when combined with the 1945 White Paper on Full Employment (Coombs 1994), clearly demonstrate both an interest in training and a willingness on the part of the Commonwealth Government to use it as a policy option as the nation left World War Two behind. While the
Commonwealth’s increased involvement may have been gradual and measured, it has also been inexorable.

**VET and the economy – a social construction**

My interviews commenced with a query designed to explore VET’s grand narrative and to test the strength of the dualistic problematisation. The answers to the opening question regarding the main purpose of VET in Australian society – educational or economic – produced three groups of initial replies in approximately equal proportions. One group viewed VET as an educational activity, another as clearly economic and the third lot preferred to describe VET as both. Nevertheless, as each person elaborated upon their opening position, VET was unequivocally linked to the economy and associated skill needs. However, the reasoning used by different people to join VET to the economy was a standout variable.

Those who immediately replied ‘economic’ rationalised (through absence) their interview response by placing VET as the necessary reaction to skill shortages. The Chief Executive of Skills Australia, Robin Shreeve, typifies this group of respondents when he asserts that VET is in the economic policy area for most governments because it “provides skills for economic growth”. The most outspoken view regarding the link between VET and the economy came from former trade unionist, ANTA General Manager, Queensland Deputy Director-General (VET) and member of Bradley Review of Higher Education, Peter Noonan. Any attempt to declare VET to be educational (in a government policy sense) is “ahistorical” according to Noonan. Positioning VET as educational ignores the important role played by Mechanics’ Institutes and the Workers’ Educational Associations in the provision of vocational skills to the working class. In Noonan’s view, a “silly debate” about the role of VET has developed because the institutions that were responsible for the delivery of vocational training were “progressively hijacked” by middle class, general
education teachers who imposed their liberal views of the world upon the working class. While it may be a silly debate, Noonan clearly stakes his position in the economic camp.

The former Chief Executive of the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training prior to serving as the Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in the Howard Coalition Government provided views that exemplify those who believe VET to be both educational and economic. According to the current Chair of the Board of Directors of NCVER, the urbane and consummate government insider, Peter Shergold, choosing between the two is a “forced dichotomy”. For optimal public policy, VET and higher education should be viewed as a whole to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the skill needs of the economy as well as enhancing individual skills acquisition. The primary guide to the necessary types and mix of skills can only be determined by the requirements of employers. He cites Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating’s attack upon ‘basket-weavers’ and Liberal Education Minister Brendan Nelson’s disparaging of tertiary courses in surfing and astrology as colourful, but insistent, messages from both sides of politics that education and training must be responsive to the economic needs of the private sector. In Shergold’s thinking, this is best achieved by blurring the boundaries between schools, universities and registered training organisations.

Those who saw VET as an educational endeavour gave yet another account of how VET came to be embraced by economic considerations. From her position as a VET analyst and writer, the self-described “naïve educationalist”, Kaye Schofield, believes that VET’s roots in adult education firmly situated it as a technique for social change that she refers to as “liberation education”. She marks the Kirby Report (1985) as the turning point when VET became an economic activity. One outcome of this landmark national report was to give rise to the category of formal
training known as traineeships.\textsuperscript{35} Schofield served as a member of the committee that produced this \textit{Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Labour Market Programs} (Kirby 1985) and feels strongly that, because of the report, “the game was on to accommodate economic aspects of skills into education”.

In opposition to Shergold’s and Noonan’s viewpoint, Schofield believes that the existing dualistic paradigmatic debate on the role of education in society remains as relevant today as when she wrote about it in the \textit{Clash of the Titans} (Schofield 1994). The titanic forces emanating from differing paradigms pitted ‘creative and responsive’ professional educators against the economic newcomers who believe in the “primacy of a labour market orientation” (Schofield 1994, 61). She is also credited with describing this 1980s philosophical argument as a battle between the ‘education tribe’ and the ‘training tribe’ (Ryan 2002, 89).

In reply to the question, economic or educational, the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Australia and Chair of the Higher Education Review Expert Panel, Denise Bradley quipped, “Or welfare”? Her considered view is that all education policy in Australia became essentially economic policy due to the 1985 Karmel Report into education and its foundation of human capital theory (Karmel, P 1985).\textsuperscript{36} Bradley feels that VET has moved from being a preparation for a particular vocation to become part of a “grander” education agenda. She concurs with Shergold’s blurring of the boundary between VET and higher education on the basis that both offer vocational preparation with the difference being that universities “deal with the handmaidens of privilege – the professions”.

\textsuperscript{35} Traineeships are a category of nationally recognised training that included about one-quarter of a million individuals in contracted training in 2010. Traineeship numbers overtook those in traditional trade apprenticeships in 2000 (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2010c).

\textsuperscript{36} This is one of the national landmark reports and was commissioned by the then Commonwealth Minister for Education in order “develop strategies for the Commonwealth Government in its involvement in primary and secondary education, for raising the standards attained by students in communication, literacy and numeracy and for improving the relationship between secondary schooling and subsequent employment and education” (Karmel, P 1985, 1).
While all interviewees agreed that VET and the economy are now inextricably bound together, their method of arriving at this position varies considerably. It is timely to recall that VET had arisen from the “newly named creature called TAFE” (Schofield 1994, 58) in less than twenty years. This means that any understanding of VET also developed within the same time frame. The disputed discursive formations and roles of class reproducer, social mobiliser or economic enabler have each been elaborated as a result of social routines and experiences.

Because a system like VET is socially constructed, then it could be expected that different individuals would have alternative views as to what it is, what it does and how it came into being. Given the disparate perspectives expressed by the interviewees, it is clear that their individual understandings of how VET has come to be an economic consideration for governments depends very much upon their personal history, professional experiences and roles played. Vocational education and training has been socially constructed and reconstructed, as part of an ongoing process by governments in their pursuit of ‘the will to train’, as previously explored in Chapter Four.

The strongly held views of my interviewees are each likely to be ‘correct’. As a new technology that represents an element of biopower, VET has a voracious ability to incorporate multiple definitions that has been greatly enhanced because it is defined by what it is not – not a university, college of advanced education or a school. By changing the focus of questioning from the object to the productive process and problematisation, it no longer matters who is ‘right’ and who is ‘wrong’; VET is all of those things that are ascribed to it and more.

**Constructing the discourse of VET**

The most recently developed discourse, as characterised by Shergold’s “forced dichotomy” and, more provocatively, Noonan’s “silly debate”, is pushing towards
dismissal of the possibility that VET was ever anything other than an economic consideration. Their telling of the VET story supports the argument that the National Training System arises from governments’ ‘will to train’. The desired goal is to produce self-managing citizens willing to work in a market-driven economy. The previous debate concerning VET’s role becomes irrelevant because its restless, productive logic has embraced other considerations arising from the conflation of democracy, employment and the economic welfare of the nation. There is no longer a need for dualistic positioning of education versus economics. They have come to be defined as the same thing – a social and economic good with political economy guiding the new discourse.

As this narrative summary demonstrates, the downgrading of a once central debate and its related theoretical and philosophical considerations can serve to hide important characteristics of the methods used by governments to manage the behaviour of the population. Training is no longer problematised in educational terms. The ability of a liberal-leaning economic historian such as Shergold to construct the same inchoate discourse as the more socialist and union-oriented Noonan is quite instructive. VET is being positioned as an unquestioned good. The will to govern, empower and train aligns a public view of what the population should be like with the associated training; producing citizens who freely participate in advanced market democracies using practices acceptable to both the governors and the governed.

This developing and socially constructed discourse challenging VET’s grand narrative is presented as unproblematic, in spite of having derived from a process of problematisation. Those wishing to retain the old dichotomy are now represented as ‘forced’ or ‘silly’ by those who operate at the highest levels of government. Importantly, those who believe VET to be a vital educational activity (Billett 2011;
Fitzgerald 2011; Foley & Morris 1995; Schofield 1994) have a diminishing voice in the VET discourse taking place the public policy arenas.

In a highly unusual move, however, the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency’s 2013 national workforce development strategy does make substantial recommendations regarding teaching and learning in VET that include the establishment of a “national body and program” dedicated to drive excellence and offer professional development for the VET workforce (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 143). The reappearance of teaching and learning as a VET public policy consideration, after a 20-odd year absence, begs a number of questions. Instead of denying the educational component of vocational training, is this an attempt to guide both educational and economic discourses?

Like the well-established grand narrative of VET, which rallies insiders around an aging dualistic debate, those contributing to the ‘post-silly’ discourse do not address the various logics, tactics or programs inherent in the system nor their impacts upon society more broadly. They thereby continue the invisibility of VET’s place and influence over the relationships between citizens and their governments. What we are witnessing in the changing VET discourse is the reason Foucault rejected grand narratives as a matter of investigatory principle – the discursive formations change due to social and other circumstances. The advantages conferred upon VET by its rationality of absence positions the National Training System as valued machinery unlimited by the dichotomy of educational versus economic. A formal system of training has been implicated in other complex issues to do with social welfare (Castles 1985), what it means to be a citizen in an active society (Cooper 2011, 18) and group or individual identity in advanced market democracies (Miller & Rose 2008, 102). Governments are willing to continuously argue over the funding of vocational education and training, with an evolving discourse that sublimates the National Training System’s development and use as a practise of government for
managing the population’s behaviour and self-improvement. After all, it is very easy for something to remain invisible if no one is looking for it.

**Problematising a governmental gap**

The Australian penchant to governmentalise, therefore problematising, the need for a national system of training required that States, Territories and Federal governments develop a VET discourse that accommodates the constitutional separation of education powers. The desire for a national VET system serendipitously matured at the same time as the 60 year-old demands from the Northern Territory for self-government, meaning that increased local influence could no longer be ignored. In addition, New Public Management\(^{37}\) (Hill & Hupe 2002, 110) and active social policy provided innovative and modern ways for governments to exercise authority and solve problems. This headline combination of events, accompanied by a vigorous debate over how to best administer education and training in the NT (Urvett, Heatley & Alcorta 1980), gave rise to the need to fill a political and bureaucratic absence.\(^{38}\) The need for a government that performed the same functions as the other States, as recognised by the Australian Constitution, was problematised for the Northern Territory.

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\(^{37}\) The New Public Management (NPM) paradigm places the operational aspects of implementing public policy in the hands of a managing ‘agent’ with whom the ‘principal’ (government) makes a contract specifying expected outputs. Implementation and responsibility for potential failure is contracted away (Hill & Hupe 2002, 110).

\(^{38}\) These included a desire by the Commonwealth Government to decentralise functions to local authorities, the perceived under-investment in social and economic infrastructure in the NT on the part of the Commonwealth and demands for types of land tenure other than lease-hold arrangements.
Chapter Seven
The Need for a State
The best view of Darwin is from 40 000 feet on your way to Paris.
Attributed to former Prime Minister, Paul Keating

It takes two

VET, as it currently exists, can only be enacted through the cooperation between a State or Territory government and the Commonwealth Government. In order to ‘do’ the National Training System, Federal policy and funding establishes the general structures and directions. These include registration of training providers (RTOs), the Australian Qualifications Framework and the collection and dissemination of nationally consistent data through NCVER. The actions of various State and Territory governments allocate the people, locations, buildings, programs and tactics that react to centralised guidance in unpredictable and idiosyncratic ways that reflect the political economy in each jurisdiction. Contestations at the interface between national policy-setting and local operational management ensures a lack of consistency across jurisdictions and never-ending skirmishes over who ultimately pays for training (McDowell et al. 2011).

Neither the Northern Territory nor the Commonwealth was forced to become directly involved in making VET policy, regulating the quasi-market for VET or collecting information about the training sector. The Australian Constitution reserved education and training as State responsibilities and the Commonwealth generally accepted this arrangement, except in the national emergency of World War Two (Tannock 1975). The Federal Government changed direction in 1974 in response to the recommendations of the Kangan Report which laid the foundations for a national system of training. Similarly, the Northern Territory did not even have a government in 1974 (Heatley 1990) and most VET policy direction was determined by an Apprenticeships Board and the Darwin Community College. Both governments could have chosen to remain aloof from training policy and funding.
But they did not. Training is irresistibly attractive to the politicians and bureaucrats of governments – like a bee to a meadow full of blossoms – so many options and so much work to be done. In addition to VET’s capacity to be a solution to many social and economic problems, it serves another well-disguised and seldom discussed function for governments. Governmentalising VET adds to the state’s knowledge of the population and, according to Foucault (Oksala 2007, 48-52), increases the power of the government and its incessant desire to conduct the conduct of the residents of the jurisdiction by integrating disciplinary and self-technologies. The dreary banality of VET masks this function.

This chapter details how these two governments have mobilised VET by describing a standard review and report process and the ephemeral nature of the major bureaucratic structures that have provided a home for vocational education and training in government. This genealogy is based in the Northern Territory because it provides a unique politico-historical context with the advent of ‘self-government’ from 1974 onwards, the same year that the Kangan Report was produced. Unlike the other States, the NT had the most policy flexibility in implementing the national training agenda because it did not have the encumbrances of pre-existing administrative departments and State-operated training delivery institutions. For example, the NT was the first State to legislate for competency-based training in 1991, “pioneered” flexible delivery strategies to increase access to training in 1989 and created and maintained several genuinely dual-sector education and training

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39 Northern Territory self-government refers to the conferral of a series of rights and responsibilities to a government legally constituted by the Commonwealth Government. The Northern Territory Government has all of the trappings of parliamentary government in the British ‘Westminster’ tradition including the Queen of England’s representative (as head of state) in the form of the NT Administrator, a popularly elected Legislative Assembly and cabinet-style government. The functions exercised under the terms of self-government are generally those reserved for the various Australian States that agreed to form the national Commonwealth Government in 1901. The difference is that the Commonwealth can repeal this act of self-determination and override any NT legislation.
organisations (Industry Commission 1998, 133-139). Vocational education and training in the Northern Territory was constructed from the ground up and in lock step with the development of the National Training System. Using techniques from both organisational and autoethnography to explore ‘how’ this construction took place, the NT provided me with maximum insider access due to my previous employment and longevity as a resident.

**Australian governments and education**

Australia’s distinctive style of government came from the joint agreement of the six self-governing colonies to come together as a single nation in 1901. Federation was built upon a strong constitutional separation of responsibilities, with most reserved to the former British colonies, now designated as State governments, and rather limited responsibilities granted to the new Commonwealth Government. During interview the former Chief Minister of the NT and Liberal Party national president, Shane Stone, emphasised that “The Commonwealth was a creation of the States, not the other way around”. There have been four levels of government operating in Australia since World War Two. These are Federal, State and local governments as well as a vast variety of statutory authorities established by the various tiers of government. Phrases such as ‘public sector’ and ‘public service’, often shortened to ‘public’, are commonly used to describe government in an institutional sense (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, 4). VET policy has been enacted in three of these levels, but not by local government. The National Training System is a joint creation of two tiers of government – the Commonwealth and the States. The interaction of

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40 These included Centralian College, a joint senior secondary-VET institution in Alice Springs, the higher education-VET structures at Batchelor College (now Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education) and the Darwin Community College/Northern Territory University (now Charles Darwin University).

41 Local government is not recognised constitutionally. A September 2013 national referendum to change the Australian Constitution in order to do so was deferred.

42 While not strictly constitutionally correct, the Northern Territory Government will be considered to be a State for the sake of clarity and reducing the number of detailed explanations of sometimes esoteric exceptions that have little bearing on this analysis.
these two levels of governments has been characterised by “tendencies to centralisation of allocative influence” at the national level that has led to:

the primacy of Federal bureaucracy, particularly in Federal financial, monetary, economic and social policy, with States and local authorities progressively downgraded to subsidiary government agencies (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, 108).

While the Australian Constitution reserves powers for education and training to the States, the Commonwealth Government has steadily increased its involvement in each educational sector due to its superior financial resources, gleaned particularly via a monopoly over income and company taxes. Its action has often been undertaken at the request of the States when faced with budgetary shortfalls. From the late 1950s the Commonwealth Government has progressively intervened in post-school education funding and “in 1973, with the agreement of the States, the Commonwealth assumed full financial responsibility for universities” (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, 215).

The funding models that have derived from the Review of funding for schooling: final report (Gonski et al. 2011) also exemplify the steady increase in federal funding to the schooling sector. Commonwealth Governments have historically provided about 50 per cent of private school funding, while 90 per cent of public school funding derives from the States and Territories (Marginson 1993a, 8). The Commonwealth Government currently provides about 25 per cent ($1,169 million) of the recurrent outlays for training, while the States and Territories furnish the remaining public provision of some $3,346 million (Productivity Commission 2012b, table 5A). Marginson (1993a, 8) neatly summarises the relationship between the States and the Commonwealth over VET in noting that even though the States and Territories
furnish three-quarters of the funding for the sector, the Federal Government has more influence through “its economic policies and national standards setting”.

Problematising State-level government

In 1910, South Australia relinquished the Northern Territory to the Commonwealth in one of many deals and concessions that came out of the federation negotiations (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 1974). As a result, a miniscule one per cent of the Australian population, albeit occupying a very large 15 per cent of the new continent-nation’s landmass, became a colonial territory of the Commonwealth Government in order to reduce the financial strains upon the South Australian State budget. NT residents lost their ability to exercise those functions reserved to the States by the Australian Constitution. Ongoing constraints on State-type responsibilities have served as defining characteristics of the Northern Territory political and economic environment ever since (Everingham 1981; Heatley 1990) and have driven long-standing local demands to transition the NT into Australia’s seventh State.

The yearning, on the one hand, and necessity, on the other, for a State-type government in the NT has been driven from two different perspectives. Inside the NT, the argument has been framed in rather simplistic terms of achieving rights and responsibilities equal to those exercised by the residents of the States. The Commonwealth’s perspective has been much more ambivalent. In spite of the persistent concentration of financial resources at the Federal level since World War Two, the Australian Government’s adoption of New Public Management principles, reliance upon statutory authorities (Hill & Hupe 2002, 110; Pusey 1988, 41) and the related withdrawal from service delivery roles to focus upon policy and funding, required some sort of political and bureaucratic mechanism to provide State-type
functions in the NT.\footnote{A number of other reasons could also be listed including social and economic problems associated with managing isolated small communities separated by vast distances in a generally harsh (by European standards) climate. There are a wide variety of cross-cultural issues, with 30 per cent of the NT population identifying as Indigenous Australians. The NT exhibits stark contrasts with both very modern major population centres and many areas that are more similar to so-called third world nations in terms of education, health, economic and other social measures. These combine to make routine governance tasks particularly unattractive to Commonwealth ministers and bureaucrats.} In addition, the late 1970s Commonwealth Government’s appropriation of ‘new federalism’ sought, briefly and ultimately vainly, to wind back the centralisation of political decision-making and program development at the national level (Heatley 1990, 33). Although working from different motivations, the joint desire to fill the absence of institutional State government produced a progressive, if glacially paced, introduction of self-government in the Northern Territory.

The absence of the right to make local decisions about State-type functions motivated local politicians to create the NT Government and its subsequent administrative arrangements. The purpose of every function of a State was carefully scrutinised by both the embryonic NT and existing Commonwealth Governments in the governmentalisation of the NT and its problematic population. The first Chief Minister of the NT, Paul Everingham, describes this early work as laying the groundwork and starting all things anew as “We were setting precedents where other Australian Governments were only modifying them” (Everingham 1981, 2).

**The Northern Territory Government and VET**

The first NT experience of a Westminster-style, democratically elected representative government body was the 1948 Legislative Council. This group consisted of six popularly elected members from various parts of the NT and eight Commonwealth Government appointees, who were mostly senior public servants resident in the NT. The Legislative Council was presided over by the Administrator of the NT – another Commonwealth appointee. Over the years, the composition,
functions and operations metamorphosed into a single house, the Legislative Assembly, consisting of the current 25 fully elected members representing geographical-based electorates of the NT, predicated upon the number of voters residing in each electoral division. In keeping with the Westminster tradition, the party capable of mustering a majority of votes in the Parliament is given the commission to form government by the Crown’s representative, the Administrator. Since self-government, the Administrator is appointed by the Commonwealth Government based on advice received from the NT Government. The position has become largely that of a constitutional figurehead.

Preparation for the transfer of State-type responsibilities from the Commonwealth Government to the NT gained momentum in 1974. This was followed by full ‘self-government’ in 1978, although for reasons that will be described shortly, the transfer of responsibility for education and training was delayed until July 1979 (Heatley 1990, 68).

The importance of apprenticeship training was evident from the very first days of the NT residents being granted limited capacity to make public policy. The inaugural 1948 session of the Legislative Council linked training, economic prosperity and social development of the jurisdiction with the passage of its very first piece of legislation that established the NT Apprenticeships Board. This organisation was to serve as “machinery whereby apprentices may be trained in a regularised manner” and “to keep lads in the Territory” (Northern Territory of Australia 1948, 93). The functions of this government technology were remarkably similar to those framing apprenticeships in this century. The Board established, registered and monitored contracts of training between the employer and the apprentice, made regular visits to inspect training records and workplaces, ensured the quality of training and currency of industry standards and, if everything proceeded satisfactorily during the 4-6 years of indenture, issued formally recognised qualifications.
Clearly, the earliest NT politicians felt that it was appropriate for the State to intervene in and regulate the transfer of economically important skills. The training system would be used to guide the conduct of residents including intentions to restrict individuals’ geographic mobility. The first legislation passed by NT elected members joined the conduct of employers and apprentices to the economic and social development of the jurisdiction through government mandated regulation.

The importance of training to Northern Territory politicians was re-iterated some 30 years later at the fledgling Cabinet’s third meeting in February 1977. It adopted a submission to immediately accept the transfer of the Apprenticeships Board and its placement in the Transport and Industry Portfolio, severing is relationship with the education sector (Northern Territory Archives Service 1977-2003a). This move reflected tensions regarding the transfer of functions to the NT that had arisen between supporters of self-government on the Apprenticeships Board disagreeing with an Education Department that was actively campaigning against greater local autonomy over education matters (Department of Education: Northern Territory Division 1978; Northern Territory Archives Service 1971-2003).

In 1974 the responsibility for school education lay with the Commonwealth Department of Education (Department of Education: Northern Territory Division 1974). Rather unusually, other than the Apprenticeships Board, most aspects of NT post-school education and training policy and delivery of these services, was under the authority of the newly established Darwin Community College (Darwin Community College Planning Committee 1970; Department of Education: Northern Territory Division 1974). The ownership of training policy did not lie with the NT Government with the first major transfer of functions in 1978. The new government still had the option of not directly intervening in training available.
In a combined effort that was to have political ramifications for decades, the Darwin Community College (DCC) and the NT Division of the Commonwealth Education Department strongly argued that education and training should not be handed over to the inexperienced NT Government. They contended that education and training were nationally important functions, in light of the Kangan Report, and that a local NT administration would be incapable of operating such complex functions or understanding national priorities (Northern Territory Archives Service 1974-1987). This campaign to impose limits on the new NT Government’s responsibilities flew in the face of efforts to position the NT in a similar constitutional space to that occupied by the States. In the end, after a delay of one year, education and training functions were transferred to the NT in 1979. A strained relationship between the NT Government, the NT Education Department and the DCC and its three successor institutions ensued. These tensions occasionally reappear in funding discussions or industry complaints about the unresponsive nature of the university, which is the NT’s largest registered training organisation.

In preparation for the handover of education functions, the freshly-minted Minister for Education, Jim Robertson, established a broadly representative committee to advise the NT Cabinet on possible administrative arrangements for education in the self-governing NT (Education Advisory Group 1978). Cabinet accepted the major recommendations of this Education Advisory Group, including placing schools in an Education Department reporting through a minister, rather than an independent authority, and that the existing training delivery role for the Darwin Community College would continue. However, any policy responsibility for training was to be transferred from the DCC to the NT Government. The development of training policy

44 In chronological order, these are the Darwin Institute of Technology, the Northern Territory University and Charles Darwin University. In addition, various other educational, training and research institutions have been absorbed into the dual-sector university over the years. These include the NT Open College, the Adult Migrant Education Centre, the NT Rural College at Katherine, Centralian College and the semi-autonomous Menzies School of Health Research.
moved from the educationally oriented DCC to the NT Government Apprenticeships Board that operated from an economic portfolio, thus separating policy and delivery responsibilities.

Crucially, the NT Government explicitly accepted the existing national definition of TAFE as developed by the Commonwealth in 1977. The basis for future NT policy work in training would be built upon absence because VET had already been defined by what it was not – not a school, college of advanced education or a university. It is also reported that there was very little interest demonstrated by members of the public in responding to requests by the Education Advisory Group for input to their deliberations in the short timeframe allocated (Urvett, Heatley & Alcorta 1980, 55). The banality of VET is an enduring phenomenon.

Reflecting upon the NT Government’s responsibility for training policy, two former ministers for training, Syd Stirling and Shane Stone, agreed that the Northern Territory was always very receptive to national events. While the Apprenticeships Board survived the benign neglect of Commonwealth colonialism for three decades, the advent of self-government allowed the NT politicians to embark upon an unceasing exercise of administrative restructure in reaction to national policy and in pursuit of Commonwealth funding for VET. Since 1979 the NT Government has had 12 successive administrative/bureaucratic arrangements in place for training policy. At various times, these have included one board, two commissions, one independent authority, a variety of government departments with shared responsibilities and one ‘super-department’ combining both education and training. As will be shown, this focus upon transitory configurations gives the appearance of taking action to increase the skills base of the NT, while deflecting attention from

45 These arrangements are described in the various annual reports of government agencies tabled in the NT Legislative Assembly and housed in the NT Library.
VET’s role as a mediator of the complex power/knowledge relationship between residents and the government.

The Commonwealth Government

With its pre-existing machinery of government in place, the Commonwealth’s move into training policy was more straightforward than in the NT. The Federal Government’s contribution is often explained in terms of its superior financial capacity, the exertion of more centralised decision-making, achieving national consistency and the linkage of training to global economic imperatives (Coombs 1994, 7-8; Department of Trade, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) & Trade Development Council (TDC) 1987). All of these considerations have merit. What is also of note is how the Commonwealth followed a predictable process to exert policy domination, to overcome the fact that VET is constitutionally reserved to the States. These efforts could be categorised as a ‘standard operating procedure’.

The Commonwealth’s initial action is to create a training problem (cf. Bacchi 2009) and represent it in a manner that renders it suitable for review or inquiry. It next commissions a report/study/review/inquiry/evaluation of this now problematised aspect of training. The work is undertaken by a more or less representative group of eminent persons who hold credibility with various lobby groups. Likewise, the chairperson is an equally considered ministerial appointment with a background and economic/business credentials deemed to be acceptable to a wide range of training interests. This person’s surname has often replaced the bureaucratic title of the final report for common usage. For instance, the Review of Australian higher education final report (Bradley et al. 2008) is known as the ‘Bradley Review’. The Commonwealth Government responds to these reports in various ways that can range from complete disregard to accepting/implementing most recommendations.
Even though the 1969 Tregillis Report (Department of Labour and National Service 1969) was the first of the landmark national reports to do with training, it would be some five years later before the Commonwealth made a major post-war financial foray into VET policy as a result of the Kangan Report. The Tregillis Report, nonetheless, is notable for several reasons. The mission reported that Australia was the only ‘advanced industrial’ country without national coordination of training, uniformity of training standards, interstate acceptance of qualifications and training methods. The continual ‘reform’ of the VET sector still seeks these elusive objectives (Council of Australian Governments 2012, 2; National Skills Standards Council 2013a, 7; Productivity Commission 2012a, 95-102).

Mirroring the importance of the heavy manufacturing industry in the development of training policy in other major international economies (Thelen 2004, 278), five of the six members of the Tregillis mission that visited 17 European countries were from a union or employer group associated with the metals or engineering industry sectors. Tregillis was a senior public servant in the Department of Labour and National Service. Between them, industry, unions and government were represented. As will be demonstrated, this is a very influential combination that still dominates the VET policy deliberations of governments.

This first landmark report, *The Training of Skilled Workers in Europe: Report of the Australian Tripartite Mission 1968-69*, demonstrated a number of activities that would be repeated in subsequent national reviews. There is an initial privileging of international experiences and policies. Secondly, the information gathering and analysis is generally conducted by individuals with economic, business or union experience, rather than education or training backgrounds (Reich 2005, 6). Finally, these reports are characterised by a relentless focus upon and recounting of the deficiencies of the workforce, the labour market and the training system itself. Absence is always the rationality in use.
The consequent actions taken by the Federal Government in reply to the Tregillis Report were quite modest. Two train-the-trainer centres and fourteen Industry Training Councils were established. These councils were to provide advice on the training needs of industry to whoever might listen. The Commonwealth Government could not deal with the more fundamental aspects of this report because it had no mechanism to 'know' training at that time. At the national level, vocational training had yet to be governmentalised.

**The productive nature of Kangan’s report**

Five years later, a tentative first step was made through significant Federal financial investment due to the Commonwealth Government’s adoption of many of the recommendations of the Kangan Report (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974). This second landmark national report was commissioned due to ongoing concerns in the Federal Government about the pressures of maintaining a full employment policy in the face of several challenges: low worker skills, the impact of technology, strong growth in the Australian economy, an increasingly globalised marketplace, rapid population increase and the inability of the States to adequately fund vocational and technical education. *TAFE in Australia: report on needs in Technical and Further Education* is considered by many VET commentators to mark the start of direct Commonwealth training policy intervention (Goozee 2001; Kearns & Hall 1994; Kinsman 2009).

The chair of the committee, Meyer Kangan, was acknowledged to be Australia’s leading expert on personnel management (Goozee 1994, 12) and his name would come to symbolise Commonwealth entry into training policy and funding. The composition of the rest of the committee was atypical of the standard operating procedure. Half the membership was from technical education, joined by what would become the norm of business and union leaders. This resulted in a singular
focus upon both the personal needs of individual citizens, albeit in the context of providing an efficient and responsive workforce to address industry’s needs. The unique composition of the members of the Kangan review, and its consequent valorisation of the individual, contributed to the dualistic debate that has characterised VET (educational or economic), as was described in the previous chapter. Educators have not been given such prominence in the national review and report process since. As will be shown in the final two chapters, the individual poses as a serious threat to the existing VET system and those who determine its policies.

Notwithstanding, the Kangan Committee operated in the usual manner by turning to the International Labour Organisation and the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Faure 1972) for guidance. Their report detailed numerous deficiencies in all areas of training and made dozens of specific recommendations for therapeutic action. The report’s State-by-State lists of priorities included funding new and upgraded facilities, staff professional development, increased access by students and improvements in curriculum development and delivery.

In keeping with the longer term trend of increasing Federal Government provision of funding for schools and universities (Marginson 1993a), the Kangan Report provided the incentive for technical and further education to join the movement away from the constitutional purity of being solely a State responsibility. At the most superficial level of analysis, the Commonwealth Government was able to buy a seat at the VET policy table by using its superior funding sources and adopting a range of the recommendations in the Kangan Report.

At another level, the rationality of absence as the major way of viewing VET was also made operational by Kangan. The funds provided by the Commonwealth were used to build new (and repair dilapidated) buildings, for staff development in how to
teach adults, support students in gaining access to training and to develop a
nationally consistent curriculum. The report also made strong representations
concerning the huge gaps and inconsistencies in data and information about
training that had hampered the work of the committee. Their recommendation for
the development of the capacity to collect nationally consistent statistics to remedy
the opacity of the training endeavour would, however, require yet another landmark
report to be completed and implemented in 1981. Nevertheless, the importance of
statistics to governments was clearly flagged at the birth of VET.

Why could the Commonwealth Government act upon the Kangan Report when it
had made only superficial responses to the earlier Tregillis Report? Kangan’s efforts
demonstrated the productive nature of power/knowledge because the information
provided in this report created a new thing that was knowable and visible to
government. The previously disparate, loose conglomeration of adult education,
mechanics institutes, Workers’ Educational Associations, State-owned training
organisations and community education bodies (described by Foley & Morris 1995;
Whitelock 1974) was crafted into something that could be made rational to
governments. The Kangan Committee produced Technical and Further Education –
TAFE (Goozee 2001, 10).

There was now an educational sector that could be understood and treated in a
similar manner to the longer established school and university groupings. The
composition of the Kangan Committee paved the way for this creation of TAFE. The
influence of the people from the training sector focused their deliberations on
individuals as well as labour markets. While it would take a further three years
before TAFE would be officially defined by what it was not, a significant event had
taken place due to Kangan’s review. Training had been made subject to the gaze
and scrutiny of the Commonwealth Government. Of course, governments would

need to have ever increasing knowledge of the new sector, hence the emphasis in the report on the necessity of generation and collection of national statistics about TAFE. The introduction of the Unique Student Identifier to label individual students is a current manifestation of this need for information identified four decades ago.

**Ownership of the public policy discourse**

As a result of Kangan's creation the Federal and the NT Governments were in a position to deal with VET policy. The NT Cabinet had decisively moved to bring VET policy into the process of Cabinet decision-making as soon as possible under the terms of self-government. The Commonwealth Government would make similar moves a decade later through the efforts of the activist minister, John Dawkins (Ryan 2002, 39). As a result of another national landmark report, *Australia Reconstructed*, and its focus upon active labour market policy (Department of Trade, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) & Trade Development Council (TDC) 1987, 107), Dawkins convinced the Commonwealth Cabinet to create a new 'super-department' – Employment, Education and Training. Dawkins (2009) believes the order of the words in the title of the new department clearly signalled the relative priority accorded to each function. This also marks the first appearance of the word training in the name of a Federal Government agency (Parliament of Australia 2012).

Just as the NT Cabinet assumed policy responsibility for VET by removing decision-making capacity from the Darwin Community College, the Commonwealth Government moved on a number of fronts to consolidate its policy dominance over the States and Territories (Dawkins 1993; Northern Territory Archives Service 1984-1991a, 1984-1991d). Over the years, the Commonwealth displayed political and bureaucratic enthusiasm for VET policy development and the impact of financial incentives on the behaviour of the States and Territories. The national structures
have also included arm’s length authorities, direct departmental responsibility and ministerially-owned companies. The Federal Government has mostly chosen to avoid involvement in the provision of training in its own right, relying instead upon a quasi-market structure that recognises the role of the States in training delivery. The major exception to this broadly bipartisan position was the Howard Government’s constitutionally bold experiment of establishing about twenty Australian Technical Colleges in marginal electorates around the country. After several years of operation, the facilities and programs of these vocationally oriented secondary schools were returned to State-level responsibility, following the election of the Rudd Labor Government in 2007. It is the appearance of continual change created by these kinds of swings between administrations that gives VET insiders their sense of turbulence, drawing attention away from the low-key consistency of the National Training System’s guiding rationale.

**Different governments and actions**

At the end of World War Two, the Commonwealth Government’s involvement with training was limited to a handful of highly targeted programs, mostly to do with preparing returned defence personnel for employment in a redeveloped peace time economy (Coombs 1994; Dymock & Billett 2010). By the 1990s, the Federal Government had taken giant strides towards dominating VET policy through the provision of capital works and financial contributions to the States and Territories, while remaining aloof from direct delivery of training.

In contrast, the NT Government adopted a broad spectrum of policy strategies that included conducting its own training when desired in specialist areas, such as police, fire and corrections or making other arrangements through private and public training providers. The NT Cabinet not only determined policy but also allocated most of the funding for VET operations and capital works. This combination
provided a range of methods that could be used to direct training and give effect to self-government. The delivery of training was most often operationalised through a ‘purchaser-provider’ model based upon annual contracts, (known as resource agreements) with a series of public colleges, private registered training organisations and the dual-sector university. The Northern Territory did not establish a public TAFE system and ‘outsourced’ the bulk of delivery of training in line with New Public Management and active social policy principles. By not owning and operating its own extensive training system, the NT Government has uniquely maintained policy flexibility in VET (Zoellner 2013a, 7).

The governmentalisation of VET joined it to a number of other “contested policy domains” (Selby Smith, C et al. 1998, 6), such as unemployment, school curriculum and labour market policy that were subject to detailed discussions between the two levels of government. As a result, "policy-making in VET is mediated through complex Commonwealth, State and Territory government structures and arrangements" (Selby Smith, C et al. 1998, 6). This description accords with the contents of an internal NT Government briefing note, written in 1990 by the Secretary of the Education Department to the head of the Department of the Chief Minister, regarding concerns about duplication of education and training policy activity by both layers of government:

The Commonwealth is quite blatantly using its financial power to bludgeon States into accepting these resource agreements or risk the funding being given to other States and Territories. It seems likely that this process will continue unless there is concerted action by all States/Territories to resist. The trend will continue if the States compete

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47 Each of the six original States own and operate a Technical and Further Education system. The government cabinets in these jurisdictions often have conflicts of interest arise when making funding decisions, regulating the training sector or negotiating with industry. Because the NT Government does not operate its own training system, these conflicts seldom arise and the risks of operational failure are shifted from the government to the RTO.
against each other and the Commonwealth is able to play one off against the other (Northern Territory Archives Service 1985-1990).

Despite VET's intensely contested policy environment, there were several significant acts of co-operation leading to the National Training System. The absence of data and nationally consistent information imposed severe constraints upon policy development at both levels of government. Following the standard procedure of review and report, the landmark 1981 Williams Report provided the impetus for the Commonwealth, State and Territory ministers with responsibility for training to establish and jointly fund a TAFE research company collectively owned by the ministers (TAFE National Centre for Research and Development 1982, 3-5). A board of directors provided strategic direction and monitored activities to ensure a cooperative national methodology for data collection and agreed research priorities. This research institution became the National Centre for Vocational Education Research in 1992 in conjunction with the emergence of private providers in the first tentative acts of marketisation and the associated new acronym of VET (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 1992, 2).

The other major cooperative intergovernmental action was enshrined in the National Vocational Education and Training System Agreement, more commonly referred to as the 'ANTA Agreement'. The Australian National Training Authority was created by an act of the Australian Parliament in 1992 and supported by complementary legislation in each State and Territory (Ryan 2002, 125-126). While ANTA operated at arm's length from government, it was responsible to its intergovernmental Ministerial Council, the same group that own NCVER. The Ministerial Council was perhaps most notable for its voting system that reinforced the Commonwealth's dominance. Each State and Territory had one vote while the Federal minister had two votes plus a casting vote. When interviewed, both Gregor Ramsey, the former chair of the National Board of Employment, Education and Training, and the CEO of...
Skills Australia, Robin Shreeve, described the ANTA Agreement as the compromise that followed the States’ rejection of an offer from the Commonwealth to fund the VET system on a national basis. ANTA would only last until 2005, but its legacy of ministerial-level agreements between governments remains the preferred way of dealing with national VET policy.

Since the election of the Federal Labor Government in 2007, the intergovernmental training relationship has assumed a prominent role on the agenda of the Council of Australian Governments. The membership of COAG comprises the Prime Minister, the Premiers of each State and the Chief Ministers from both large Territories. In terms of VET policy deliberations, this group has replaced the Special Premiers’ Conferences of the Hawke/Keating era that had been characterised by high levels of political conflict (Perron 1991a, 1991b, 1992, 1994; Ryan 2002, 2). The language of COAG speaks of ‘agreements and partnerships’. The VET Partnership Agreements that have been adopted by the council have addressed skills and workforce development (Council of Australian Governments 2008a, 2008b), youth transitions (Council of Australian Governments 2009, 2011), funding of a productivity places program (Council of Australian Governments 2008b) and skills reform (Council of Australian Governments 2012).

While the detail varies, the structure of the agreements is based upon the Commonwealth Government’s continued or additional financial contribution to training being dependent upon the States and Territories implementing national policies as monitored against performance criteria and targets over a multi-year period. Even when all members of COAG sign up to one of these agreements, it is not uncommon for any single State or Territory to decline implementation of individual elements of each accord either through design or incapacity (Crowe 2013).
How did this happen?

Australian society has a special view about the role of government. Government is not only capable of doing things, but it has an obligation to do so as opposed to alternative arrangements such as *laissez-faire*. The logic that directed the development of the National Training System was shared by both the NT and Commonwealth Governments. VET is derived from a rationality of absence and this was problematised in such a way that a variety of bureaucratic structures was able to be established and abolished in the enactment of VET.

The exact type of government body – commission, authority or department – appears to have made little difference to the development and implementation of VET policy. The elusive goals of national consistency, replicable standards and guaranteed quality have each remained aspirational, regardless of the constant bureaucratic restructuring by both Commonwealth and Territory governments. The focus of government remains firmly fixed upon the machinery of VET and, until very recently, dismissed concern for the actual transfer and acquisition of skills (Allen Consulting Group 2013). The need for the constant reform of the administrative configuration of VET invites an exploration of the tactics and techniques that have been used by these various bureaus. How do they exercise their influence?
Chapter Eight

The Tactics and Techniques of VET
This has been true of most vocation (sic) education and training research: policy has been accepted, not questioned.

(Hall 1999, 309)

Too common to be queried

Successive State, Territory and Federal governments have created a system that will effectively put a barcode, the Unique Student Identifier (USI), on every individual Australian resident who enrols in VET. The Federal Government has even flagged the extension of the USI into both schooling and higher education, potentially enumerating every person who starts school.48 This publicly funded numerical tool has materialised without attracting critical attention, yet it will allow for the recording of hundreds of pieces of information about the individual throughout most of his or her working life. As an integral part of the National Training System, USI data will be available for use by governments and their contractors for any purpose deemed relevant by the government of the day.

One stated intention is to shift the financial costs associated with gaining the skills and knowledge leading to employment away from industry and government sources onto these quantified consumers. An unstated impact of introducing the USI is the significantly increased concentration of power/knowledge in the VET system, further enhancing its value as a means of conducting the behaviour of citizens. This numerical device is an apparatus that allows for observation of each individual, personal self-examination and calculation of the normal behaviour (Hacking 1990, 160) expected of a VET student and a life-time recording of their training competencies.

In any given year, this National Training System can spend upwards of 60 per cent of its annual national budget of $7.9 billion on administration and support services.

This means that a minority of expenditure is directed towards the actual transfer of skills and knowledge to potential workers (Charles Darwin University 2012, 25; National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2012c, 11). If the old adage of ‘follow the money’ holds true, the bureaucratic structures and the technical operations of the National Training System are the features most valued and invested in by governments. Given the propensity of governments to establish and just as quickly jettison certain forms of public institutional structures, the real impact is given effect through the tactics and techniques used by these agencies. It is the processes used to manage the behaviour of the population through “a subtle integration of coercion technologies and self-technologies” (Foucault 2007a, 155) that consume the majority of the public resources allocated to VET. The ability to use simple and reductionist numerical representation to support the formative activities of standard setting, recording, auditing, accounting, calculating and reporting (Miller & Rose 2008, 110) feature prominently in the tactical planning and operation of the VET system. It is this, not the clients or consumers of vocational education and training, which absorbs the most money and energy.

The introduction of the USI is not an administratively top-heavy grand conspiracy to invade personal privacy. VET is the latest manifestation of a 70 year-long project that is so mundane and banal that even the most passionate participants in the National Training System acknowledge the entire topic is fundamentally boring. Upon reflection on my time spent in the sector, this boredom was constantly reinforced to me by the glazed look on the faces of small business operators when discussing their workers’ training requirements. During my early years in the sector, colleagues constantly doodled in the margins of the mind-numbingly predictable papers in countless meetings (replaced in later years with endless button pressing

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49 This calculation is based upon CDU employing 787 general staff out of 1421 total staff (Charles Darwin University 2012, 11) and the funding categories for administration and support described in the references above.
on mobile communication devices) giving a clear, if non-vocalised, judgement of the utter dreariness of VET. I always found a strange juxtaposition between the personal enjoyment of my job as a senior VET leader and the inability of friends and relatives to comprehend what it was that I actually did. Those who asked would politely, but insistently, change the subject to something more interesting to them and never ask again.

The management and skills delivery associated with vocational education and training is so commonplace that the entire system has avoided serious philosophical examination and consideration. This phenomenon sits at the core of this narrative. How has VET come to be portrayed by governments, and accepted by Australians, as harmless and uninteresting when, examined more intimately, it represents a key disciplinary technology and self-technique orienting people’s behaviour toward the economic? Nation-states have materialised as the major geographical and economic units of societal organisation and their governments manage the conduct of the population by repressing “disorder, irregularity, illegality and delinquency” (Foucault 2007b, 353). The rigid coercive and physical enforcement of rules and regulations has been replaced by normalising mechanisms that recognise individual freedom and often masks government intervention (Foucault 2007b, 48). The techniques used in VET represent one of these more modern technologies of social discipline and yet it evades consideration.

Alongside the development of the nation-state and its desire to regulate the behaviour of the population through the provision of security from external threat and internal disorder, economics has come to dominate thinking and conceptualisation about how society operates (Heilbroner 1999, 14). Any nation’s prosperity and the welfare of its population are dependent upon the operations of its economy. There are a variety of economic theories that seek to explain this. These range from the traditional Left’s acceptance of Marxism and Socialism (Harvey
1982) through European social democratic models of society being run by technical experts (Schumpeter 2012) to the Right’s support of capitalism and its markets that are driven by self-interested and economically rational choice-making on the part of free individuals (Hazlitt 1979). Regardless of which economic theory is in the ascendancy, as capitalism currently is placed in Australia, the supposed need for a regulated system to produce a skilled labour force is unproblematically accepted. It is because of its sheer techno-rational ordinariness that the National Training System has been able to produce uncritically accepted outcomes that would be politically and administratively impossible if attempted in a more overt manner.

**The Australia Card lesson**

In contrast to the trouble-free adoption of the USI, the 1987 Labor Federal Government attempted to implement the Australia Card as an individual numbering system avowedly designed to combat tax and welfare fraud. Because the Senate repeatedly refused to pass the legislation, Australia’s sixth double dissolution election for Federal Parliament was held on the matter. This election was accompanied by a massive public debate about the privacy of personal information, potential misuse of information by law enforcement and security agencies, making public of medical procedures (particularly to do with abortions) and a general distrust of politicians. Protest rallies matching those of the anti-Vietnam War campaigns were organised by well-known public figures (including the then high profile rock music star, Peter Garrett, who was destined to become the Federal Minister for Education when the USI was agreed) as part of scare campaigns designed to whip up public protest (Greenleaf 1988). Polling showed that support for

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50 The double dissolution election is a constitutional device that allows for all members of both the House of Representatives and the Senate to be chosen in a single election. Normally only half the Senate faces the polls in a general election. Following a double dissolution election, both houses sit together and this gives the newly elected government the chance to bring forward the legislation that triggered the election in a bid to resolve the political deadlock arising from the Senate’s refusal to pass legislation repeatedly carried in the House of Representatives.
the Australia Card dropped from a high of 68 per cent in mid-1985 to 39 per cent in September of 1987 (Greenleaf 1988, 3). In the same month there were 526 letters to the editor of *The Australian* newspaper with 475 against, 25 for and 26 neutral (Greenleaf 1988, 3). While the Federal Government formally had the numbers to pass the legislation following the double dissolution election, a technical loophole made its implementation unlikely and the Australia Card project was abandoned.

This stands in stark, yet unremarked, contrast to the introduction of the Unique Student Identifier through the mundane VET system. The underlying logic of having a numerical means to track each and every individual is exactly the same. But there has been no public discussion or widespread concern expressed about the current project. The introduction of the USI was first agreed to by the government minister with responsibility for training from each of the State, Territory and Federal governments in 2011 and then accepted a year later by jurisdictional leaders in the *National partnership agreement on skills reform* (Council of Australian Governments 2012). The USI will draw together information that includes address, gender, ethnic origin, languages spoken at home, VET and Higher Education study, training provider and so forth. In total, over 90 fields of information on the individual will be joined with substantial amounts of information held by registered training organisations, all linked by the USI (Charles Darwin University 2009; National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2008, 2010b).

In a demonstration of its under-examined social management function, the VET system will be able to enumerate virtually every Australian resident (due to near universal educational participation in school, VET or university), where a direct attempt at personal coding through the Australia Card failed because of serious questions and public anger about individual privacy and possible misuse of information.
Unquestionably positive

This is not to suggest that little is known about the training sector or that it is shrouded from public view. The VET system’s importance as a practise of government derives exactly because it is able to hide in the open (Bowker & Star 1999, 33). In fact, my research was made considerably easier because VET is so exceptionally well-documented and this information is easily and freely accessible. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research maintains VOCEDplus, a tertiary education database containing more than 48,000 items from both Australian and international sources. The items are held in two formats – digital and hard copy. The physical materials reside in a windowless room in an office building in the main street of Adelaide. The compactus units in this room are overflowing with books, journals, glossy program guides, curriculum materials and reports and reviews – lots of reports and lots of reviews. The oldest parts of the collection date back to the late 1960s and a process is in place to make all of the materials available online. Much Australian VET research is characterised by descriptive case studies of individual events, reviews and reports commissioned by governments or statistical analyses of the vast amount of data collected about VET by governments and dedicated research organisations (Robinson & Thomson 1998, 5-6). Within this collection, more fundamental philosophical and theoretical questions about the National Training System are seldom addressed. VET’s unexceptional familiarity seems unattractive to deeper abstract inquiry.

Indeed, one of the outstanding features of my interview program with key participants involved with the creation and continual reform of the National Training System was their unanimous acceptance of training as ‘something that cannot be spoken against’. For this very influential group of people (see Appendix One), training is an unquestioned and unquestionable public good. In Australia’s robust

version of democracy, it is virtually impossible to find an issue that does not attract some in-principle criticism – particularly one with 40 years of public longevity behind it such as the National Training System. But this is what I have found. It is as if the standard setting, recording, auditing and reporting techniques of VET have become a favourite pair of worn and comfortable shoes.

The lacklustre nature of vocational education matters within Australia’s conventional political narrative is demonstrated by one of Australia’s most prolific political writers and commentators, the Editor-at-Large of The Australian newspaper, Paul Kelly. In his extraordinarily detailed 700 page book, The March of the Patriots: The Struggle for Middle Australia (Kelly 2011), educational issues (schools and universities) occupy a total of about one full page while VET does not receive a single mention. This is in spite of the fact that Kelly is writing about the Keating and Howard Federal Governments covering the time period in which VET both came into existence and grew substantially and the Commonwealth increased policy and financial influence over a training system owned and operated by the States and Territories.

It is not as if Kelly had nothing to report at the level of Prime Ministerial action either. There are two major examples from this period that demonstrate the willingness of the Commonwealth to intervene in VET. Prime Minister Keating personally delivered a rare White Paper on employment and training, the first in 50 years. This policy statement situated training as the major substitute for unemployment benefits, provided for training initiatives to address very high levels of youth unemployment and re-defined VET’s links with social welfare and labour market policies (Keating 1994b). Ten years later, Prime Minister Howard openly defied both constitutional authority and convention by establishing Australian Technical Colleges in each State and Territory except the Australian Capital Territory. These represent a major further intrusion by the Commonwealth into State government responsibilities.
The Commonwealth’s incursions into VET turned nearly a century’s law, precedence, programming and funding on its head (Harman 1999, 40-42; Tannock 1975). Yet these moves progressed in such an unremarkable manner, they went unnoticed by Kelly’s account of the politics of the time. The banality of VET seems to have dissipated the controversial aspects of the federalist nature of the Australian Constitution, which reserves education and training as a State-level responsibility. This very absence of recognition hints at VET’s usefulness to governments. The States and Territories contest ownership of training policy with the Commonwealth for some reason. I believe this is because VET is a very potent technology of social regulation that is used in both public and personal settings. Its influence and near universal acceptance as a good thing by politicians and the public make it a highly valued political asset for whichever level of government directs VET strategy. Vocational education and training’s uncontroversial nature and its ability to blend in with the broad social and economic environment in the Australian nation-state encouraged Kelly, one of Australia’s most influential and long-serving public policy commentators, to ignore the deployment and growth of this mechanism of social management. Academics have also tended to ignore VET and its relationships with the labour market and broader economy. For example, in his detailed description of the “widespread and relatively comprehensive” reforms to “Australia’s economic and institutional practices” in the 1980s and early 1990s, Gerritsen (1994, 39) overlooks education and training.

**Technical context**

The nine Commonwealth, State and Territory governments are inextricably bound to each other through VET in a constitutionally ambiguous but nevertheless very large undertaking. In 2011 these governments collectively spent $7.9 billion on publicly funded training (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2012c, 6), catering for 1.9 million students’ study towards a nationally accredited VET
qualification (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2012b, 1). This represents about 12 per cent of the total national population of 15-64 year olds. It is estimated that another 1.2 million students, supported by about $4 billion expenditure, are being trained in the private training sector (National Skills Standards Council 2012a, 8). Prior to the 2014 introduction of total VET activity reporting, the private trainers have not fully conveyed non-government funded training details to NCVER’s VET statistics collection. As a result of the National Agreement on Skills Reform, in the future most training providers will be required to report all formally recognised training in the existing nationally consistent format just as soon as the technology infrastructure and processes can be implemented (Council of Australian Governments 2012, 19). It is proposed that full reporting will be introduced from the start of 2014.52

Formal training is delivered by registered training organisations (RTOs). These can range from private enterprises providing local specialist skills development to businesses solely dedicated to training, such as colleges and universities with national and international offerings. RTOs are subject to detailed reporting requirements, auditing and quality processes that have been stipulated by government funding bodies.53 In 2010, almost 2,800 RTOs reported offering training subsidised from public sources (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011d). Of this group, 60 providers were from the State and Territory sanctioned systems or large RTOs. When interviewed, Andy Bruyn, the former Chair of the Northern Territory Employment and Training Authority, described how these public

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52 Some providers will be exempted on the grounds of national security or undue hardship.
53 Quality in VET represents a desired state of existence that should be the goal of RTOs. The use of the word quality is intended to serve as some sort of warranty to the public and governments that training providers are achieving national consistency by meeting centrally determined standards. National VET quality is enacted through processes of registration and auditing by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (http://www.asqa.gov.au/). The National Skills Standards Council provides policy direction and advice to government on quality matters and procedures.
providers are still colloquially, and by many affectionately, known as “techs” or TAFEs – Technical and Further Education.

These large public providers delivered about 75 per cent of the total reported national training effort in 2010 (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011d, 7). In addition, there were about 600 other government or community education RTOs operating across the nation. This leaves an additional 2,100 RTOs, generally referred to as private providers, operating in all of the States and Territories. This amorphous group can range from quite large and sophisticated corporations listed on the stock exchange, such as Woolworths and Qantas, to literally sole operators offering training in a few competencies only, for example, fork lift operations or shot-firing.

The outcomes expected of the VET system are fairly straightforward. Trained individuals must demonstrate competence to a nationally determined standard in their chosen field of study. This proficiency is recognised by the granting of a certificate or diploma that meets the requirements of the Australian Qualifications Framework (National Quality Council (Australia) (NQC); Council of Australian Governments (COAG); National Quality Council/COAG Joint Steering Committee 2009). Additionally, these formally skilled graduates are deemed suitable for employment in contemporary industrial environments.

This entire system is built upon a particularly techno-rational set of beliefs and thinking, exemplified by a hierarchical, linear system of qualifications commencing with Certificate One stepping to a Doctoral degree 13 levels later. Each VET credential (concentrated in the six levels between Certificate One and Advanced Diploma) is defined by very tightly prescribed competencies that appear in the form of national training packages or accredited courses.
National consistency of training and equivalency of experiences by students are highly valued goals for the system. Most of what purports to be critical analysis of VET concerns the gap between anticipated nation-wide uniformity of outcomes and the actual operations and routines of the government regulated training system (Lundberg 1996; McDonald 2006; National Quality Council (Australia) (NQC); Council of Australian Governments (COAG); National Quality Council/COAG Joint Steering Committee 2009; National Skills Standards Council 2012b; Skills Australia 2010). Lately, stricter standard setting and enforcement to ensure the “integrity of nationally recognised qualifications” has been problematised as being vitally important to the sector (National Skills Standards Council 2013a, 2).

The day-to-day operations of the sector give rise to two defining characteristics of the National Training System. Virtually every person interviewed for my research voluntarily made reference to VET’s acronym-saturated vocabulary. Personal experience shows that it is impossible to have a discussion about vocational education and training without putting at least one acronym in every second sentence. Two per sentence would be more normal and three is not out of the question. For example, each VET student will be assigned a USI as approved by COAG in 2012. In order to make some sense of this proliferation, NCVER has published a discrete glossary of Australian VET terms that, even by excluding international references, is 130 pages in length and boasts a mind-boggling 743 entries (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011g). When interviewed, the former Northern Territory Deputy Chief Minister, as well as Minister for Education and Training, Syd Stirling was unequivocal in his view about the language of VET, “I never understood the language and acronyms associated with VET. These are tools of obfuscation”. This feeling further serves to hide the tactics and techniques peculiar to VET that are built upon this expert language used in problematisation.
The second issue that was commonly raised in interviews and informal discussions was the multifaceted and convoluted nature of the system, with its hundreds of boards, councils, companies, foundations, advisory bodies, committees, departments and contractors. The regular meetings of these various agencies, in my experience, operate to different agendas and priorities that can only be understood and influenced with significant practice and expert knowledge about where these various organisations are positioned in the overall system. The Australian Government’s own advisory group on workforce development, Skills Australia (2011, 34), makes specific reference to the multifarious nature of the National Training System with masterly understatement: “The way the VET sector is currently financed, structured and organised is overly complex”. Somewhat perversely, the major contributor to the construction of this complicated and cumbersome training system, the Federal Government, has responded to industry and public complaints by calling for streamlining, national harmonisation, simplification and a reduction in the present confusion and duplication in the system (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011). These types of statements are linked to an agenda of transparency that will be examined in Chapter Ten.

How has the disarmingly simple goal of using taxpayer’s funds to support the development of a skilled workforce that will allow Australia to prosper in a globalised market economy given rise to a vast and unwieldy apparatus that simultaneously confounds and engages 3.1 million residents each year? And that in the near future, will embark on an endeavour that has the capacity eventually to keep a permanent record of virtually every resident in the country except those who are too young to attend school? My argument is that the theoretical commentary and associated deep thinking, exposing the very basis for the existence and construction of the National Training System, is missing. VET policy remains unquestioned in all but the
most base and crass manners – discussions about who funds the system (TAFE Directors Australia 2004), the technicalities of standard setting and compliance (National Skills Standards Council 2013a) or complaints about the constantly expanding set of acronyms.

Because VET is a relatively recent creation of the two levels of government, it has been able to unproblematically incorporate modern, yet simple, techniques and tactics of social discipline and self-transformation as identified by Foucault (1979, 170; 2007a, 154). Hierarchical observation of training providers has been accomplished through standard setting, registration and audit. Observation and self-monitoring of the individual VET student will be achieved via the USI. Normalising judgement is exercised through the setting of quality standards and industry determined competencies. Examination is carried out through competency-based training reported upon in the form of qualifications issued in a standard format. The tactics and techniques associated with VET have been ‘discovered’ as solutions to problems that have been framed in the form of an absence. This process has enormous appeal to the governments of advanced market democracies. After all, everyone ‘knows’ that training is good.
Chapter Nine
The Ubiquity of Training
Reformulating problems means changing solutions. This is done when a particular problem is not soluble but is substituted by one that is possibly capable of solution.

(Pressman & Wildavsky 1984, 176)

Unanimously

It is very difficult to find someone who will speak against training per se. While the technical detail or arrangements for training may be subject to criticism, the concept of training as a common good is unchallenged. The uncritical acceptance of VET arises from a paucity of studies into the philosophical, moral and ethical issues associated with the National Training System. During her interview, Kaye Schofield conjectured that this was a purposeful outcome on the part of governments and their refusal to fund such research was on the grounds that it is “irrelevant and impractical”. This focus upon the immediately useful and relevant pushes scrutiny of VET into either mundane operational or technical areas populated by experts.

Training is good

An exceptional feature of the interviews with those at the heart of VET policy-making was the uniformity of the responses to a particular question. When asked ‘can you conceive of a time when you would speak against training?’ each of the respondents replied “no”. Some qualified their belief by referring to the inefficiencies of delivering the wrong type of training or too much training, but could not envisage speaking against training itself. This situation is mirrored in the literature and political discourse of the Australian bipartisan approach to VET.

This narrative summary contains multiple references to White Papers, Ministerial Statements, ministerial correspondence, landmark reports, annual reports, media

54 Relevance and practicality are closely aligned with senior NT public servant Peter Plummer’s privileging of relevance and efficiency as the best measures of government activities as described in Chapter Five.
releases and reviews. None of them question the concept of training being beneficial for all Australians. This stands in sharp relief to targets that have been set for secondary school completion rates and the number of people holding university qualifications.

Over the years, various national goals have been set to increase year 12 schooling completion rates. The implementation of the Australian Vocational Certificate System targeted 90 per cent of 19-year-olds to either finish year 12 or possess an initial nationally-recognised VET qualification by 2001 (Carmichael 1992, 5). Although extensive effort was put into introducing this new certificate system, it and its target fairly rapidly disappeared. Two decades later, The National Partnership agreement on youth attainment and transitions resets the target for either year 12 completion or obtainment of a VET Certificate II or above to be 90 per cent by 2015 (Council of Australian Governments 2009, 7). An unstated, but decisive, point is being reinforced by these objectives. Receiving a school qualification by completing year 12 is not necessary for each citizen and a low level VET certificate is an acceptable substitute.

If year 12 completion is not for everyone, neither is a university qualification. The Review of Australian higher education final report recommends a national target of at least 40 per cent of 25- to 34-year-olds obtaining a bachelor level qualification or above by 2020 (Bradley et al. 2008, xviii). Again, the key message is that higher education is clearly not suitable for each individual, even though structural constraints on access to higher education were reduced as one outcome of the Bradley Review. VET is viewed in a very different light.

The Kangan Report harnessed technical, adult, further and vocational education to meet an individual’s “total needs which include those of being a citizen at work, at home and in the community at large” (Australian Committee on Technical and
Nearly 40 years after Kangan, Prime Minister Gillard proposed nearly identical characteristics arising from the intersection of work, skills, the economy and national prosperity:

For individuals, achieving recognised qualifications is one of the best ways to secure a job and earn a decent wage. In a changing economy, skills also build resilience. They provide workers with the flexibility to change jobs, apply skills in different contexts and go on learning (Gillard 2012, 2).

Prime Minister Gillard promotes the benefits of training and skills acquisition by linking them explicitly to ‘human capital’. An increase in the numbers of individuals who hold formally recognised VET qualifications will transform their own lives, those of their families and society in general, all for the better according to the Prime Minister. This government-supported development will encourage individuals to invest in their personal improvement through VET. Through increased Federal resourcing, State and Territory governments will guarantee access and financial subsidy to undertake training leading to an employment entry-level, certificate III qualification. This training will be offered to every individual citizen between year 10 in school and retirement age, accessible whenever they wish to use their entitlement (Gillard 2012, 4). VET is discursively formed as a technique of the self.

This gives effect to Kangan’s earlier call for training opportunities to be “accessible at whatever point in time or stage in life they can be useful” (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974, xxi). For the nation’s Prime Minister in 2012, there is a ‘simple proposition’ that skills are no longer optional. The VET system is tasked to meet both the needs of the economy as well as the demand for a fairer society by providing training leading to employment in evermore highly skilled jobs. VET is for everyone because it enables those with or without school or
university qualifications to participate in the labour market as a responsible citizen by becoming a flexible, mobile and more highly skilled worker.

**Training for skills and other things**

Every interviewee also linked training with the provision of skills required by the economy. The reasoning used by each individual again exemplifies social construction. Those with industry experience singled out the needs of private enterprise, educators started from a personal improvement perspective and the politicians and bureaucrats referred to national or NT economic development as the most important reason for linking the skills of workers to the economy. About half of those interviewed specifically used the phrase ‘human capital theory’, while each referred directly to its major elements. Human capital theory provides the linkage between personal skills acquisition and the labour needs of industry and this will be further explored later in this chapter.

Northern Territory experiences obviously influenced some of the interviewees’ interpretation of the function of training. Each mentioned the essential role assigned to VET in the economic and social development of their jurisdiction. Former Chief Minister Shane Stone cited the development of State Square and VET as “a natural fit” because the government would not only get a new Supreme Court and Parliament House but also an increased number of skilled tradespersons. This was accomplished by requiring employers to have specified numbers of apprentices engaged on the project as part of the tendering and contractual arrangements. Three others offered more expansive views as to the purpose of training.

VET was also seen to remediate both the skill and behavioural deficiencies displayed by the NT population. The former Deputy Chief Minister and Minister for Education and Training, Syd Stirling, believed, “Training changes behaviours to a desirable state of affairs. It helps those being trained to understand why things need
to be done in a certain way”. Supporting this view, the former Commissioner for Public Employment and Secretary of the NT Department of Labour and Administrative Services, David Hawkes, described training as “the only answer if people are not behaving as they ought to – you have to train them”. Additionally, Col Fuller, the Secretary of the Department of Chief Minister towards the end of the 26 year-long run of Country Liberal Party governments was characteristically brash in his description of the importance of training to governments. “Training can rehabilitate those who break the rules or do not conform to social norms”.

Conjoined concepts

Positioning training as an unquestioned good used in the exercise of governments’ ‘will to train’ has several effects. The first is a jumbling of the concept of training, the National Training System and VET. Because the words and concepts have come to be used interchangeably, it is a very easy transition to think of them as the same thing. The entire associated assemblage can assume the implied characteristics of the individual parts. For example, many of the reasons training systems are seen to be complex have nothing to do with the transfer and acquisition of skills inherent in the concept of training itself. The complexity is institutional. The political and constitutional compromises reached between the State, Territory and Federal governments and the various bureaucratic institutions deemed necessary to implement a National Training System give rise to this complexity.

Secondly, the whole apparatus can be positioned so that it becomes all but impossible to argue against any single element of the now conflated concept of training and government created programs and structures, on the basis that training is good. This situation is amply demonstrated by two interview excerpts. When asked why is training a commonly used policy option for governments, Robin Shreeve, the CEO of Skills Australia, unequivocally stated, “Because it works”. He
then asked, “What is the alternative”? Denise Bradley also placed training in this virtually unquestionable space by replying to the same question: “It is common sense”. This leaves little room to query any aspect of VET except in very tightly prescribed definitional situations because one’s starting point is to either propose a substitute for training or to argue against common sense as defined by two of the most experienced and influential education and training policy contributors in the nation.

A rare exception to the unquestioning acceptance of training as a public good was noted in a book chapter reporting a steady reduction in the number of low- and unskilled jobs in the labour market. The authors propose that newly created jobs require highly skilled individuals able to compete in an increasingly internationalised employment market. They argued that training for the chronically unemployed is a waste of time because “serious consideration also needs to be given to the little debated possibility that the level of commitment, intellect and knowledge required to successfully participate in the labour market may be increasingly beyond the capacity of many” (Bell & Quiggin 2006, 158 emphasis in original).

Questioning the intellectual capacity of a portion of the population relies upon accepting the notion of a regular distribution of individuals along the great bell curve of humanity. Those at the extreme left of the standard distribution are, by definition, abnormal. Australian society expects governments to empower and train these individuals and instil them with an aspiration to move further to the right. Rather than accepting the proposition that a significant proportion of the population is too dumb, the process of problematisation creates groups who display traits that are amenable to training and finds ways to enrol these troublesome individuals into appropriate sub-populations, such as those who need to be socially included, as measured by literacy and employment status (Productivity Commission 2012a, 18).
Significant public resources are allocated to the identification, measurement and accounting for the actions of the other-than-normal in order to move them along the bell curve towards the desired state of self-regulating, economically rational choice-makers. Because VET is for everyone, the arguments against training based upon incapacity to learn or breaking the bond between citizenship and work are tenaciously countered with solutions involving yet more training (Arbib, Macklin & Ellis 2011, 6; Evans 2011a; Gillard 2012). In advanced market democracies, it is currently politically impossible to accept a statistical argument on innate deficiencies or ontological bias in notions of human capital due to the easy transition into racism, paternalism and other stereotyping activities (Foucault 2008, 227).

It is also philosophically unviable to accept large-scale population faults because both classical and critical educational practice and theory confirms that human life is to be “conducted and organised according to the ideal of autonomy and self-determination” (Masschelein 2004, 363). Advanced market democracies are built upon the belief that the population must exercise choice, but it must be the ‘right’ choice. In Australia this precludes choosing not to be a worker and seeking to use one’s ‘training entitlement’ in fields that are deemed to be economically irrelevant, such as the arts and culture (Archer 2012).

**Human capital theory**

It is difficult to overstate the centrality of human capital theory in any study of the ubiquity and positivity of training. Nobel Prize-winning economist Gary Becker's proposition is very straightforward. The research reported in *Human capital: a theoretical and empirical analysis with special reference to education* (Becker 1993) indicates that, after the effects of physical capital and labour have been taken into account, an individual's growth in income (and the related economic growth of the nation) demonstrates the value of education. Becker (1993, 17) finds that
“Education and training are the most important investments in human capital”. Conversely, on the basis of extensive econometric modelling and examination of a variety of sub-populations, “unemployment tends to be strongly related, usually inversely, to education” (Becker 1993, 17). From Becker’s theoretical perspective, training is an empirically verified good.

Contemporary Australian labour market policy is dominated by neo-classical economic views positioning human capital theory as the best explanatory mechanism for modelling and planning governmental management of the economy (Whitfield 1987, 18). Crucial to the Australian application of this theory is the view that individuals at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid cannot obtain employment because their skill levels are so low as to render them unproductive at industrial award rates of pay. The neo-classical economists believe labour market policy should be “directed toward encouraging them to improve their productive levels via the appropriate education and training” (Whitfield 1987, 203).

Other major policy alternatives include wage reduction and migration. Lowering wages is currently politically implausible; however from the earliest days of European occupation of Australia, overseas immigration has been used to increase the nation’s human capital (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, 56). Labour force mobility does not question the fundamental good of training, however, as it only serves to shift the cost of training elsewhere. With its strong focus upon the numbers and types of qualifications required for the future needs of Australian industry, the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (2013, 70, 146) “strongly” favours increased domestic training rather than a large expansion of skilled immigration.

The assumptions and limitations built into human capital theory are seldom mentioned by those who use it to advocate for VET. “Some unresolved difficulties”
in identifying and measuring the impact of opportunities, abilities and family backgrounds are noted (Becker 1993, 5). This is in spite of observations that in Australia, “the labour market penalises rather than rewards immigrant human capital that emerges from a diversity of linguistic skills and cultural knowledge” (Collins et al. 2000, 229). In addition, an assumption is made that every individual is a rational actor who wishes to move to the right hand side of normality’s bell curve.

However, each individual is motivated by different and frequently convoluted considerations. When people interact their behaviour can resemble a dramatic event because they are presenting a ‘performed identity’ (Goffman 1990, 26). This performance depends upon what behaviour is perceived by the actor to be required of them by those doing the observing and interacting. The complex interactions of people are difficult to interpret since the behaviour that is observed is only ever part of anyone’s potential repertoire, not only “because everyone keeps skeletons in the cupboard” (Garsten & Lindh de Montoya 2008c, 3) but also because the self is not fully knowable to the self. These considerations challenge one of the key assumptions of human capital theory – not every person will behave in an economically rational manner.

Social factors such as discrimination and nepotism, while recognised as impacting upon any one individual’s economic circumstances, are offset by the general proposition that an investment in training will always benefit the one who chooses to capitalise according to Becker (1993, 98). The overall theory has an inclusive nature because “nothing in the concept of human capital theory implies the monetary incentives need to be more important than cultural or nonmonetary ones” (Becker 1993, 21). Not only is training good for the economic considerations of governments, but human capital theory can be applied to virtually any other problem developed for government, making training an inevitable solution.
In addition to recognising land and equipment, human capital theory allowed for fiscal analysis of labour’s contribution to production, leading to “the possibility of giving a strictly economic interpretation of a whole domain previously thought to be non-economic” (Foucault 2008, 219). In describing the impact of this transplantation, Foucault (2008, 227-233) proposes that human capital is made up of two elements. The first is innate or hereditary and its analytic logic can quite quickly lead to Social Darwinism and the use of racism, genetic screening and eugenic programs to ‘improve’ a nation’s human capital. Advanced market democracies have mostly avoided moving in this direction since World War Two, although explicit elements of this approach were in active use in the post-war management of the NT’s Aboriginal population, with the existence of a separate school system for this group until the early 1970s (Department of Education: Northern Territory Division 1974) and a tacit two-tiered system after that (Northern Territory Department of Education 1999).55

Foucault (2008, 227) describes the second element as ‘acquired’ human capital. Acquisition is achieved through education, but not solely from formal schooling or professional training, a perspective which brings him into alignment with Becker’s views. The entire milieu of family, social class and cultural environment contribute to the formation of human capital. Public health issues and population mobility can also be factors and, therefore, come under economic scrutiny.

According to Foucault (2008, 232), investments in the now economised notion of ‘acquired’ human capital are the easiest to make by the governments of advanced market democracies. Human capital theorisation recasts social, cultural, health and educational policies in commercial terms. As a demonstration of the adaptability of

55 Indigenous Australians were given a special status due to 1967 amendments to the Australian Constitution which gave the Commonwealth Government authority to pass laws with distinctive reference to this group and to override State and Territory legislation relating to Indigenous affairs.
this thinking, the socio-economic problems of Third World nations can now be
expressed in terms of deficiencies in the population, capable of remedy through
human capital improvement and with absolute disregard of local history as well as
environmental, social and historical realities (Li 2007). This insertion of the
economics of capital into hitherto untouched arenas encourages the
conceptualisation of the individual citizen who is both a permanent project and a
responsibilised entrepreneur of the self (Ong 2007, 4).

Not unexpectedly, human capital theory has its critics. Rather than making
individual investment in skills acquisition, this could be done at a team or group level
and remunerated accordingly; alternatively payments to workers could be based
upon hierarchical industrial salary bands (Maglen 1993, 10). There are also
infrequent arguments that increased levels of educational attainment have yet to be
shown to make a worker more productive and that the assumption that a lack of
skilled workers acts as a constraint upon economic growth has never been
conclusively demonstrated in Australia (Maglen 1993, 32). Another critical review of
the history of human capital theory concludes that it assumes an ‘unreal’ certainty
about links between education and work earnings, as well as deeper ethical issues
in treating humans as units of capital (Marginson 1993a, 54). However, even
Becker’s critics recognise the pervasive influence of human capital theories upon
the core assumptions of Australian education and training because they “have found
their way into common sense about education” (Marginson 1993a, 31).

Bipartisanship

Broad support is given to major training policies by both the Left and the Right, the
workers and the bosses. In the recurring pattern of Australian bipartisanship, a
strong critic of human capital theory (Marginson 1993a) ends up in the same space
as one of its strongest proponents when he concurs with Denise Bradley’s view that
training is common sense. Robin Shreeve, CEO of Skills Australia, also commented during interview upon this unique bipartisanship that characterises the VET system.

This joining of views can trace its recent lineage to British cross-party support for the development of youth training programs in the 1980s (Raggatt & Williams 1999, 22). A shared discourse of inferior performance on the part of secondary schools developed from diametrically opposed political positions. Schools were held responsible by the political Right for inadequate teaching of basic skills leading to unemployable school leavers while simultaneously being highly successful in teaching ‘anti-industrial values’ leading to inadequate motivation and work habits.

This general distrust of the union-dominated public education sector and its unemployable end product encountered the Left’s belief that the system was not resolving social inequality. This led to both sides supporting ‘common sense’ reforms espoused by industrial interests rather than ‘failing’ educationalists. The outcome was a reconceptualisation of competence, formal recognition of qualifications and articulation with Higher Education (Raggatt & Williams 1999). Australia’s fondness for looking to Europe ensured the immigration of this style of thinking into the foundations of the National Training System.

The bi-partisan manifestation of policy in Australia also saw the Right blaming public education systems for producing youth lacking the high level skills required for the emerging global economy (Kenway 1990, 188-192). The Left’s position dated back to an early 20th century “deep suspicion of formal education” and more recent concerns that education systems were not addressing socio-cultural inequities associated with increased unemployment in the 1970s (Bennett 1982, 162). These antagonists shared a discourse that facilitated a joint attitude to the creation of the VET system based upon other than purely educational considerations. This view is supported by former NT Chief Minister Shane Stone’s interview recollection that VET needed to be under the influence of those who made their living in the ‘real’
economy rather than bureaucrats “or it would wither on the vine”. In particular, according to Stone, the creation of the Northern Territory Employment and Training Authority was one mechanism to “distance” training from the Education Department.

The development of the National Training System has been corporatist in nature. Virtually all of the landmark national reports were produced or overseen by committees dominated by employer, union and government representatives. 

Australia Reconstructed (Department of Trade, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) & Trade Development Council (TDC) 1987) cites numerous benefits to be gained from Australia’s adoption of this ‘tripartite’ effort to rebuild and manage the national economy. The involvement of employer groups, trade unions and governments was consequently reflected in the ANTA Board and all of its major committees (Australian National Training Authority 1995a). The various State training authorities also mimicked the corporatist, three-way structures to manage the VET system (Northern Territory Employment and Training Authority 1993).

The major significant departure from the national bipartisan approach to the development and implementation of training policy occurred in the mid-2000s when the Howard Government unilaterally ended the agreement with the States and Territories over the Australian National Training Authority and abolished the ministerially-owned company structure called the Enterprise and Career Education Foundation (ECEF). ECEF had an annual budget of about $70 million and focused

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56 Corporatism is the theory of managing society by means of peak ‘corporations’ or interest associations authorised by the state. Enterprise associations represent employers and employees have professional associations. Both have a role in ensuring compliance with interventions they have brokered with the state in public policy areas. Some interest associations are “afforded privileged access” to the state policy process “at the expense of other interests which are excluded from such access” (Williamson 1989, 223-4).

57 The large number of TAFE personnel on the Kangan Review Committee was exceptional.

58 Although ANTA resulted from an agreement between the State, Territory and Federal governments, it was established through Commonwealth Government legislation. ECEF replaced the Australian Student Traineeship Foundation (ASTF) when it was disbanded by the Howard Coalition Government. ASTF was considered to be too strongly influenced by the union members of its Board. The ECEF Board, when appointed by Commonwealth
upon research and programs that further developed VET-in-Schools delivery and school to work transitions for secondary school aged students. The programs funded by ECEF generally by-passed the State or Territory education departments and training authorities.

The Commonwealth also set about establishing Australian Technical Colleges. Peter Shergold’s interview describes the Howard Coalition Government as “highly suspicious of the VET sector” because of undue influence of unions and the supply-driven approaches to training attributed to the public RTOs and advocated by groups such as TAFE Directors Australia.  

By focusing upon increased productivity as a national economic target, the Right-leaning Howard Government interpreted the national award system to be a mechanism used by employers and unions to block more economically efficient early completions of apprenticeships. Employers benefitted because it allowed for lower wages to be paid to more productive apprentices nearing the completion of their apprenticeship, while trade unions could maintain contact with potential members and exert influence over the VET discourse through industrial relations mechanisms. In addition, this alignment of employers, unions and TAFEs were thought to be hindering the introduction of a training market, thereby restricting the full economic benefit of competency-based training and recognition of prior learning.  

According to Shergold, the Howard Government conducted a comprehensive and ongoing campaign to remove these “cosy arrangements”. The Federal Government was convinced that such tripartite arrangements did not serve

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Education Minister, Dr David Kemp, did not contain union representation. I served as a Board member of ECEF.  

TAFE Directors Australia is the peak national association for the 60 CEOs of large public providers of training. It serves as a lobby group advocating for public provision of VET. I served several terms on the TDA Board of Directors.  

CBT and RPL are mechanisms imported from the British experience of VET policy adopting economic guidance (Raggatt & Williams 1999). They both serve to reduce the actual amount of time spent in formal training. This is often described as a ‘skills demonstrated’ rather than a ‘time served’ method of training.
the economy well because they decreased productivity and thwarted individual choice.

Shergold did qualify his description of the Howard Government’s actions with the observation that the underlying theoretical basis, human capital theory, was shared by all parties involved with the VET system. Following the 2007 Federal election, tripartite arrangements have been reinstated by the Federal Labor Government and this is reflected in the composition of the Board of Skills Australia, the Board of NCVER, the National Skills Standards Council and the Australian Qualifications Framework Council. The impact of re-establishing the 1980s corporatist influence in training will be more fully canvassed in the final chapter. It is significant.

Training had long been accepted as a vital contributor to Australian economic prosperity well before the appearance of human capital theory. Peter Noonan opened his interview by referring to the Victorian Fink Royal Commission into training at the start of the 20th century which clearly delineated a link between training and economic development. The South Australian Government had drawn a similar conclusion as far back as 1873 and the involvement of the union movement in skills formation as part of broader labour market matters was investigated by the New South Wales Piddington Royal Commission in 1911-12 (Kell 1994, 95-97). The roles played by unions and the progressive linkage of technical education and economic considerations resulted in the State TAFE systems being regarded as the “working class’s university” (Kell 1994, 95-97). The Australian Labor Party (ALP), representing the Left of politics, has had an interest in VET from early in the last century due to their belief that technical education was the most appropriate option for the working class (Bennett 1982, 161-162). Bennett (1982, 178) believes that this policy position arose because of the ALP politicians’ lack of school or university education and their general distrust of formal education systems’ role in the maintenance of class differences.
The Right's suspicions of education and training bureaucracies and the Left's long-standing wariness of allowing the 'working man's university' to be taken over by educationalists have come into alignment. The adoption of human capital theory and its ability to mobilise alternative economic analyses and rationalities provided the basis for a bipartisan demand for governments to act. The public policy potential of VET programs gained a more prominent position in Federal Government decision-making in the late 1980s because the senior ministers of the Hawke/Keating Labor Governments and their advisors felt “that education was too important to be left to educationists” (Kell 1994, 156). It was a policy position that fitted easily with the conservative Howard Government’s cynicism of the cosy arrangements between the three parties that had been producing VET’s discourse.

**Training as an attractive policy option**

Because of the economic prosperity that followed World War Two, no problem appeared to be insoluble and education was a primary instrument available for the use of Australian governments (Marginson 1997a, 14). The production of self-regulating citizens who would share in the nation’s increased affluence proceeded on a number of fronts. Training was seen to be a useful tool to redress problems of inequality, unemployment, social order and innovation (Marginson 1997a, 14; Menzies 1942). With the assumption of Australian adult education as a universal right, “more than ever, education was regarded as a panacea for social maladies” (Whitelock 1974, 264). This thinking persists, not just in Australia, as it has recently been suggested that every problem can be turned into a training problem by consensus-driven modern governments (Simons & Masschelein 2010, 599).

Support for training’s attractiveness as a policy lever was also confirmed by my interviews. The former Deputy Chief Minister in the NT’s first Labor Government, Syd Stirling, described how his government was “convinced” of the link between
training and employment including a special role for training in the transition of young people from school to work. In reply to a question about the appeal of training to governments, Kay Schofield repeated her one-liner: “It cures cancer”. She believes that State and Territory governments are drawn to training because it is one of the few things left in their control. It is also useful for a government wishing to give the appearance of addressing a problem when unsure what to do. The former head of TAFE New South Wales, Gregor Ramsey, expressed similar views about State and Territory influence over VET; retaining this policy and programmatic option allowed for these governments to be seen to be active across a wide range of social and economic matters.

Not all of those interviewed accepted my question’s underlying premise of governments’ attraction to training as policy option. The former Chief Executive of the NT Department of Employment, Education and Training, Peter Plummer, believes that training was “sometimes” considered by government as a viable option. Shane Stone, former Chief Minister and Education Minister of the NT, made the candid observation that frequent inclusion of training as part of policy solutions was often “lazy policy” put forward by “people who get a pay cheque on the second Thursday of each fortnight” – public servants and ministerial advisors.

Returning to the majority view, the most expansive answer to my question came from former NT Commissioner for Public Employment, David Hawkes. He feels that training appeals to the paternalistic tendencies of governments and their quest to “get citizens to do the right thing”. Training’s positives lie in four areas:

- it is easy to do
- the answer sounds right
- you can throw money at it and
- government is seen to have done something.
Information and knowledge

Before governments turn to training policy, first they must create the problem to be solved. Those undertaking the problematisation task must have information about the population and other characteristics of the State or nation. Many parties can lead the process of problematisation, but if the desired outcome is to get government to act, the information must be produced in a form of knowledge that is intelligible and visible to government, frequently guided by the rationality of absence.

Modern techno-rational programs of action that are proposed as solutions to social and economic problems have been based upon schemes of legibility and standardisation underwritten by scientists, engineers and planners. The instruments of statecraft, such as maps, censuses, statistical bureaus and identity cards, have allowed for a wholesale transformation of society, represented as progress, emancipation and reform (Scott 1998, location 4623). These seemingly value-free instruments have come to be treated as facts by governments and ignore the impact of unpredictable or unintended events upon programs of improvement based upon these technologies. This leads to governments viewing populations and individuals by using a very narrow range of options (Scott 1998). Overall, the consequent problematisations and proposed solutions seldom address the complex historical reality of those whose lives are being targeted for improvement (Li 2007). The very techniques used by governments to ‘know’ the population actually serve to severely limit this knowledge to a handful of ‘facts’ that are inevitably considered incomplete. This creates a continuous demand for the compilation of yet more information.

The movement to governmentalise functions was accompanied by an 18th century change in the unit of knowledge used by the state. The family was replaced by a newly conceptualised thing – the population (Foucault 2007b, 42-43). The
development of the nation-state could proceed because governments could problematise situations based upon a link between the economy and all of the citizens. Statistics provided the main technical instrument to ‘know’ the population and this specialist knowledge could be used to frame interventions in pursuit of national economic prosperity (Foucault 2007b, 100-101).

Numerically representing those who are to be governed is an active, technical process. Governments spend a vast amount of labour to transform events and phenomena into quantified information (Miller & Rose 2008, 65). This process of inscription renders reality stable, mobile, comparable and combinable. The data gathered by this activity of state is turned into information in ‘centres of calculation’ (Miller & Rose 2008, 66) and those who operate these centres are able to exert relational power due to the knowledge they accumulate. This allows for management of individual workers to be exercised at a distance from their physical location (Miller & Rose 2008, 33-34). In addition, the objectives of government can be recalculated as problems that can only be solved by the application of technical expertise built upon the statistical knowledge held in these centres of calculation (Hunter 1996, 154).

In Australia, there are four major centres of calculation and expertise that directly impact upon the VET system. While VET is not their sole focus, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Australian Council for Educational Research and the Productivity Commission each have a number of, sometimes related, programs of data gathering that contribute to VET policy deliberations. These collections are funded either directly or indirectly by governments. On the other hand, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research focuses exclusively upon VET. Its mission is “to be Australia’s leading provider of high-quality, independent information on vocational education and training (VET) to governments, the
education sector, industry and the community” (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2010a, 2).

The nine owners of this centre of calculation are the State, Territory and Federal government ministers with responsibility for training. With an annual budget of over $21 million and a positive balance sheet position of almost $3 million, NCVER is clearly performing a highly valued function on behalf of its owners (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011a, 19-20). NCVER’s sheer longevity, in a sector characterised by frequent bureaucratic restructuring, demonstrates its utility to governments.

NCVER has two major functions. The organisation collects and analyses data and also conducts a VET research program. The largest data collection activity involves managing the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard, while the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth is a smaller task (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011a). Many of the research projects arise from econometric analysis of the statistical data gathered by AVETMISS or LSAY.

With the introduction of the Unique Student Identifier, the productive capacity of AVETMISS, already NCVER’s largest single activity, will assume even greater importance. Governments will gain access to massive amounts of information on the entire VET population, regardless of funding source or the public/private status of the RTO. In addition, this vastly enhanced collection of data can be combined with statistics from the other centres of calculation, as occurs currently, to produce even more knowledge about the population (Australian Committee on Vocational Education and Training Statistics 1993; Australian Council for Educational Research 2011; Productivity Commission 2011b). The derived information will allow the owners of the company to use both individual and population-level knowledge,
gained through the information gathered about VET, for whatever reason they deem important.

NCVER’s durability can further be explained because it addresses two more practical realities. Firstly, it provides a mechanism to deal with inter-governmental tensions arising between VET policy centralisation at the national level, while the operational responsibilities lie with the States and Territories. Because VET is an activity where the States and Territories retain significant influence, the supply of statistical training information is vital to the operations of these governments and their problematisations. The existence of an independent third party allows for the VET centre of calculation to be seen as not giving any one government an advantage over the others in terms of knowledge and expertise. The establishment and continued existence of a National Training System requires consistent information. NCVER provides the mechanism allowing the Commonwealth Government to purchase information about VET from the States and Territories on mutually agreeable terms (Zoellner 2013b, 5). Therefore, NCVER serves as a vehicle to manage the political and financial contestations between the two levels of government.

Secondly, NCVER reduces the complex reality of training to statistical formats that are calculable and amenable to the accounting, auditing and reporting operations of the governments who own the organisation. The information, and consequent knowledge, generated by NCVER feeds the process of problematisation by governments. However, there is never enough information available and the desire for more is always evident and represented as being necessary for the development of better policy (Karmel, T 2011; Shergold 2010). As a further demonstration of the organisation’s usefulness, higher education has been brought into NCVER’s remit to provide information to governments (Bradley et al. 2008, 190).
The information produced by NCVER is important to governments because it is power/knowledge. The statistics convert the messy, real-world process of training into a rational format that makes sense to governments and their quest for knowledge about the population. Management of this information provides the experts and operators of the centres of calculation with positional power. As theorised by Foucault (Gordon 1980), power/knowledge is productive, rather than coercive, allowing for new ways of representing and understanding individuals and groups in conducting the conduct of the population. The valorisation of “qualifications” (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 19) and “integrity of qualifications” (National Skills Standards Council 2013a, 23) represents an outcome of this productive process and provides for a new ways of viewing the population. Citizens can be thought of as a labour market, sets of skills or as qualifications while individuals can construct their own identity through the formal qualifications they hold. Each conceptualisation carries its implied problems and solutions.

**Creating those who need training**

The contribution of economists to the interpretation and preparation of statistics is a central activity of governments in advanced market democracies and has been critiqued (Pusey 1991, 19). In particular, criticism has been aimed at the desire to reduce very volatile and difficult phenomena into quantifiable and calculable representations responsive to techniques of auditing and accounting (Marginson 1997b, 98-99). Dualism is one name given to this reductionist process and is defined as “the practice of organising thought by means of all-encompassing mutually-exclusive categories, with fixed meanings” (Dow 1990, 143).

Dualism has an impressive lineage that includes Cartesianism and its notions of a clear distinction between the mind and body (Dow 1990). It ignores the irreducible
complexity of real phenomena in order to enable quantification and computation used in political economy. Ravetz (1995, 50) believes that “Economics had to choose between certainty with unreality and uncertainty with reality and opted for the former”. Dualistic thinking provides the opportunity for entire ideas and concepts that fall between the two mutually-exclusive extremes to disappear. The seed of failure can be sown in socio-economic theories from their very creation through simplification, contributing to the malfunction of programs and practices based upon these theories (Dow 1990). The processes of identifying those who must be trained can be analysed by reference to its dualistic reasoning.

Even the hegemonic human capital theory is subject to dualism. To deal with data deficiencies in the measurement of human capital, “unfortunately, the only recourse is to simplify further” (Becker 1993, 104). The theory also explicitly defines a dualism to deal with human behaviour. In human capital theory, all persons are assumed to behave in a rational sense economically while uncertainty, ignorance and irrationality are specifically excluded as possible behaviours (Becker 1993, 91).

The foundations of the National Training System laid down by the Kangan Report relied upon the dualism of vocational versus academic (Fooks 1994, 41). In spite of repeated landmark report recommendations for better articulation between VET and Higher Education (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974; Bradley et al. 2008; Dawkins 1989b; Skills Australia 2009), the dualism of vocational versus academic remains virtually unchanged. This compelling and persuasive distinction produces a number of binary oppositions that include describing certain fields of study as practical versus conceptual, the work of institutions as ‘doing’ versus ‘thinking’ and a strict hierarchy of formal qualifications that privileges some forms of knowledge over others. Dualism is built into the very genetics of the VET system all the way down to assessment of individual achievement. The complex tasks, required to be performed in order to gain employment in particular industries,
are broken down into highly detailed units of competence that are promulgated through Training Packages and accredited courses. The grading scheme that is used to assess an individual's progress through these units is itself a binary – competent or not competent. While the debate continues as to the suitability of this assessment method (Harris et al. 1995; Ryan 2011; Stevenson 2007), those who oppose the scheme are forced to argue from a position that is represented as supporting incompetence. By ignoring complexity and contingency, dualistic thinking can render one term privileged and unproblematic while its opposite is aberrant (Marginson 1997b, 278).

Problematisation created the identity of unemployed youth in the 1970s when unskilled jobs rapidly disappeared from the Australian labour market. Given that work was considered normal, dualism allowed the creation of the unemployed as abnormal. The Australian public's historic lack of sympathy towards the unemployed was transferred onto these youth (Cooper 2011, 20). This situation allowed governments to use this newly problematised cohort to test a range of disincentive-type policies, aimed at keeping citizens off the welfare rolls, before extending them to groups that might attract more public sympathy, such as single mothers or older people. Some of these trials were Work for the Dole, more frequent reporting requirements, training and more rigorous activity tests to demonstrate job seeking behaviours. Dualism facilitated the transfer of the negative impact of structural changes in the economy to the personal and moral responsibility of individual young people in an unquestionable manner, because it could be resolved by training directed at achieving 'normal' behaviour on the part of these youth.

As the VET system developed, a group of dualisms have been bundled together and used interchangeably in a manner that has stripped any real meaning from the

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62 Training Packages are national in coverage and developed by 11 government-endorsed Industry Skills Councils collectively representing the majority of industries in the Australian economy.
political considerations they represent. Most early landmark reports into VET in Australia make reference to the provision of training to groups that are identified as ‘disadvantaged’ (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974; Dawkins & Holding 1987; Kirby 1985). In the early 1990s the terminology changed to ‘equity groups’, increasing the number of categories that could be identified (Australian National Training Authority 2003). With the election of the Federal Labor Government in 2007, clusters of people are being constructed from those who need to be ‘socially included’ (Bullock 2011). While the words may change, the purpose of categorisation is the same. These problematic groups are asserted to be different from normal citizens, who are dualistically classed as ‘advantaged’, ‘equal’ or ‘not excluded’ by implication.

The naming of a group that is other than normal serves a useful purpose. It allows governments to identify and encourage the desired behaviours expected of the population, while preparing to use expertly developed programs to fill the absences, gaps and voids that have been identified in the deviants. The actual work of creating these assemblages of problematic sub-populations is accomplished by the use of statistics. Those requiring remediation are identified and made amenable to normalising government action through calculating statistical relationships using the dualising data collected by “a great bureaucratic machinery” (Hacking 1991, 181).

Advanced market democracies see the supposed neutrality of numbers as a means of ensuring equality and fairness in the treatment of the citizens. The application of normality and its related bell curve is greatly assisted by the simplicity of dualism. Devising dualistic categories capable of being counted and computed in order to improve the behaviour of a deviant population is the work of experts and their specialist languages:
I claim that enumeration requires categorisation, and that defining new classes of people for the purposes of statistics has consequences for the ways in which we conceive of others and think of our own possibilities and potentialities (Hacking 1990, 6).

NCVER is a major cog in the great bureaucratic machine of the National Training System and calculates the statistical relationships used to create groups suitable to problematisation. The socially excluded groups are defined in terms that not only allow, but demand, the involvement of government. These abnormal individuals can be problematised in ways that simplistically define their disadvantage on the sole criterion of not being gainfully employed and, therefore, not contributing to the social and economic development of the nation (Skills Australia 2011, 22, 68). In other words, for contemporary Australian policy-makers, disadvantage has come to be represented as unemployment; the two concepts have been conflated while hiding many other contributions to disadvantage, such as gender segregation, racism or even the lack of access to transport to and from workplaces.

The dualistic reduction of the complexity of living in a market-based democratic society characterised by strong conceptions of individual freedoms and responsibilities contributes to fashioning people. “The making of citizens is a permanent political project for democracy, but their social construction is erected upon what they are said to lack” (Cruikshank 1999, 123). With the now problematised categories such as unskilled, excluded, inequitable, disadvantaged and unemployed melded, training becomes an unarguable proposition. The combination of the rationality of absence and the historical development of the workers’ welfare state in Australia provides a very receptive environment for enrolling government to assume responsibility for resolving these problems by using the inseparable technology of training.
However, there is a major gap between provision of training and a correlated employment outcome (COAG Reform Council 2011; Karmel, T 2012). It is very difficult to demonstrate that any particular training program directly leads to ongoing employment in the same industry. Governments have openly attempted to influence employment outcomes, by supplying wage subsidies or providing short term job placements, but these interventions not only distort the labour market, they are financially unsustainable over time (Dodd 2013b; Kirby 1985). Identifying and measuring the qualifications issued through the VET system is much easier to use as a proxy for employment and to demonstrate that something is being done, using the training machinery which, as noted, is analytically under-examined.

**The missing dualism – training equals working**

The public policies of an active society envisage that the vast majority of citizens will be employed or in training in anticipation of entering (or re-joining) the workforce. Even though full employment is the long-standing goal set by governments, the impact of labour market and social security programs in support of this goal are often measured by a proxy – training. This substitution appears across a range of Commonwealth Government policy interests. For example, in discussing the options available to the Australian Government to move remote Indigenous people off a range of social security benefits, it is accepted by the responsible ministers that training will be a suitable, if transitory, outcome (Arbib, Macklin & Ellis 2011, 11).

The various COAG Agreements and Partnerships specify education and training outcomes rather than employment targets. This simultaneously makes government active, while failure is laid at the feet of the individual. In another example, the compulsory years of school attendance have been increased in order to force young people to be ‘earning or learning’. The targets set for 19-year-olds are expressed in terms of formal qualifications held rather than employment outcomes (Council of
Australian Governments 2009). Similarly, the National Partnership on Skills Reform establishes levels of qualifications held by the whole population as its target, rather than employment (Council of Australian Governments 2012). It is even projected that by 2025, there will be “an undersupply of between 1.6 million and 2.8 million qualifications at diploma level or above” and an oversupply of lower level certificates (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 42). The population is being considered as a pool of qualifications rather than as individual workers.

Given the attractiveness of training to governments, it features prominently in the processes of problematisation. Governments will give priority to problems that have attractive and immediately available remedies (Edwards, Howard & Miller 2001, 8). The programmatic outcomes of Prime Minister Keating’s white paper on full employment, Working Nation, (Keating 1994a) exemplify the tendency of Governments to accept training as a substitute for employment:

In the case of Working Nation and its implementation, politicians did not show as much concern as was necessary; for political, resource, timing and other reasons, as well as a lack of clarity about what was to be achieved, policy moved away from delivery of employment outcomes for the Long Term Unemployed and towards offering them training places to get them off the books (Edwards, Howard & Miller 2001, 183).

Clearly, training is a very useful technology, as it can be liberally deployed across all groups and ages under the guise of lifelong learning. In addition, VET can substitute for matters that are much harder for governments to directly address, such as employment or the structural basis for social inequality. This fusion of work and training gives rise to a curious situation. Given dualism’s importance in the construction and understanding of VET, why is there not a dualistic distinction
between work and training? Clearly, they are different things. After all, one is either employed or not; skilled or not; an apprentice or a tradesperson.

The implicit rejection of this potential dualism demonstrates several things. At a higher level of abstraction, it supports a Foucauldian viewpoint that accords significance to luck and historical accident. Dualism is not an absolute narrative – important but not all-encompassing. From a more operational perspective, VET is too useful to be put in a tightly prescribed box. Training is useful because it is:

- common sense
- freely available to all governments and all citizens
- so mundane that it is widely accepted as a good thing
- demonstrating action
- capable of being funded from the public purse
- capable of measuring the population’s behaviour and
- endlessly flexible – a potential ‘cure for cancer’.

VET’s distinctive feature of being defined by what it is not, deploying the rationality of absence, surfaces yet again. It is too hard to put VET into one exclusive group because it can be anything (other than a school or a university). VET serves a multiplicity of roles in addition to the transfer of skills.

**Training is multiple**

Because VET was defined by what it was not, it is easily viewed from multiple perspectives (cf Mol 2002) and this capacity fosters a negotiated process of VET public policy production. Herein lays an explanation for the bipartisan arrangements that have been described. VET serves as a boundary object facilitating communications between the political Left and Right, as well as the State, Territory and Federal bureaucracies, to problematise issues in a manner amenable to
governmental action. This process creates deficient groups who demand action – unemployed youth, the disadvantaged, those who are illiterate, the socially excluded or even an amorphous group like women.

Such a coming together of the Left and Right has been described as a process of convergence allowing for “the mutual constitution of a person or object and their representation. People get put into categories and learn from those categories how to behave” (Bowker & Star 1999, 311). As a boundary object, VET allows many groups to contribute to the productive construction of Australian society. Employers, unions, not-for-profit organisations, training providers and a plethora of lobby groups can invoke the concept of training as a means of gaining entry into policy discussions with governments by creating sub-populations in the need of treatment at the taxpayers’ expense. Convergence is a very good thing for governments in advanced market democracies. Having both sides of the political divide asking for action significantly reduces the political and electoral risks of initiating a response.

But convergence serves as ‘counterfeit’ to transparency (Bowker & Star 1999, 311). While there may be broad agreement as to the need for action, what often results is not always what was expected by those who created the original set of demands. Transparency is in the eye of the beholder and, as with boundary objects, can mean multiple things to different groups. It is even suggested that transparency is either impossible or, if it does briefly come into existence, highly unstable (Bowker & Star 1999, 311).

But the call for transparency in VET has assumed centre-stage (Council of Australian Governments 2012; Evans 2011a; Gillard 2012; National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011a). With VET serving as a boundary object and, as a consequence, promoting convergence, what does that mean for the transparency agenda that has become so prominent of late? Having examined how
VET came into existence and the importance of the rationality of absence, it is now time to move to the second part of this analysis, exploring how VET not only serves as a form of biopower but also as an officially sanctioned and widely accepted technology of the self. The techniques of the self as theorised by Foucault (2007a) marked a transition in his thinking that moved beyond discipline and examined how individuals transformed and worked upon their conduct and thoughts. The inclusive capacity of vocational education and training has allowed it to exist simultaneously as a disciplinary practice of government and a seldom questioned technique of self-transformation and regulation.

In addition, both extensions to and questioning of the Foucauldian perspective on the various social and personal technologies will also be taken into account in the second part of this narrative. For example, Wacquant (2009, location 5506) believes that the massive increase in the use of imprisonment in advanced market democracies directly challenges Foucault’s proposition that disciplinary society has given way to self-regulation. Deleuze (Miller & Rose 2008, 102) describes ‘societies of control’ in which behaviour is monitored by continuous and unlimited processes that operate outside of formal institutions such as schools and prisons. His views build upon those of Foucault. Baudrillard (1998) explores the importance of consumption to the way western society functions, adding another consideration to be taken into account when exploring how public policy contributes to conducting the conduct of citizens.
Chapter Ten

Transparency
Visibility is a trap.  
(Foucault 1979, 200)

A slippery concept

Interview question: “What do you understand to be the meaning of transparency”?

Experienced bureaucrat David Hawkes’ answer (with a hearty laugh): “It means what you want it to mean – the actions of government should be open for informed discussion and debate”.

The call for greater transparency in VET has assumed a central place in public policy announcements. From the Prime Minister (Gillard 2012) downwards, virtually every recent VET policy document, media release or speech endorses greater transparency in training as something that will be good for the country. The State Premiers and Territory Chief Ministers have joined the Prime Minister in signing a national agreement which commits all Australian governments to delivering a “more transparent VET sector” (Council of Australian Governments 2012, 5). What is transparency and what does it have to do with VET? Making transparency itself transparent will demonstrate how VET can impact upon citizens’ behaviour.

The rationality of government, Foucault’s ‘governmentality’, has been used to disguise a substitution in both the meaning and the intended targets of transparency. As noted by Hawkes above, the late 20th century transparency agenda was reconceived as a mechanism to make governments accountable to the citizens of the nation-states and has been a central feature of New Public Management styles of governance (Bennis et al. 2008, 18; Piotrowski 2010, 31). Transparency has had its meaning reassigned from a layer that can be seen through, as if it is absent, to now signify complete visibility. More importantly, the

63 The words transparent and transparency will be treated as if they refer to the same phenomenon and will be used interchangeably as reflected in the current VET discourse.
various public bodies that are sanctioned by government to direct and regulate the VET sector have shifted the target of transparency from government to private individuals and providers of training.\textsuperscript{64} These agents of government do not behave transparently by limiting access to minutes of meetings, not providing clarity as to how directors or members are appointed, not describing the length of these appointments and not discussing their dealings with government ministers and senior bureaucrats.

Conversely, in this application of transparency that has been directed by State, Territory and Commonwealth Governments, every single private individual who enrols in even one unit of nationally accredited VET study will be assigned a lifelong Unique Student Identifier while most registered training organisations (exemptions apply to government agencies who claim a link to security) have become obliged to report their activities to government. Transparency has been shifted from a mechanism that makes government accountable to the people to the reverse. Private individuals and organisations must make themselves accountable to government centres of calculation and regulation that are far from open in their pursuit and application of information that can be used to manage the behaviour of the population.

By courtesy of the Productivity Commission, a widely accepted operational definition of transparency is provided by the Commonwealth Government.\textsuperscript{65} For this economically-oriented organisation, it means to ‘open the books’ so that an

\textsuperscript{64} These bodies include the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, The National Skills Standards Council and the Australian Qualifications Framework Council. In addition there are another group of less high profile public bodies that include the oddly named National Advisory on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment, as well as the National Senior Officials Committee, the National VET Equity Advisory Council and the Flexible Learning Advisory Group. Refer to (http://www.innovation.gov.au/Skills/National/NationalAdvisoryForTertiaryEducationSkillsAndEmployment/Pages/default.aspx ).

\textsuperscript{65} The Productivity Commission is the Australian Government’s independent research and advisory body on a range of economic, social and environmental issues affecting the welfare of Australians. It aims to contribute to governments making better policy for the long term benefit of the country. Refer to http://www.pc.gov.au/.
investigation can be replicated, if required, on the basis of the same data, 
asumptions and methodologies (Banks 2009, 14). Of course, these same 
characteristics describe the numerical and statistical regularities upon which 
randomised controlled trials rely and give rise to normality. And these are the tools 
used to make up dualistic groups of people, who are problematised and made 
amenable to training.

In its various applications, transparency has become a public policy objective in 
advanced market democracies because financial-style calculations can be used by 
governments in the centralisation of information about citizens (Rose 1999b, 151). 
While transparency is often held up as a vital part of the democratic process by 
providing the ability to observe and debate governmental actions (Bennis et al. 
2008, 16), it is impossible to have a situation that is equally transparent to everyone 
(Bowker & Star 1999, 311). More direct criticisms posit that making a situation 
transparent hides as much as it reveals (Garsten & Lindh de Montoya 2008a, 284) 
or that the entire transparency agenda is a modern style of propaganda (Burton 
2007, 4).

Transparency is of interest not only due to its pervasive, uncritical use by politicians 
and bureaucrats but also because it is a form of absence. By its very definition, you 
cannot see the layer of material that is transparent. In yet another paradox 
associated with VET, the term signifies complete visibility in the official VET 
discourse. How has is come to be that a word can have its meaning re-assigned to 
its exact opposite without question or diagnosis? What are the implications and 
productive opportunities that arise from having a VET system made more visible by 
a phenomenon that is invisible?

This chapter commences a change in emphasis for the remainder of the analysis. 
The creation of the VET system has been described using Foucauldian theoretical
perspectives of power/knowledge and its productive capacity. Considerable attention has been given to the research methodologies in use as well as setting the Australian National Training System as the context. The rationality of absence has been identified as the predominant way of thinking about VET’s role as a disciplinary technology of governments. Up until this point, the focus has been upon the ‘construction’ (Miller & Rose 2008, 14) of the National Training System, now the emphasis will shift to ‘enacting’ VET (Mol 2002, 32-33). Vocational education and training’s power/knowledge is subject to an endless struggle for domination of the official discourse in the Australian version of an advanced market democracy. Transparency, invisibility and public secrets all contribute to the enactment of VET and the resultant production of citizens, workers and consumers and the way they conceive of themselves and their behaviour.

If training is an unquestionable good, then transparent training appears to be even better. It is all but impossible to find a significant current VET policy or program document without multiple propositions for increased transparency. The snappily-titled centre-piece of Commonwealth Government VET policy, Skills for all Australians: national reforms to skill more Australians and achieve a more competitive, dynamic economy (Australian Government 2012), uses the word 14 times and allocates all of Chapter Six to transparency in VET. The National partnership agreement on skills reform specifies four intended outcomes including: “a more transparent VET sector, which enables better understanding of the VET activity that is occurring in each jurisdiction” (Council of Australian Governments 2012, 5 emphasis in original). A new arrival to the study of VET policy might conclude that, given its prominence, the pervasive presence of transparency has a

66 The use of the term ‘enacting’ has a very precise meaning for the purposes of explaining how VET is understood. It is used in the sense described by Mol (2002) allowing for different individuals and groups to ‘do’ an object differently based upon their own experiences, training and paradigmatic viewpoint. Mol’s theoretical considerations come from a different epistemological basis than does Foucault’s, relying upon the social construction of science and actor network traditions.
long association with training. In fact, they would be wrong. The arrival of transparency is relatively recent and can be identified.

**The origins of transparency in VET**

The early landmark national reports, including the seminal Kangan Report, *Australia Reconstructed* and the 1980s ministerial statements of the prolific John Dawkins, do not mention the word. The introduction of transparency into VET accompanied the establishment of the Australian National Training Authority in 1992. ANTA complained bitterly about the paucity and poor quality of national training information and the consequent adverse impact upon planning and resource allocation (Australian National Training Authority 1994a, 33; 1996b, 6, 76). This position mirrored the Kangan Review’s citing of deficiencies in data and information hampering its deliberations two decades earlier. Through the standard process of problematisation, the lack of consistent training statistics was created as a major difficulty to be solved by governments. From the earliest days of the National Training System, the focus was less on skills formation and transfer and more on gathering of consistent data. The foundations of VET were built upon an absence; there was never enough information available, particularly statistics that would allow for comparisons between jurisdictions and computation of national indicators and figures. Due to perceptions of insufficient data collection and statistical information, the system was represented as opaque from its inception.

One of the earliest official references to transparency as a solution to this opacity came in a 1994 assessment of the progress of training reform. This review was carried out by private management consultants on behalf of ANTA. It was noted that successful training reform “will require significantly improved financial management and reporting systems if transparency is to be achieved” (Allen Consulting Group 1994, 5). The evaluation recommended the development and use of management
principles based upon “transparent accountability for results to Parliaments, responsible Ministers, clients and taxpayers by ANTA and each implementing authority and agency” (Allen Consulting Group 1994, 23).

ANTA’s enactment of VET was not done from an educational perspective. This public authority relied heavily upon private business consultants to produce reports and evaluations of the developing National Training System. This is not surprising, given that ANTA’s Board and committee composition consisted of representatives from the customary corporate groups of industry, government and unions. The conjoining of training and the economy demanded that the work of ANTA be examined by people with public policy, business and economic credentials. In the 1995 description of the rationales behind the allocation of financial resources to the jurisdictions, it was declared “one of ANTA’s priorities is to achieve transparency across State and Territory quality arrangements in the VET sector” (Australian National Training Authority 1995c, 21). The new training system now had finances, quality mechanisms and reporting systems officially tied to a transparency agenda.

By the following year, transparency was to assume an even more prominent place in VET policy agendas. In order to plan for the next triennium, the nine governments that were party to the ANTA Agreement decided to review the progress made over the preceding three years. The landmark Report of the review of the ANTA agreement (Australian National Training Authority 1996b) was conducted by a committee chaired by Mr Rae Taylor. He was eminently qualified to lead the analysis, given his experience as a senior Commonwealth Government bureaucrat, Managing Director of Australia Post, shipping company director and expert on national transport and logistics matters. Each of these roles gave him insight into the policy battles and financial considerations that often characterise intergovernmental relationships arising from the federalist nature of the Australian Constitution. As usual, he did not have an education or training background.
Taylor’s report positioned greater transparency as part of the solution to virtually every issue facing ANTA and its mission to create a national system of training. Taylor put forward transparency as an answer to the complexity of the system, accountability for public funds, competition between public and private RTOs, the policy implications for State and Territory funding decisions, regulation, quality assurance, academic accreditation, funding of community service obligations and the scope of VET services. In his considered view, “the entire system lacks transparency” (Australian National Training Authority 1996b, 132).

Transparency in VET is one of ANTA’s legacies to the sector because the concept did not come from governments of the day. The legislation that created ANTA did not use the word (Department of the Parliamentary Library 1994). Likewise, the most prominent training experts occupying key positions in the relevant government agencies in the early and mid-1990s did not propose a case for transparency. A major national commemoration and symposium was held in 1994 to celebrate the impact of the Kangan Report after two decades. The published proceedings of those events were opened by a letter from Prime Minister Keating and the commemorative address was delivered by the Commonwealth Government minister, Ross Free (Kearns & Hall 1994). The symposium presenters included most of the significant individuals influencing VET policy at the time. They variously addressed the original Kangan Report, its legacy and the future directions of the sector. Not a single mention of transparency was made during any of the events that celebrated the continued influence of the Kangan Report upon the development of the National Training System. The transparency agenda is a creation of ANTA’s business and commercial orientation.

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67 Community service obligations (CSOs) refer to training activities that would normally be deemed inefficient or financially unprofitable, but are represented by lobby groups and politicians as a public good and, therefore, suitable for public funding. High cost training delivered to small groups in remote communities using expensive equipment, such as grader operator training or high level computer operations, would be considered CSOs.
In addition to recent government policy documents, media releases, COAG agreements and speeches, the transparency agenda has been taken up by other organisations that influence VET policy. For Skills Australia, benefits will accrue from greater transparency in relation to published indicators of training quality, achievement profiles of individual RTOs and more public availability of VET system data (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 137). The Productivity Commission (2011b, 70-71) also cites a number of advantages from a more transparent VET system characterised by increased autonomy in funding and governance for public RTOs, the publication of quality and audit results by the National Vocational Education and Training Regulator and improved indicators for community service obligations.\(^{68}\)

In less than 20 years transparency has come from nowhere to now occupy a central position in the VET policy environments of governments. Not only have many of the problems faced by governments been rendered capable of solution through increased transparency, but, like training itself, transparency has assumed an aura of unquestionable good. But what is this thing called transparency and how is it used and represented?

**What is transparency?**

The dictionary definition of transparency has expanded over the years. Early 20th century usage was limited to “that is transparent which does not even obscure sight of what is behind it” (A dictionary of modern English usage 1968). However, by the 1980s not only did transparent mean “able to be seen through” but also “easily understood, obvious” (The Oxford Guide to English Usage 1984). In Australia in the

\(^{68}\) The National VET Regulator carries out quality audits upon individual RTOs against a nationally agreed set of benchmarks and provides registration credentials allowing each RTO to issue nationally recognised certificates and diplomas compliant with the Australian Qualifications Framework. States and Territories have referred their accreditation and quality functions to this body with the exception of the two States, Western Australia and Victoria. The current agency name is the Australian Skills Quality Authority.
new millennium, to be transparent is to be “open, frank or candid, easily seen through or understood, manifest or obvious” (The Macquarie Dictionary 2001). The rationality of absence carries through with each of these definitions. The things that serve as barriers to openness and understanding must be made to appear absent in order to deal with the problems facing VET and governments.

While it is not all that unusual for the meaning of words to evolve over time, the change of emphasis regarding transparency, from being something that can be seen through to one of understanding through increased observation, allowed for its appropriation into the language of New Public Management. The movement towards more market-based and corporate styles of governance in advanced market democracies is generally attributed to policy directions determined in the United Kingdom under Prime Minister Thatcher and the United States by President Reagan in the 1980s (Hill & Hupe 2002, 110). NPM relies heavily upon contracting government services to third parties and introducing highly specialised reporting and accountability mechanisms – transparency – in the name of safeguarding public monies. This allows for the responsibility for implementation to be contracted away from governments and, with that, liability for mistakes, inefficiency or unintended consequences. The Northern Territory Government was able to easily adopt NPM because it was creating the machinery of government during this time period. The possibility of establishing a government owned and operated TAFE system in the NT was never seriously considered since the contracting out of VET provision to arm’s length public providers and the private sector readily aligned with NPM and active social policy principles. Transparency represents a method of monitoring this style of public expenditure and its impacts from a distance.

In Australia, NPM was one part of the broader ‘economic rationalism’ agenda of the 1980s (Pusey 1991, 3). Proposals to apply market-based approaches to service delivery by Australian governments (Marginson 1997b, 111), directed by human
capital theory, allowed the possibility for individuals and organisations to become responsibilised choice-makers. In addition to funding private sector contractors to competitively deliver goods and services, governments increasingly used NPM and active social policy principles as a mechanism to fund the activities of not-for-profit organisations, as opposed to direct operating grants, which further spread transparency as a desirable characteristic:

The public management agenda of strategic goal setting, more efficient management and improved accountability, transparency, budgeting and financial oversight was a cultural revolution for organisations structured as charities (Colebatch 2006, 48).

The unique features of Australian federalism lend themselves to policy built upon NPM principles. While the detailed VET funding mechanisms have varied from direct grants, the ANTA Agreements and the COAG Partnership Agreements, the underlying process remains the same. The Commonwealth Government buys its way into State-level responsibility for VET policy through a contract with the relevant State or Territory training authorities who, in turn, repeat the contracting process to purchase specified types and levels of training from the providers registered to do business within their jurisdiction.

The current COAG VET Reform National Partnership will allocate the NT a possible total amount of $18.1 million over the five years of the agreement based upon the jurisdiction having one per cent of the total Australian population (Council of Australian Governments 2012, 27). This so-called ‘reward funding’ will be paid by the Federal Government when the NT demonstrates achievement of reform milestones and training outcomes, including the data-driven creation of a more transparent VET sector. Because the markers do not include employment
outcomes, one could argue that in pursuit of transparency, the Commonwealth is actually buying information instead of training (Zoellner 2013b, 5).

This NPM-style requirement for the NT to sign a VET contractual agreement with the Commonwealth Government was first proposed in 1987. The Secretary of the Education Department prepared a briefing memo for the NT Education Minister on the implications for the NT contained in the Commonwealth Budget Statement Number 9 – Skills for Australia. The major changes to previous relationships between the two governments would be implemented in 1988 and included:

- no further untied per capita training grants
- all funding would be allocated on the basis of funding submissions to the Commonwealth
- a Resource Agreement between the two governments would need to be signed
- all Commonwealth funding would be tied to achieving national priorities
- NT funding would also need to demonstrate links to national priorities and
- the Commonwealth Government threatened to withdraw funding to the NT Government and give it directly to industry if NT public providers were considered to be unresponsive to the national priorities (Northern Territory Archives Service I June 1987-26 October 1987).

Another section of the briefing memo referred to Higher Education and described the change in government style that was taking place:

> The same emphasis as with TAFE is that funding is now in the hands of the bureaucrats and the more generalist public service style of

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69 These national priorities were part of what would come to be known as the National Training Reform Agenda and included the provision of training to identified priority groups such as unemployed youth and women in heavily gendered traditional trades, greater responsiveness to industry priorities, improved quality and national consistency in a variety of VET-related areas in support of industrial award restructuring.
operations will apply. Arguments of academic freedom, need and necessity will lose to accountability and productivity (Northern Territory Archives Service I June 1987-26 October 1987, Folio 123 emphasis in original).

Transparency has been adopted as part of the language of NPM because its meaning has been re-purposed in pursuit of openness and understanding associated with audit and reporting (Rose 1999b, 154). The preferred format for transparency in VET is information and data amenable to accounting and auditing because this allegedly allows for potential replicability of programs that work and national consistency (Banks 2009, 14; Productivity Commission 2011b, 12). Some believe that one outcome of this NPM approach to governance is that organisations that enter into contracts with governments are expected to operate as businesses accompanied by audits which causes the ‘real’ productivity of bodies to be overlooked (Strathern 2000, 318). Transparency is the public policy centre-piece that has re-defined the operations of government-funded organisations. They are required to behave in ways that are compatible with free markets and demonstrate levels of openness deemed conducive to the exercise of democracy by an informed citizenship (Miller & Rose 2008, 215). Transparency supports the operation of advanced market democracies.

Transparency’s centrality in educational public policy does not apply only to VET. The *Review of Australian higher education final report* makes repeated calls for transparency in funding processes, target setting, student identification, student income support, reports of student experiences, standards, quality processes, provider accreditation and funding accountability for universities (Bradley et al. 2008). The opening sentence of the *Review of funding for schooling – final report* (Gonski et al. 2011, xi) explains the purpose of the evaluation is “to develop a funding system that is transparent, fair and financially sustainable”. The word
transparent appears almost 90 more times in the report, giving some indication of its importance to the authors.

**The discourse of transparency**

One of the singular experiences of the post-modern age has been the colonisation of language by dominant discourses (Rose 1996a, 42). This leads to the conquered language being commonly used by bureaucrats and the media without careful and informed understanding of its origin and impacts:

> The point is that an entire philosophy – often neoliberal economics – is itself imported when such language is used, which defines certain actions and behaviours and this established the logic of practice that generated them in individuals’ subsequent activities – a kind of epistemological Trojan Horse (Grenfell 2007, 232).

Certainly, from its unproblematic appearance in a few ANTA documents in the mid-1990s, transparency has developed in a manner that is consistent with Foucauldian productivity and the growth of ‘societies of control’ espoused by Deleuze (2009). The understanding of the population gained from this pursuit of transparency helps redefine the power/knowledge relationship between governments and citizens. The development of a transparent VET system is heavily influenced by a ‘performative process’ that defines the issues facing any organisation (Power 2003, 12). The specification of what contributes to transparency “can *kick-start* practices” both inside and outside the immediate environment (Power 2003, 9 emphasis in original). The alleged opacity of the VET system has been problematised in a manner that can be addressed by the collection of data and publication of increasing amounts information through:

- improving timelines for data sharing and reporting
- implementing the Unique Student Identifier and
improving consumer information on quality, prices, government subsidies and labour market information (Council of Australian Governments 2012, 20-22).70

This focus on “data collection as constitutive and performative process” (Power 2003, 12) will determine the future direction and conceptualisation of what is possible in VET. Defining the issues of transparency so that they can be resolved by more data and information determines the priorities of State and Territory governments and guides the development of the training system. In the face of public budgetary constraints, the provision of nationally consistent data will drive investment decisions towards the acquisition and continuous upgrading of computers and information software in preference to developing training facilities and skills transfer mechanisms. In order to keep Commonwealth monies flowing, the main aim of the system shifts from industrial skills and technical competence to doing things ‘transparently’ – now defined quite narrowly as AVETMISS-compliant data collection and selective publication in a centrally mandated format.

For governments, the problems with VET are characterised as a lack of information. This should not be a surprise, as defining and gathering information are the stock in trade of government bureaucracies (Hacking 1991, 183-184). The accumulation and tabulation of data about those things problematised by governments is what makes the conduct of the population’s conduct possible (Miller & Rose 2008, 65). This is not a peculiar characteristic of either the Left or Right of politics. Those who plan programs to improve society, having identified and represented the problem, need to make society ‘legible’ in order to guide the implementation of programs of improvement (Scott 1998, location 1167).

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70 This information is available on the My Skills website (http://www.myskills.gov.au/). In December 2012, 13 fields of information were available for Charles Darwin University, for example. These include statistics on numbers and characteristics (gender, socio-economic status, previous highest level qualification) of students, qualification levels and industry areas being studied and summary statistics of the institutional VET offerings.
The willingness to governmentalise many societal functions leads to a generally well-intentioned but seemingly inevitable inability to successfully implement mass programs designed by technical experts to correct perceived deficiencies in the population (Scott 1998; Sirolli 1999). Contributing to this failure are the dualistic, reductionist simplifications that are used in the conversion of qualitative experiences into quantifiable – transparent – measures (Dow 1990). Addressing programmatic failure inevitably demands even more information. When a state’s objective is to change the daily habits or work performance of its citizens, ignorance is absolutely disabling for the techno-rational experts of state:

A thoroughly legible society eliminates local monopolies of information and creates a kind of national transparency through the uniformity of codes, identities, statistics, regulations and measures. At the same time it is likely to create positional advantages for those at the apex who have the knowledge and access to easily decipher the new state-created format (Scott 1998, location 1102).

Governments have appropriated the economically rational term transparency to describe their need for the seemingly endless amount of information about the nation’s residents that can be generated from the technology of VET. This ‘busnocratic’ word brings with it unstated and increasingly uncontested implications that emphasise information and information retrieval over understanding, while positioning consumers as the sole arbiters of quality (Marshall 1995, 191-192). Transparency is a ‘Trojan Horse’ capable of limiting other VET discourses.

Information for markets

The application of NPM’s language of capitalist, free-market economic development has made the need for certain styles of information from the VET system incontestable. While this power/knowledge relationship guides the population’s
behaviour, it also serves another fundamental capitalistic purpose. The neo-
classical theory of economics proposes that all of the field can be reduced to one simple lesson stated in a single sentence:

> The art of economics consists of looking not merely at the immediate but at the longer effects of any act or policy; it consists in tracing the consequences of the policy not merely for one group but for all groups (Hazlitt 1979, 17).

In order to operate most efficiently, markets must have access to as much information as possible on both a wide range of policies and the characteristics of the population (Hazlitt 1979, 17-19; Loasby 2005, 60). The National Training System contributes to this information flow in pursuit of the perfect VET market by the provision of data in economically useful formats. The use of government subsidies for initial qualifications, requiring most training providers to supply data and the provision of income contingent loans for higher level qualifications, all encourage individuals to enrol in the VET system and become inscribed through the Unique Student Identifier. This is a project without an apparent end point, as there can never be too much information available to the market. The call for transparency is a demand to make available the information contained in the training system in support of Australia’s advanced market democracy.

**Contesting transparency**

The ongoing political dispute between the State, Territory and Federal governments over who pays for training and directs the related policy processes has positioned transparency as one of the conditions for access to Commonwealth tax revenues. The remainder of this chapter will examine this contestation from several perspectives, commencing with the limitations and the uses of the information that
comes into the hands of governments as a result of transparency and finishing with consideration of who gets to see what and what transparency does.

Different types of reasoning provide seemingly insoluble discrepancies between concepts. For example, in the medical field, so-called evidence-based medicine is built upon frequencies and randomised trials, while clinical medicine relies upon coherent degrees of belief. Neither has a logical or philosophical superiority, but evidenced-based approaches will come to dominate because of economics (Hacking 2006a). Quite simply, it is less expensive “to base medicine on large-scale statistical regularities than to attend to the clinical details of each case” (Hacking 2006a, xxii). Similarly for VET, national statistics, produced in the name of transparency, have replaced the ‘local knowledge’ of the nearly 5,000 RTOs that operate across the entire country. In fact recent proposals for increased regulation of entry into the training sector include provisions to dramatically reduce the number of providers – their knowledge and experience is not valued in the pursuit of transparency (National Skills Standards Council 2013a, 46).

One of the pitfalls of relying too heavily upon statistics is that it is impossible to predict the future based upon past events because, at best, the future is unknown (Hacking 2006a, 181). The concepts that get used by governments are based upon what they think will probably happen (beliefs) and what they want to happen (values). Any long term commitment to action requires the assumption of knowledge of the future that no one could possibly possess (Loasby 2007, 1755). The concept of transparency is clearly contested in a philosophical sense because it is based upon information about what has already happened in the VET system in order to plan and react to the future – a rational but nevertheless unachievable task. A more recent approach to envisaging the future has been the provision of multiple scenarios to guide government VET policy (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 25). Governmentalising VET evokes an ever-present but
nevertheless impossible desire to predict the future based upon the past even if it does come in the form of alternative scenarios. The key issue is to recognise the limitations of transparency.

A concept such as transparency is a suggestion about how things should proceed from the present situation (Bacchi 2011, 31, citing Tanesini). The way forward for VET, using the concept of transparency, has been agreed through COAG's political compromises and relies upon the provision of greater amounts of nationally consistent data supposedly representing information about how the system functions. But transparency, as will be shown shortly, actually means various things to many different parties who contribute to the VET discourse. Because it has multiple abstract and qualitative meanings, transparency can be considered to be a contested concept. Contested concepts are devoid of fixed meaning, but are used as if they have significant importance. Their study allows for the politics and relationships that give such a concept meaning to become the focus of attention (Bacchi 2011, 31).

The contested concept can “take on a signifying function by being related to an object and serving as a permanent sign for it” without assuming any intrinsic value itself (Miller 1987, 173). Transparency has come to signify the production and calculation of information used by governments to measure the population. It has no value on its own, but what it represents is important to governments and markets. Domination of the discourse of transparency becomes contested in both political and economic arenas. This dispute has even allowed the word to be re-defined from something that can be seen through to a process of complete visibility.

The capacity of transparency to be a ‘contested concept’ without any intrinsic value makes it another of Mol’s (2002, 138) boundary objects. Transparency allows people who are enacting VET from different perspectives to communicate and
develop relationships in order to provide VET for a population in need of training. Transparency’s obvious attractiveness to policy-makers and bureaucrats arises because it is a boundary object. This word is so adaptable that it becomes almost impossible to argue against it. It has become another form of common sense.

**Multiple transparencies**

This adaptability gives rise to multiple understandings, and consequent uses, of transparency. These can include ‘visibility, openness and communication’, ‘a nexus of associated neoliberal ideas’, ‘tool of experts’, ‘a relational thing’, ‘disciplinary’, ‘enabling’, ‘deeply ideological’ or ‘related to the hidden and necessary secrets’ (Garsten & Lindh de Montoya 2008b).

The capacity of transparency to be a contested concept while serving as a boundary object was further confirmed in the interviews. The question concerning transparency was noteworthy due to the response it elicited from those being interviewed. The reaction was both intellectual and physical. When asked what they understood by the common use of the word transparency, the interviewees sat upright, most smiled – beamed might be more accurate – and relaxed their guarded consideration of the questioning. This was a space in which they were clearly comfortable.

A range of views on the uses and benefits of transparency came from the now energised interviewees. For most, it is the method used to hold governments to account for the provision of effective and efficient services. Many also mentioned that transparency provides clarity regarding funding allocations to VET organisations. Peter Noonan was quite explicit and forthright in his views that a “lack of transparency” about both historical funding patterns and the outcomes at individual RTO-level produced a “conspiracy against the public interest”.

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Robin Shreeve from Skills Australia believes that transparency increases quality in the VET system. This improvement comes about because more timely and accurate information can be used to support a market for training. Users of the system make more informed choices based upon the past performance of individual RTOs. According to Shreeve employer and student choice, guided by an abundance of relevant information, influences the behaviour of RTOs and drives improved quality and responsiveness to the requirements of industry. In alignment with the single sentence economics lesson, Shreeve also believes that transparency is important because it allows for consideration of “who wins and who loses” during periods of policy change. The inevitability of winners and losers was also taken up by Kaye Schofield. She proposes that transparency provides checking mechanisms to ensure that VET policy decisions were “real” rather than secret deals being done between political allies.

The continuing calls for more transparency, if not interrogated fully, may result in unintended consequences or may not always be a good thing. On its own transparency does not ensure the most efficient economic outcomes. There are numerous examples from international trade policy demonstrating the ability to implement bad policy, even if it is done in a transparent manner, because decisions are made without due regard to a whole-of-economy view (Hazlitt 1979, 17; Stoeckel & Fisher 2008, xi). Projects aimed at the improvement of target populations’ lives can also founder because the mode of making both the population and programs transparent is too simplistic and leaves out important cultural and environmental factors (Li 2007, 281-283). For transparency to be effective in supporting the operations of advanced market democracies, those who are the intended recipients must have “receptors for processing, digesting and using information”; otherwise a transparency agenda, on its own, is irrelevant (Heald
The real benefit develops from working out the balance between sunlight’s value and the hazards of over-exposure (Heald 2006a, 60).

The major opposition to the groundswell of support for greater transparency in VET comes from an unexpected source – the most enthusiastic supporters of a contestable training market. The Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) rebuffed the original COAG proposals to have all registered training organisations provide AVETMISS-compliant information. While believing that “markets work best when there is transparency in their operations and where information is available to support informed choices”, ACPET proceeded to list a number of reasons why its members should not furnish the same quantity and style of information as required of public providers (Australian Council for Private Education and Training 2012, 3). Their arguments against this particular version of VET transparency included the ‘onerous and costly’ nature of data collection and reporting, the advantages of using ACPET-sponsored surveying techniques, NCVER’s lack of understanding of the private sector and the transfer of increased costs to students (Australian Council for Private Education and Training 2012). In particular, ACPET questions the relevance of the information to the intended receivers:

Firstly there is no agreement yet on the data elements for My Skills and secondly it is unlikely that all of the elements of the VET Provider Collection will be useful to students, their parents and employers in selecting the right RTO for their needs (Australian Council for Private Education and Training 2012, 5).

71 ACPET represents 1100 members as the national industry association for providers of post-compulsory education and training (http://www.acpet.edu.au/). It is the private sector counter-part of TAFE Directors Australia. The two organisations often express quite different policy positions as they lobby various decision-makers. ACPET’s proposal to exclude private providers in the VET data collection was rejected by COAG.
Because transparency is a contested concept, ACPET has chosen to argue against the AVETMISS-compliant version of transparency. As the representative of the private market, one would expect ACPET to argue for greater transparency. However, it ended up cautioning against over-exposure. It also avoided framing the argument as being against the truth or falsehood of the transparency agenda. Instead it argues on the basis of relevance (Deleuze 1995, 130), by making the case there are more efficient and effective ways of gathering data, rendering the Council of Australian Governments’ proposal as unnecessary for the private sector.\(^7^2\) ACPET’s submission raises the tantalising issue of the capacity of the intended recipients and beneficiaries (students, parents and employers) of greater transparency to use the data provided. One wonders if it means they do not have the right receptors (Heald 2006b, 35), are intellectually incapable of dealing with the information (cf Bell & Quiggin 2006), or that the format of the data renders the information ineffectual?

**Who can see what?**

The application of transparency to VET is part of a “nexus of associated ideas” promoting a central role for economically rational individual choice-makers who self-regulate in a society that relies upon methods of audit and calculation (Garsten & Lindh de Montoya 2008c, 6). The process of rendering a thing or system transparent relies upon information that is made legible by use of the very careful designs of specialist experts (Scott 1998). It also mediates the connections and transactions between individuals and the state because “it involves a specific relationship between the one who is seeing and the one who is being seen” (Garsten & Lindh de Montoya 2008c, 6). This description of the transparency

\(^7^2\) ACPET supports the existing AVETMISS-compliant reporting regime for training funded from public sources.
agenda returns us to a familiar space. Transparency links governments’ wills to govern, empower and train in the pursuit of the economic prosperity of the nation.

The proliferating mechanisms associated with achieving transparency, such as the Unique Student Identifier and AVETMISS, are built upon and made operational through a non-transparent, expert knowledge base that is frequently in the form of supposedly neutral numbers and statistics (Bowker & Star 1999; Garsten & Lindh de Montoya 2008c). The esoteric languages, distinctive values and specialised knowledge associated with these particular technologies cannot be made fully transparent to everyone and, as a result, “undermines the trust that is necessary for an expert system to function effectively” (Tsoukas 1997, 835). In rejecting a role for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research in implementing a survey of private sector VET activity, ACPET mobilises this cynical view of expertise:

ACPET does not consider that the NCVER has demonstrated it understands the private sector or its obligations as a government owned statistical collection agency sufficiently well. For the NCVER to be in any way involved in survey design and administration would require a substantial change in NCVER Board membership and substantial changes to its corporate governance and internal administration – to ensure the sector could have greater confidence in its operations (Australian Council for Private Education and Training 2012, 4).73

For ACPET to accept the validity of NCVER as the promulgator of transparency, it demands involvement in the determination of expertise and what counts as valid knowledge, in order to construct the systems that make this statistical version of transparency functional. The information that is chosen to describe a particular

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73 This complaint concerning the governance of NCVER appears to have had some impact upon the company owners as a member of the national board of ACPET (Jenny Field) was appointed to the Board of Directors of NCVER in March 2012 (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2012a, 17).
world reflects the purposes and intentions of the creators (Tsoukas 1997, 830). The choice and deployment of the specialist language is more than representative, it also helps construct the system. ACPET was staking a claim to exert greater influence over the VET discourse and its productive capacity.

NCVER’s use of expert language to construct VET has had two distinct phases. In its first incarnation, the language and associated expertise were unambiguously educational. The purpose of the original TAFE national centre was to develop research capacity to deal with TAFE pedagogy, the development of technical teaching expertise and materials, course accreditation and to develop new technologies of teaching (TAFE National Centre for Research and Development 1986). As the National Training System came into existence, the role and associated language of the national centre moved away from an educational discourse.

The current language of NCVER signposts its most important function – operating the expert and reductionist information systems that partially describe, measure and report upon VET (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011a). NCVER’s statistical expertise and specialist language are the mechanisms by which VET is made transparent to the economic considerations of governments. In continuing support of the rationality of absence concerning the lack of VET information arising from the Kangan Report and ANTA, NCVER makes consistent representations for ever more data to be collected and turned into information through its processes in the name of better public policy (Karmel, T 2011; Shergold 2010).

Similarly, the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency’s (2013, 87) recommendation for a regular “national sample survey for the assessment of literacy and numeracy levels of the adult population” demonstrates this insatiable desire for
more information. Because transparency can mean so many different things, its pivotal role in the governance of advanced market democracies “ensures that there is no obvious end to the call for more transparency” (Garsten & Lindh de Montoya 2008c, 7). The Commonwealth Government’s major skills advisory body agrees: “we continue to stress the need for transparency of information in VET” (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 137). Ironically, the National Workforce Development Fund that is administered by AWPA is considered to exhibit a “lack of transparency” that adds “to the confusion” over the VET system’s operations (Dodd 2013b).

While it is doubtful that the current round of COAG skills reform will achieve perfect transparency, VET is becoming more visible to those with an economic frame of reference. On the other hand, if one’s orientation is based upon educational, communitarian or personal development perspectives, the VET system is simultaneously becoming more opaque. The statistics on the My Skills website will give no indication as to the climatic conditions and related access issues in remote Indigenous communities of the Northern Territory, cultural differences, English language skills, accessibility of internet services or the training facilities in each community – all of which impact upon training delivery and learning. Even though transparency implies visibility and openness, “what is easily legible and transparent for some can be dark and opaque for others” (Bauman 1998, 29). Transparency can be considered to be a ‘Trojan Horse’ because it has imported different ways of thinking about VET into the sector.

The gathering and usage of a panoply of statistics to quantify a population’s behaviour are mediated through “the transparency of computers” (Baudrillard 2009, 55). However, the underlying classification systems and dualisms (contemporary computer operations are reduced to the binary code of 1 or 0) that enable computer programs to function “are never transparent to everyone” (Bowker & Star 1999, 33).
This is a space occupied by experts. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 28) believe that one drawback of increased reliance upon technical expertise and its associated specialist knowledge, in the name of transparency, is that it inevitably leads to experts seeing fewer and fewer things better and better, thus missing out on important relationships and features of systems and their underlying epistemologies. They liken this phenomenon to the drunk searching for lost keys under the streetlamp because that is where the light is best.

Given that reality can be thought of as multiple (Mol 2002, 182), the high hopes for the benefits attributed to transparency will be tempered because “although it intends to reveal, it can only produce situated revelations and will only tell one of many stories” (Garsten & Lindh de Montoya 2008c, 9). More importantly, there are times when transparency should not be used in advanced market democracies. The corporate secrets that give an advantage and reward risk-taking in the free market need to be balanced against the availability of full information (Galli 2008). For example, the formula for Coca-Cola syrup has remained a closely guarded secret for many generations. Personal information kept by governments is often the subject of privacy legislation and considerations (VET National Data Strategy Action Group 2010, 10-11). The very practice of modern democracy relies upon the secret ballot (Montoya 2008, 261). ACPET raises the issue of training data ownership and responsibility for its use, suggesting that private training providers have some sense of commercial value that should limit the provision of data for publication (Australian Council for Private Education and Training 2012, 4). In a post-9/11 world, national security considerations are frequently used to limit transparency of government decisions and actions (Piotrowski 2010, 25). For example, the reporting of total VET activity in Australia has granted exemptions to defence, police and customs on the grounds of “national security and personnel safety” (Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment 2013, 2).
In addition, the transparency agenda comfortably finds a home in the ordinariness of VET. This type of surveillance, supporting societies of control, is permanent in its impact and creates a system where “the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary” because it induces “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that ensures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 1979, 201) in the relationships between governments, individuals and trainers.

The impact of the transparency can also have the opposite effect of what is intended – it can make things invisible. One very cynical view is that transparency has replaced the word propaganda for government and corporate purposes and that things that are transparent to lobbyists and ministerial advisors are purposely made translucent to everyone else (Burton 2007, 4). It has also been proposed that the real academic mission of universities in Britain has been driven out of sight through the application of corporate accountability methods aimed at increasing transparency (Strathern 2000). Individuals can even rebel against the constraining rules of modern society by “ceaselessly recreating opacities and ambiguities – spaces of darkness and trickery – in the universe of technocratic transparency” (de Certeau 1984, 18).

Although a massive amount of data is gathered and published about VET by NCVER and other institutions each year, there never has been and never will be enough, as the uses of information are constantly being refined, redefined and problematised. Transparency has become a proxy for increased gathering of information and performs multiple functions, due to being both a contested concept and boundary object. Transparency is very useful in each of these roles but the official supportive discourse hides or ignores its inevitable capacity to make some things invisible.
Chapter Eleven

Invisibility
Powerful participants in the policy development process appear to concede ground initially, but regroup subsequently and renew their resistance at a later stage.

(Selby Smith, J & Selby Smith 1998, 265)

Not everything can be seen

The inseparable companion of transparency is invisibility – referring to what cannot be seen. Every project designed to supposedly increase transparency has the immediate and unavoidable consequence of making some things disappear from sight. In exploring how VET mediates the power/knowledge relationships of citizens, reference to transparency inevitably invites examination of invisibility.

The VET transparency agenda is publicly reported in 15 major statistical fields detailing the past performance and characteristics of each registered training organisation as well as student achievement measured by qualifications issued in any given year. This information is available on the My Skills website which includes links to other details about financial assistance available to students, general descriptions of each RTO, case studies and course availability. Most of the information contained at, or linked to, My Skills has been separately available, but drawing together the 15 statistical fields represents action to increase transparency (Australian Government 2012, 56). In 2013 for the Northern Territory, the site lists 57 providers ranging from very small RTOs with fewer than five students studying a single qualification (Aurecon Australia Pty Ltd) to the largest with 14,000 students studying in 11 of the 12 possible fields of education (Charles Darwin University). Currently, no information is provided on My Skills for 21 of the

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74 These fields include numbers of students and cohorts by age, gender, socio-economic status, labour force status, previous highest level of education, intended employment destination, study mode, level and field of education as well as the Industry Skills Council and Training Package their study comes under. Student achievement is listed by field of education and qualification level.

75 http://www.myskills.gov.au/Home
57 providers but this is set to change in 2014 with the introduction of total VET reporting.

These 15 sets of statistics (and the links to previously available generic descriptions of RTOs) make the VET system transparent, based upon a limited array of ‘easily’ measured characteristics of both RTOs and the students who attend them. The selection of this set of data and reporting mechanisms causes many other characteristics of both RTOs and students to be less visible. Gender segregation in the traditional trades, numbers of apprentices versus trainees in each field of education or the RTO’s links with employers become more difficult to ascertain. At the system level, the reductionist approaches brought into VET have made equally important knowledge invisible. This includes how to integrate training with daily workplace routines, delivering training in remote Indigenous communities and the different teaching and learning strategies required by a diverse range of students. As pointed out by de Certeau (1984, 34), “What is counted is what is used, not the ways of using it. The latter becomes invisible in the universe of codification and generalised transparency”.

People or phenomena can be made invisible in three major ways. Firstly, it may be a purposeful activity. In the creation of the National Training System adult educators disappeared because VET employed assessors, lecturers and teachers. Adult education was subsumed into VET so there was no need for this classification of people, even though the very same individuals were still delivering similar training to adults.

Secondly, invisibility can arise because something is too small or hard to perceive to be noticed or, thirdly, the object of interest could be so large and pervasive that it escapes attention (Bowker & Star 1999, 33). For example, the local cross-cultural training knowledge held by a single small RTO operating in remote NT Indigenous
communities, in spite of being highly effective in skills transfer to people with English as a second language, is not capable of being officially ‘seen’ by the national VET data collection and its focus upon enumeration of enrolment, module completions and demographic data. While the success or failure of the RTO depends upon this cultural knowledge and its application, it is too hard to measure and collect. For national transparency this is microscopic, impossible to accurately enumerate and difficult to report in a universally consistent format; therefore it remains officially unseen.

Invisibility most often happens in the VET system because of the third reason. The common sense of VET, its wide-spread application in solving problems and its sheer mundanity allows for certain processes, actors or structures to disappear from sight and serious consideration. The reductionist gathering of statistics, the techniques of standard setting, accounting and auditing applied to this data and the econometric calculations used to interpret that information, while not purposely hiding, become invisible because they are relegated to mere technical detail. Law (2002, 152) believes that in such systems, “The problem is that its very banality tends to deaden our critical faculties”.

Invisibility is not necessarily a bad thing. It has been proposed that a certain amount of invisibility serves an important transactional function. For example, the maintenance of monopoly positions by surgeons, plumbers and electricians on the basis of their training can instil public confidence in these specialist groups, even though the training and licensing processes involved are not on open display (Goffman 1990, 55). In addition, social identity can be formed through the use of opaque and self-referential surveys and polling (de Certeau 1984, 189). ACPET’s objection to supplying AVETMISS-compliant data as part of the VET transparency project is based upon their desire to maintain a very separate identity to that of public providers of training. Their proposed use of their own private surveys of
selected ACPET members would not only be ‘invisible’ to the national data collection but also serve to create a private sector identity built upon a supposed, but difficult to measure, greater responsiveness to industry training requirements and commitment to a free market in training.

I propose that while there has been limited direct effort to make particular features of the VET system disappear, such as ANTA and the Australian Vocational Certificate Training System (Carmichael 1992), invisibility in VET occurs because of the sheer size, mundanity and complexity of the National Training System. It is the exercise of power/knowledge at this level of the commonplace and everyday that gives rise to a ‘common sense’ about VET that leads to invisibility.

The paradox of a totalising yet individualising training technology is similar to the ironical outcome of making VET more transparent. Put quite simply, the act of making something visible inevitably makes other things invisible (Scott 1998, location 4788). The Kangan Review made the individual student invisible as an altogether unintended outcome of providing a conception of training that would be visible to the Federal Government. The creation of TAFE and its successor VET, in the form of an education sector that governments could problematise, was a corporatist activity of the unions, business and government. The individual was made invisible to policy-makers because in the establishment of the national system of training there was no role for the personal entity. Individuals were considered to be a product of the system. But this also produced a conundrum for the system that has only recently been addressed.

The process of making the individual student invisible, due to placing corporatist arrangements at the centre of policy and implementation, raises the inevitable question of who consumes the VET service. Advanced market democracies are guided by human capital theory and capitalism which valorise the position of the...
economically rational, self-regulating, choice-making individual market consumer (Becker 1993). The penultimate chapter examines the decades-long attempt to establish a free market for training that has been unable to see the individual worker in this role, while the final chapter describes a second invisibilisation of the individual consumer because of the re-emergence of the tripartite arrangements of *Australia Reconstructed*.

**The contested and the avoided**

Problematising always creates exclusions and the avoided (cf Bacchi 2009). This can come about due to costs, ideological conviction or a feeling that the matter is just too difficult (Law 2002, 150). Few government decisions are made by a single individual or are eventually implemented in the exactly intended format. Most decisions are made by a whole chain of individuals, fickle or otherwise, whose contributions accumulate or are eliminated at various decision-points (McKenzie 2006, 225; Pressman & Wildavsky 1984, 107-108).

As the following example demonstrates, even decisions made many years ago by those no longer active in VET can still impact. As part of the COAG *National partnership agreement on skills reform* (2012, 8), the Northern Territory Government agreed to increase the number of higher level VET qualifications commenced and completed in its jurisdiction.\(^7\)

The accrual of decisions taken by a range of people makes it highly unlikely that this goal will be achieved. More than a decade ago the NT Employment and Training Authority redistributed RTO funding from higher level qualifications in favour of those supplying the lower level, minimal qualifications allowing direct entry into employment. In response, the major VET contractor, Charles Darwin University, gradually removed higher qualifications from its academic profile as they were

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\(^7\) These include Certificate III, Certificate IV, Diploma and Advanced Diplomas as recognised in the Australian Qualifications Framework.
considered to be economically unviable. Because CDU delivers the vast majority of training in the NT, if the university does not offer upper level qualifications, they become unavailable for much of the population. To have these qualifications reinstated is a lengthy and time-consuming process requiring support from industry, allocating CDU lecturers’ time to prepare the documentation and applying for national accreditation from the VET regulator. All of this would be done on the speculative basis that there might be a market for fee-for-service delivery because the NT Government has shown little interest in funding for this level of study beyond the basic student entitlement. While the public and official discourse about the importance of higher level qualifications remains positive, the impossibility of making good the rhetoric is obscured by a long series of historical decisions. With the context rendered invisible, when there are large numbers of VET graduates with lower level qualifications who are not progressing onto higher education and employment, such as unemployed youth, the problem can then be represented to be individual or cultural rather than structural.

The development of human capital axiomatically defines higher level qualifications as a good thing, but the process of delivering this desirable state of affairs has been subject to exclusions and negotiations of how the problem is framed. Industry wants governments to pay with public funds, while governments are facing mounting pressures to rein in spending. The proposed solution is to shift the cost of obtaining higher level qualifications to the individual student (Council of Australian Governments 2012, 25). But this solution faces two major difficulties. The qualifications are no longer offered in the NT and the VET system is not currently set up to deal with individual students. Individuals are literally invisible to the policy process.

The origin of this process of defunding and removal of higher level qualifications is a point of contention between the funding authorities and training providers who shared their recollections with me. It seems most likely to have been a joint effort driven by different motivations.
In other cases, the act of making things opaque can be more purposeful. It is not uncommon for policy workers who are sensitised to political imperatives to actively seek out data and statistics that fits a favoured story line (Burton 2007; Gill & Colebatch 2006). This also makes other equally relevant information invisible. The Australian Council for Private Education and Training’s (2012, 3-4) proposal to use survey and sampling techniques instead of full population reporting of training activity allows for considerably more scope in determining what can be seen. The way in which questions are framed can favour certain responses; or carefully choosing which RTOs participate can determine the conclusions. Even ACPET (2012, 2) acknowledges that its membership is less than half of registered private training providers, making any claims to comprehensive representation of the sector difficult to sustain. In addition, ACPET maintains that some of the information held by private members should be treated as ‘commercial-in-confidence’ and, quite reasonably, remain invisible to potential competitors.

Michel Foucault (Gordon 1980, 81) described the role of experts who arise when a sector such as VET becomes governmentalised. Those with technical expertise isolate ‘subjugated knowledges’ which are deemed to be naïve and not capable of supplying the robust elaboration of problems required by governments. The Commonwealth Government’s insistence upon each State and Territory signing a resource agreement aligned to national priorities in the late-1980s (described by senior NT public servants as a ‘financial bludgeon’) reflects this suppression. The local and popular knowledges held in the NT, particularly to do with remote Indigenous training, become subjugated to higher Commonwealth Government priorities and ways of thinking more aimed at national industrial and economy-wide considerations.

Often this now second-rate familiarity and expertise is held by clients and customers. For example, nearly 90 per cent of former VET students report that they
were personally satisfied with their training and about 85 per cent report that the training supported their goals (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2012d, 7). In spite of this consistently high satisfaction rating by students, their knowledge is constantly ignored by policy makers in the pursuit of continual reform in VET. As governments are in the business of solving problems, there appears to be little need to recognise those who do not make themselves visible through the identification of difficulties.

It is not only those who operate vocational education and training who determine what's visible or what remains out of sight. Individuals, and the organisations they populate, are guided by two socially constructed systems. The first is the belief system, all the things that are accepted as true, and, secondly, the disbelief system, those things that are rejected as false (Rokeach 1960, 33). One's belief systems can either be open or closed, based upon the ability to manage two opposing sets of motives – the need to know and the necessity to defend against threat. Consequently, cognitive dissonance is rife:

People often actively avoid contact with stimuli, people, events, books, etc. that threaten the validity of their ideology or proselytise for competing ideologies. Cognitive narrowing may be manifested at both the institutional and non-institutional levels (Rokeach 1960, 48).

It is easy enough to observe this form of cognitive narrowing in organisational settings. I experienced a stark example of institutionalised cognitive narrowing during my time at Charles Darwin University, involving the necessity to create the curiously named committee, 'Nutcracker'. This variably-sized group would meet fortnightly, more frequently towards the end of the academic year, to deal with the problems of translating the information held by individual lecturers about students
and their training outcomes into the formats required by the university’s electronic reporting systems in order to create AVETMISS-compliant information.\footnote{This committee comprised 15-20 people, depending upon the agenda, who were eligible to attend. All were either middle or senior managers of various administrative departments and academic delivery units of the university.}

For administrative staff, this compliance was seen to be the most important VET function because it allowed CDU to meet contractual obligations and maintain funding from the NT and Commonwealth Governments for training delivery. For many lecturers the creation and supply of this information was thought of as ‘administrivia’ gone mad. Nutcracker was created as formal group to temper the shouting, swearing, paper throwing, door slamming and storming out of meetings of the previously informal ‘crisis’ gatherings that were held when reporting deadlines, end of year public holidays and staff recreation leave collided and the data supply and collection remained incomplete.

Nutcracker provided a disciplinary structure to address avoidance behaviours and to mediate the clash of two different belief/disbelief configurations. Those with a systems/administration bent were highly critical of the inability of the VET lecturers and staff to follow ‘simple and clear instructions’ to produce grades, roll books and other evidence of competence for each and every student at the times specified in the academic calendar. Academics saw the administrative staff as inefficient, incompetent, overbearing and unrealistic in terms of their expectations for staff who work in remote communities and with local businesses that operate 52 weeks of the year. Lecturing staff were strongly of the view that no administrator could possibly understand the requirements of competency-based training.

The ambiguously named Nutcracker was an attempt to bring together different assumptive worlds that studiously ignored each other’s organisational imperatives.\footnote{Was it a threat to anatomical parts, a genuinely tough nut to crack or a ballet fantasy? Or all of these?}

Eventually, the need for Nutcracker was removed, with the re-positioning of
administrative staff into VET delivery teams along with financial and reporting responsibility. Since then CDU has met its AVETMISS requirements with minimal errors and considerably less acrimony. The cognitive narrowing that was previously practiced was making the ‘real world’ of each group invisible to the other. It was resolved by exposing the differing belief/disbelief systems to each other.

Similarly, the Howard Federal Government’s consistent and persistent effort to remove union membership from VET boards, such as the Australian Student Traineeship Foundation and the Enterprise and Career Education Foundation, as well as from university councils, exemplified this type of cognitive narrowing. In my experience that government was uninterested in the views of trade unionists and their long-lived involvement in tripartite approaches to VET policy. The ability to appoint members of the various boards and councils determines who gets to attend the multitude of meetings where the VET discourse is created and practised. While the Howard Government, rather inelegantly, dumped those who were considered to be holding inappropriate views, the rather more subtle re-appointment of the usual corporatist participants to the national bodies by the Rudd/Gillard Labor Governments was just as effective in altering participation in the VET discourse.  

Invisibilisation

The neologism ‘invisibilisation’ refers to the processes used to make ideas, things and people invisible. Australia’s National Training System stands accused of having too many of its features out of sight. A major rationale that has been deployed to justify the demand for more transparency in VET has arisen out of capitalist economic conceptions of a competitive market (Skills Australia 2011, 84, 98) and its requirement for maximal information in order to be efficient. In addition,  

80 While none would agree to go on the record, several interviewees questioned the unions’ current level of influence reflecting the decline in Australian union membership from more than 50 per cent in 1970 to 20 per cent of the workforce in 2003 (Roberts 2010, 33).
transparency has also been used to justify greater levels of centralised regulation of this market (National Skills Standards Council 2013a, 9).

VET’s expert and acronym-dominated vocabulary also provides an invisibility mechanism. The former long-serving Chair of the Northern Territory Employment and Training Authority (NTETA) and Channel Nine TV station manager in Darwin, Andy Bruyn, described the impact of VET jargon in our interview: “the technical language and acronyms alienate small business”. However, in a rather neat twist of fate, the never-ending battle for domination of the VET specialist language and associated discourse would be used as a reason to remove Bruyn from his NTETA role and disband the authority when the NT Labor Government was elected in 2001.

Former NT Deputy Chief Minister and Education and Training Minister, Syd Stirling, related during our interview that the then Labor Opposition Spokesperson on Education and Training, Peter Toyne, was driving the alternative government’s development of strategy and policy in the pre-election phase of the 2001 NT poll. This included constantly rehearsing the Labor candidates on policy and arranging targeted meetings with key groups and individuals post-election to set the scene for a new government following 26 years in opposition. Stirling went on to describe how NTETA’s language and acronyms were used to “obfuscate” the alternative government’s agenda. The newly elected Labor government consequently concluded that NTETA was “undirected”, its funding allocations to RTOs did not align with current and anticipated industry needs and all these opaque functions needed to “be brought under the control of a minister through a department”.81 Stirling and the new government wanted to send a clear signal to the NT Public Service that ministers had a reform agenda they wished to see implemented.

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81 NTETA’s operations were similar to those of ANTA – arm’s length from the Government of the day and dominated by industry and union interests. Funding for NTETA came from the NT and Federal governments. NTETA entered into resource agreements with RTOs to purchase various types and levels of training in a range of industry groupings, based upon the advice of numerous committees, councils and boards.
The post-election change from an authority to a department for the administration of NT Government funded training did nothing to change the use of language or the related processes that drive the VET system. It did, however, change the participants in the political discourse. Under Labor, the Chief Executive of the Department of Employment, Education and Training and a reform-minded minister were firmly in charge. Except for a different CEO, it was mostly the same people doing unchanged jobs with their relentless focus upon receiving AVETMISS-compliant data to do with numbers and types of students, quantities and education fields of qualifications issued, amounts of money used by the system and meeting quality audit outcomes. Rather simply, ‘what gets counted gets used – the rest remains invisible’ (de Certeau 1984, 35) regardless of who leads.

While the NT Government had changed, the unrelenting focus on the ‘core businesses’ of funding and reporting processes ensured no one had either the time or the will to fundamentally question the good attributed to training and its role in NT society. As governments toggle between different administrative arrangements to enact VET policy, different groups and interests come into and out of view as access to the discourse shifts to those in favour with the government of the day.

When the industry-dominated NTETA existed, it served to make invisible the government public service bureaucracy through its command of language and funding mechanisms at a distance from government. On the other hand, the creation of the NT Department of Employment, Education and Training (and consequent assumption of NTETA’s roles) served to make industry disappear by transferring responsibility for the discourse to public servants and ministerial officers. Both the creation of NTETA and the new ‘super-department’ were made on the partial pretext that VET’s language presented a problem to someone. Foucault (1975, 115) believes that the exclusionary impact of a specialist language comes from the use of “a speech that can be understood only by those initiated into true
speech”. My experience with information technology specialists, plumbers, electricians and health professionals demonstrates that the capacity of specialist languages to make things and people invisible is not limited to VET. One difference exists, however; the VET system must demonstrate an understanding of and show an ability to promulgate these other specialist languages in training programs.

The development and invisibilisation that stems from specialist languages is not the upshot of collusion. During our interview the CEO of Skills Australia, Robin Shreeve, reiterated that I would find “no conspiracy in VET”. Former NT Chief Minister Shane Stone related his belief that “governments are incapable of conspiracy”. This is also the theoretical conclusion drawn by anthropologist Tess Lea from observing the operations of another large NT Government agency over an extended period of time (Lea 2008). There seems little empirical support for Peter Noonan’s proposition that a lack of information at the RTO level is a “conspiracy against the public interest”. It is the special Australian penchant for governmentalisation of functions such as VET that necessarily leads to the involvement of experts and their context-specific knowledge that requires a vocabulary or language to facilitate problematisation. The process sets up endless skirmishes between experts for ownership of the political discourse and makes some things and groups invisible as a consequence. No matter who has the upper hand in guiding VET, some features will always be invisible and it is matter for governments to decide which ones.

There are three other invisibilisation mechanisms that impact upon VET because of its relationship to social welfare and employment. Socialisation, medicalisation and penalisation are used by the governments of advanced market democracies to manage the population occupying the bottom of the socio-economic order to limit their threat to the established social relativities (Wacquant 2009, location 251). The use of socialisation to make those who live in poverty invisible is a well-established practice in Australia, with its roots in the workers’ welfare state and the more recent
use of active social policy that considers poverty to be a by-product of unemployment and joblessness as a personal choice (Castles 2001; Whitfield 1987, 41). Invisibilisation through socialisation can be achieved by directing individuals into low paid jobs (Wacquant 2008, 26), forcing young people to remain in school longer by raising the legal school leaving age along with removing social benefits (Council of Australian Governments 2009) or else directing the jobless into training to remove them from unemployment rolls (Kirby 1985).

Secondly, the economically problematic individual can be made invisible through medicalisation. The Commonwealth Government has made extensive use of this technique to reduce the numbers of people who are recognised as officially unemployed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.\(^2\) Coinciding with the introduction of economically rational approaches to government and contributing to falling levels of unemployment in Australia, the number of people on the Disability Support Pension has risen from 229,000 in 1980 to 732,000 in 2008, with the average duration of payment being slightly over 11 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002; Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2008). All of this occurred at a time when the total national population only increased by 50 per cent. By 2011, the number of individuals on this pension and, therefore, officially unavailable to the workforce had grown to 818,850 (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 74).

The Commonwealth Government has been able to exercise socialisation and medicalisation in the pursuit of invisibility because of the responsibilities it acquired from the 1946 amendment to the Australian Constitution concerning the provision of social services.\(^3\) The State and Territory governments have similarly used their

\(^2\) The ABS considers a person to be unemployed if they are over 15 years of age, without work, are actively looking for work and are available to commence work immediately. If a person works at least one hour per week, they are not considered to be unemployed (http://www.abs.gov.au/).
\(^3\) The content of this amendment was given on page 35.
retained constitutional authority to implement the third method of invisibilisation — penalisation. The harsh and unambiguous reality is that Australian State and Territory governments are following in the footsteps of other advanced market democracies by making the poor invisible through imprisoning them (Wacquant 2008). The use of incarceration to direct the population’s behaviour has become a popular option for governments due to the political potency associated with discourses of personal security and public safety. The use of penal sanctions has also been appropriated into the economic considerations and calculations of government. Like VET, it appeals to both the Left and the Right of politics and according to Wacquant (2009) we are witnessing a genuine institutional innovation to manage the economic sub-proletariat through the novel use of imprisonment and a return to disciplinary society.

The Northern Territory presents an extraordinary example of invisibilisation through penalisation, with its dubious distinction of having the nation’s highest rate of imprisonment (Productivity Commission 2011a, 8.6). Between 1995 and 2010 the annual funding allocated to the operation of the justice system in the NT has increased from $134 million to $445 million and the daily number of prisoners has doubled to nearly 1,100 (Zoellner 2012a, 6). This contrasts starkly with the funding allocation made to VET over this same time period. The core training budget has remained constant at around $85 million per year (Zoellner 2012a, 5).

As part of the Labor Opposition’s strategising and rehearsing for the 2001 election, a pledge to repeal the controversial mandatory sentencing law (introduced by Country Liberal Party Chief Minister Shane Stone) was identified as a potential vote winner. Mandatory sentencing removed judicial discretion when penalising repeat adult offenders found guilty of certain classes of property offences (Northern Territory Office of Crime Prevention 2003, 2) and was deeply unpopular with large sections of the community who variously believed that it was racially motivated,
limited the full range of sentencing options available to magistrates and reduced the discretionary community policing abilities of officers on the street. The regime was in place from 1996 and produced a moderate rise in the prison population of about 15 per cent (Northern Territory Office of Crime Prevention 2003, 9).

As promised during its campaign, one of Labor’s first actions after winning the 2001 election was to repeal mandatory sentencing. The prison population at that time stood at about 660 (Productivity Commission 2002, table 10A.1). By 2010 the near doubling of both the prison population and the rate of imprisonment along with the one-third reduction in the number of community corrections orders occurred in spite of the removal of mandatory sentencing (Productivity Commission 2011a, table 8A.1). Clearly, penalisation is an attractive policy option for governments in their desire to manage the population. This has been accomplished by building on a discourse of security where the subjugated knowledges associated with ‘social security’ and ‘job security’ have been replaced by a re-purposed ‘security’ coupled to personal safety, controlling anti-social behaviour and vague concerns about national security (Wacquant 2009, location 306). The timing of the explosive growth in penalisation in the NT is yet another example of the alignment of the Left and the Right that characterises Australian approaches to the governmentalisation of functions. Incarceration has considerably more political policy clout than does training in the process of problematising the behaviour of citizens, as reflected by government spending priorities.

This invisibilisation by penalisation is also accompanied by active repression associated with organisational defence routines (Senge et al. 1994, 265). Stacey (1996, 395) proposes that “The prime defence routine is to make matters undiscussable and to make the fact that they are undiscussable itself undiscussable”. Neither side of the NT political divide was interested in considering my analysis of penalisation when interviewed. Former Deputy Chief Minister, Syd
Stirling, only managed a slight smile and waited for questioning to move on to other things, while Country Liberal stalwart and current NT Cabinet Secretary, Col Fuller, gave a shrug of the shoulders and changed the subject. Penalisation is not open to discussion even though it is in direct competition for funding with VET when decisions are being made in Cabinet. Penalisation became more attractive to the NT Labor Government than socialisation in making problematic people invisible.

However, training is too useful to governments and their efforts to manage the population’s behaviour to just disappear in the enthusiasm to discipline the population. The then NT Labor Government Treasurer, Delia Lawrie, evoked training to justify increased expenditure on a new prison being constructed on the outskirts of Darwin for a new 48-bed supported accommodation unit “to provide better education and training options” (Guthrie, Levy & Fforde 2013, 257). The new Country Liberal Government has revisited socialisation with moves to integrate the coercive technology of gaol and the techniques of self-transformation through VET; certain low-risk prisoners are to undertake training-to-work programs.84

The invisible student

Australian governments enact policy in VET by mobilising one of two tactics. Responsibility for VET can either be pushed out to arm’s length authorities or brought into government departments. The argument for the latter position was colourfully made by the Northern Territory’s first Chief Minister, Paul Everingham:

I wasn’t going to become Chief Minister and hand over whatever control I might have had [to commissions]. It doesn’t matter whom you put on those statutory bodies. They can be your best friends but they soon turn into crazy megalomaniacs and empire-builders. The most logical,

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84 This initiative has been entitled ‘Sentenced to a job’. (http://www.alicespringsnews.com.au/2012/12/18/sentenced-to-a-job-and-a-future-elferinks-visionary-initiative/).
sensible or rational businessmen, when put on a statutory authority, seem to become putty in the hands of bureaucrats who work for it and start running along its boundary fence like a dog (as quoted in Heatley 1990, 89).

Regardless of these strong views, VET advisory functions, financial allocations, quality, regulation and statistical standards setting have variously been performed through commissions, boards, authorities or government departments over the years. Those interviewed had a range of views on the merits of the alternatives. Like transparency, this was an area in which the interviewees felt very comfortable. Their expertise and influence are applied through these bureaucratic structures.

Some, like former NT Commissioner for Public Employment, David Hawkes, felt that the exact structure did not matter. The crucial issue was to have a separate and identifiable “owner and advocate for VET” combined with high quality people working within the organisation. Unsurprisingly, former senior Commonwealth public servant, Peter Shergold, believed that only government departments could develop good public policy, while authorities were best used for audit, evaluation and monitoring if given “a certain level of independence”. The opposite view was expressed by former NT Chief Minister, Shane Stone, who stated that authorities involved more people, leading to better policy and also served the purpose of countering public service agendas or neglect of issues. This view was supported by Emeritus Professor Denise Bradley’s observation that “departments hate truly independent advice”. Several others believed that authorities were better at getting previously ‘ignored’, ‘excluded’ or ‘neglected’ matters onto government agendas.

While not being quite as explicit, many alluded to their belief that these ideas were cyclical. Drivers of the sequences included the political pragmatics of the time, the level of expertise within new governments and the desire of a new minister to stamp
his or her authority on a policy area. In each interview, the examples provided to support preference for arm’s length or close to government arrangements made only reference to the relationships between institutions. Not a single mention was made of the individual VET student. In the collective view of this influential group, VET is done at the corporate level and there was no indication that the student is of material interest.

While State and Territory legislation may provide for student representation on the board or council of the few large public providers, the VET system generally confines the student voice to one location and format. NCVER gathers information about teaching, assessment, generic skills and learning experiences as well as overall satisfaction with their training through its annual Student Outcomes Survey (Fieger 2012). This survey consists of 20 questions with a six point Likert Scale that is sent to each student who either completes a full qualification or leaves the VET system after completing one or more modules of a training package. It has been administered since 1995.

The use of the information contained in the satisfaction questions of the survey “has been limited” (Fieger 2012, 7). While this acknowledges the low priority accorded to student views, the suggested solution to make the information more useful is intriguing and reveals the dominant rationality used by NCVER. If the data from these surveys can be shown to be ‘statistically valid’, it is hoped that more use might be made of the information (Fieger 2012, 7). It seems a rather self-serving subterfuge to suggest that student responses to the survey can only become visible to government if they conform to levels of statistical validity.

As is often the case, the process of rendering student views visible relies upon expert non-transparent technical processes; ‘Cronbach’s alpha scores’, ‘Rasch

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85 Even these few token student positions are under review. The Victorian State Government is legislating to remove designated student positions from University Councils and TAFE Boards (Mather 2012a).
analysis’, ‘weighted composite averages’ and ‘Eigenvalues of the correlation mix’ perform the task (Fieger 2012). Making perceptible is accomplished by techniques that are opaque and effectively invisible to the non-expert. NCVER believes that only through the application of statistical expertise can the subjugated knowledge of students, represented by ticked boxes on 20 questions, be made valid. Any other student concerns, views, preferences or ideas about VET remain invisible to the policy process. It is also likely that because student satisfaction with their VET experiences has remained uniformly high over many years, their views do not present a problem for governments to solve and are considered accordingly.

In a similar vein, the Commonwealth Government’s main advisory group on workforce development and training does not envisage a place for student views. The summary of recommendations to yet again reform and improve the National Training System, contained in Foundations for the future (Skills Australia 2009), does not make any mention of students directly and only a brief reference to consumers of the system’s services generally. Their first recommendation is “to formalise arrangements for industry advice as a central feature of a new governance framework” (Skills Australia 2009, 5). Students are not required to be visible in a system where the primary client of publicly funded training is industry. Until very recently, the student voice has been considered irrelevant to the operations of this practise of government, which uses tax dollars to produce a skilled workforce whose main role is the creation of private wealth. The student has traditionally been conceptualised and treated by policy-makers as the product of training rather than the consumer.

If there was any doubt as to who should be making decisions about VET and its priorities, the last word goes to Jenny Lambert of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (as reported in Dunckley 2012): “The system we need to implement should be an industry-driven system, not a students-demand-driven (sic)
system”. If VET is too important to be left to educators (Kell 1994, 156), it certainly cannot be left to the capricious whims of 16-year-old school dropouts, the unemployed, the socially excluded and those responding to fads and ephemeral trends. In order for governments to manage the economy and population, expert knowledge and planning are required. Individual choice must be balanced against other national considerations, dominated by industry’s priorities. The absence of the student voice has not been considered to be a problem for governments. Therefore, it has been unproblematic to leave students basking in invisibility.

A conundrum

As part of Australia’s unique style of governmentalising activities, the individual has frequently been excluded from consideration in favour of organisations and institutions. The workers’ welfare state was premised upon a contest between unions and employer groups umpired through government sanctioned industrial arbitration. In fact, “individuals were banned as bargaining units” (Kelly 2011, 135). This corporatist arrangement, supported in the highly influential landmark report *Australia Reconstructed*, laid the foundations for the National Training System.

Providing technical and vocational training, as implemented by ANTA and the various State and Territory training authorities, was done through tripartite arrangements. The major participants were the unions, employer groups, industry associations and governments, while the student came to be represented as a population-level statistical artefact of AVETMISS expressed in terms of hours of training, level of qualification, field of education or residential location.

In creating the world’s first national VET information scheme, the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information System Standard, the developers saw “the prime goal of the system is to provide timely and accurate management information to assist planning and monitoring activities throughout the
VET sector” (Australian Committee on Vocational Education and Training Statistics 1993, 47). VET was to be managed from the system and institutional level. The documentation supporting the creation of AVETMISS dismissed the issue of personal recognition: “Individuals will not be identifiable in any data provided from the national database system” (Australian Committee on Vocational Education and Training Statistics 1993, 70). For the purposes of conducting the business of the VET system, the need to ‘see’ the individual student was not even considered. AVETMISS was the creation of statistical experts working with the entire numerically-represented population of VET students and their RTOs, allowing for centralised calculation and policy direction.

The decisions that were taken to arrive at this population approach fly in the face of the findings of the 1974 Kangan Report. It is worth quoting at length from this seminal report to demonstrate the difference between what was initially envisaged from a national training system and what came into being:

The Committee adopted two guidelines early in its deliberations on the nature and scope of this Report:

(a) Recurrent opportunities for technical and further education should be available to people of all ages regardless of minimum formal educational entry requirements or of current employment status. Opportunities throughout life for recurrent education should give priority to the needs of the individual as a person and to his or her development as a member of society, including the development of non-vocational and social skills that affect personality.

(b) The broader the approach in technical and further education, the more the likelihood of creating an environment in which self-motivated individuals can reach their vocational goals and in which motivation may
be regenerated in people who have lost it (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974, xvii).

For the authors of the Kangan Report, the individual was clearly the target of this project of social improvement by inclusion into the workforce. The construction of the economically rational, self-regulating individual was to be a lifelong process built upon human capital theory. In spite of the prominence given to the individual who would rationally seek out a better life through training, the labour market needs of industry replaced those of individuals (Australian National Training Authority 1994c, 4; Skills Australia 2009, 22). This style of substitution for individual requirements is neatly summarised by the former president of General Motors. “For years I thought what was good for the country as good for General Motors and vice versa. The difference did not exist” (Wilson 1953, 1).

Replacement was accomplished by using the rationality of absence yet again. This is exemplified by the reply of the Chairman of the South Australian Training and Skills Commission, Adrian Smith, to a question from the audience at the July 2012 NCVER Research Conference. The questioner wanted to know how industry determines the extent, style and content of training it requires for workers. Smith responded, “Industry knows what it doesn’t want”. That was the end of his reply. Industry’s training requirements only become visible when the VET system serves up a variety of offerings to see what is acceptable to industry. The individual’s needs are irrelevant. Clearly, this approach is subject to cognitive narrowing as industry can limit the training options it examines based on negative selection.

When deciding upon what it does not want, industry is constantly confronted by human capital development as part of the financial equation that determines its success or failure in the marketplace. What they are receiving from the governmentatisation of VET is an institutional response to a market-driven economy
that, paradoxically, is theorised at the individual level. A dissonance has occurred in
the creation of the National Training System that has made the individual invisible,
but not altogether removed, because the economically rational, choice-maker lies at
the conceptual heart of an advanced market democracy. While everyone ‘knows’
that the individual is present, there has been no need to officially see them because
government is paying for industry’s training needs.

As it currently exists, the Australian VET system has much in common with the
styles of economic socialism and democracy theorised by Austrian economist and
political scientist, Joseph Schumpeter. In proposing the end of free-market
capitalism, Schumpeter (2012) foresaw a society that would be ruled by technical
experts who represented a country’s intellectual elite, regardless of class. These
rational technocrats would compete amongst themselves for the power/knowledge
to best manage the population and prosperity of the state. The process of
government would be legitimated by periodic elections offering the population a
choice between sets of recognised experts and their programs. The views of
citizens would become increasingly irrelevant and there would be a very limited
participatory role for the individual. The ensuing style of socialism would ensure that
the production of goods and services was aimed at meeting the ‘real’ needs of the
population. In Schumpeter’s view capitalism would collapse due to the role of the
individual entrepreneur becoming untenable, forcing technical experts to step in and
manage the economy. The individual would no longer be important, having been
replaced by the institutions of a socialist democratic government (Heilbroner 1999,
288-310; Schumpeter 2012).

However, this rather bleak forecast of the demise of capitalism from the first half of
the 20th century has been side-lined by the relentless and restless nature of
capitalistic free market thinking (Ong 2007). The bipartisan political will to introduce
market-based mechanisms into the provision of VET, promoted by the Australian
National Training Authority and a more precise and clear identification of human capital theory’s dominance of labour market conceptualisation in Australia (Marginson 1993a; Whitfield 1987), have thrown up yet another absence. The wills to govern, empower and train need to operate at the level of the individual in the project of making self-managing citizens who live in a society of continuous control (Miller & Rose 2008, 102). That sentiment was lost in the process of building the National Training System; but it did not disappear. The outcome of the interaction of an institutionalised VET system and industry that ‘knows what it doesn’t like’ is the desire to be able to see individual citizens, to ensure appropriate behaviour. The same type of numerical and technical expertise that previously saw no need for individual information during the development of AVETMISS has been called upon to supply the specialist statistical, economic knowledge used to make the individual visible through the Unique Student Identifier.

As pointed out by Foucault (2007b, 11-12), when social functions become governmentalised they call forth a paradoxical behaviour on the part of the bureaucrats that make the systems function. There is a simultaneous activity of totalisation (seeing the whole population through AVETMISS-compliant reporting by all training organisations); while individualisation (through the Unique Student Identifier) ensures that those who are not conforming to social norms are identified for remedial action. The logics underpinning human capital theory and capitalism also demand that the individual be considered in another manner, post-invisibilisation.

**The productive response**

While the process of making individuals invisible can serve a politically convenient purpose, such as reducing the number of people on unemployment benefits or even demonstrate innovative population management by using prisons to reduce welfare
rolls, the insistence upon a free market VET system has challenged the benefits of keeping the student invisible. For example, the Victorian State Government’s massive cuts to VET expenditure during 2012 (Dunckley 2012; Mather 2012a; Ross 2012b) were used to bring the State budget into a positive situation and to correct alleged market failure associated with uncontrolled growth of economically suspect VET qualifications (for example, personal fitness training). These steps were also accompanied by increased charges for training to be paid for by the individual who must now be made visible.

In fact, all States have agreed to pass on the cost of higher level VET qualifications to students as part of the implementation of a so-called ‘entitlement model’ of funding, which provides for one initial VET government-subsidised entry level qualification and anything further to be paid for by the individual (Council of Australian Governments 2012, 25). This entitlement model will be supported by a student loan scheme. Both of these actions require mechanisms to keep track of each person’s use of the training system. Recalling that VET is for everyone requires this system to have the capacity to keep track of every Australian resident over the age of 15. The Unique Student Identifier and associated reporting and tracking systems will be used to make the individual visible.

But this is also more than an accounting activity. The individual student has been reborn, not as Kangan’s envisaged lifelong learner but as a consumer. The penultimate chapter will explore the construction of the consumer and its implications in greater detail, while the final chapter will show how rapidly the discourse can change with the apparent re-invisibilisation of the individual and replacement by qualifications.

86 In keeping with the typical reaction to national policy that leads to complexity in the system, each State and Territory is developing its own variation of the student entitlement model of funding while the Commonwealth prevaricates on the policy intention. The Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency has recently argued against limiting the government subsidy to a single qualification in order to allow for lifelong retraining that will be demanded by industry (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 100).
The increased use of market-related mechanisms and terminology in VET has produced some curious reactions on the part of organisations that have historically expressed the strongest support for an open training market. The private sector providers in ACPET (2012) have concerns about shifting the compliance costs to students, the increased workload of reducing invisibility and the nature of a level-playing field in VET. While frequently arguing against further government intrusion into business operations and advocating the advantages of market rigour, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry also argues against a consumer-driven market in favour of a centrally planned approach to training that retains industry’s roles in the system (Dunckley 2012). While industry is happy to support the part of individual-as-consumer that shifts the costs of training from business to government and the individual, it still wants to dominate the discourse of VET. This task is undertaken by perpetuating one of the longest-lasting facades associated with the National Training System.

Governments’ desire to recognise and act upon industry’s skill needs in the development and operation of the labour market in Australia is a continuing theme. Curtin’s 1945 *White Paper on Full Employment* (Coombs 1994) noted its importance, as did the 1974 Kangan Report, which placed the individual in the context of responding to industrial requirements as the primary consideration (Zoellner 2011, 7). ANTA’s constant mantra declared an ‘industry-led’ training system to be the over-riding consideration of the system’s structure (Australian National Training Authority 1995b, 1996a). The legislation to establish the most recent Commonwealth Government agency for workforce development re-iterates the significance of industry requirements and knowledge in determining the direction of VET (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2012, 2). The discourse of industry leadership is inevitably framed as aspirational and represented as something that has yet to be achieved, with the clear implication that work needs to...
be done in this area. The next chapter peers behind this outward veneer to demonstrate the importance of yet another absence – the secret.
Chapter Twelve

Public Secrets
There is a politically caused tendency to implement complex programs instead of simple ones because every pressure group demands its own special benefit.

(Pressman & Wildavsky 1984, 234)

An aspiration, maybe

The outward pretence of a desirable but yet-to-be achieved state of an industry-led training system relies upon maintaining a deception, or more accurately, a secret. Industry already directs the development of training policy.

Given that industry leads VET on the basis of ‘knowing what it doesn’t like’ (as previously described by the Chairman of the South Australian Training and Skills Commission); the need for continual reform of the National Training System arises. In addition to the tripartite arrangements industry’s surreptitious ruling function is enacted in two ways. Firstly, industry-based members dominate the scores of licensing and registration bodies that determine who can participate in regulated sections of the labour market. Secondly, the peak industrial associations are exceedingly effective lobbyists of governments and achieve outcomes that are financially favourable to industry.

The potency of this secrecy can be surveyed by analysing the narrative of skills shortages. Concerns about the lack of an appropriately skilled workforce in Australia dates back to the earliest days of European presence on the continent (Beddie 2010, 5; Castles 1985). The uncritical acceptance of skills shortages as a permanent feature of the Australian labour market has maintained the argument’s potency, even though the workforce has changed from being predominantly rural agrarian to an urban supplier of services (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, 112; Ruthven 2012). The lack of substantive evidence that shortages of skilled labour, as opposed to other factors such as low wages or unsafe work practices, have ever
acted as a constraint upon economic growth in Australia is seldom discussed (Maglen 1993, 32). Regardless, the ‘common sense’ of this narrative has delivered the current proposition that “it would be better for productivity and the economy to have more qualifications than employers require rather than less” (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 42).

This, of course, begs the question of who pays for the production of excess qualifications. The desire for business entrepreneurs to shift as many costs as possible to the public purse while retaining the profits dates back many centuries (Li 2007, 40). In a 2009 seminar on the development of VET, John Dawkins, the former Commonwealth Government Minister for Employment, Education and Training, described the unwillingness of private industry to increase their expenditure on apprenticeship training, using as illustration when government departments, such as the railways and electricity agencies that formerly produced many of the traditional tradespersons employed in the private sector, were privatised or had their training budgets slashed. Instead of picking up the training tab, industry resorted to poaching skilled labour from each other and demanding increased levels of overseas skilled migration. According to Dawkins (2009), this refusal to train was seldom open to public discussion and government attempts to force industry into paying were quickly and effectively thwarted during the years of the Hawke/Keating Labor Governments of the 1990s.

In order to keep public funding under the surreptitious influence of industry, a ‘moral panic’ (Roman 1997) concerning skills shortages dominates the official narrative and makes challenging the existing relationship between industry and the public purse all but impossible. We have already seen how the historic influence of the workers’ welfare state and active social policy shifts responsibility for participating in training to the individual, through a student entitlement for training financed by the government for every resident between the ages of 15 and 64 years old. This
position is being spruiked from the Prime Minister downwards because training is for everyone and it is an automatic good (Gillard 2012). The moral panic linked to skills shortages – or more accurately, predicted skills shortages – is based upon the premise that receiving a formal qualification is good for you. In the Australian context, unemployed youth have been particularly attractive targets for those wishing to perpetuate this highly charged position (Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission 1982; Council of Australian Governments 2009; Department of Employment and Industrial Relations 1986; Keating 1994b; Kirby 1985). This group has been created and recreated by governments of all persuasions because they attract little public sympathy (Cooper 2011, 19-20). Their shortcomings can be blamed on schools or self-deficiencies and their plight can be used as a testing ground for public policy initiatives, with limited political consequences at elections.

One example of the influence of industry’s secret, masked by this moral panic, comes from the Managing Director of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, Tom Karmel. His findings challenge the core belief that training is an automatic benefit by statistically demonstrating that for workers in some age groups and industry areas, such as sales or community and personal services, increased formal training did not improve a person’s income and career options (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011e). Speaking at the 2012 Australian VET Research Association Conference, he called for more scrutiny of the allocation of public funds in training. He proposed that shifting funding to areas that produced outcomes more in line with human capital development (as measured by increased income post-training) was better economic and social policy, but prefaced his remarks with commentary about the political sensitivities associated with even discussing the matter and light-heartedly linked his raising the issue with his own pre-retirement planning. The audience reaction was one of genuine and knowing laughter. What is it that might cause one of the most influential persons in the VET
system to express such concerns about questioning industry’s rhetoric as some sort of swansong?

Taussig (1999, 5) proposes that secrets have a purposeful role and place in society, based upon how members deal with “that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated”. In order for society to operate, members must learn that most important social knowledge is mediated by “knowing what not to know” (Taussig 1999, 2). This has been described as holding a ‘public secret’. The mirror images of transparency and invisibility are intimately associated with the production and transmission of public secrets. Together they establish unstated, but nevertheless very potent, rules about what to turn a blind eye to and what to know without declaring it publicly. This includes industry’s role in the VET system. Public secrets discussed in this chapter serve a quite important and precise purpose in the operation of the National Training System. They maintain the furtive reality of industry’s current domination of the vocational education and training discourse.

**Public secrets**

Notionally transparency should minimise secrets; however, choosing the objects and processes that are to be made transparent always hides others. For example, VET’s relentless focus upon the use of statistics to achieve transparency (Council of Australian Governments 2012, 18-19) has contributed to pushing the 1980s national focus, upon the teaching and learning process involved in skills transfer, into the shadows (see, for example, TAFE National Centre for Research and Development 1986). Invisibilisation contributes to secrecy. Hiding the unemployed by forcing them into training programs, onto pensions or into prison, combined with not being willing to discuss these actions, actively creates secrets. These secrets are built upon the rationality of absence yet again, because of the disappearance of the problems of the unemployed and those deemed to be disadvantaged.
Secrets mediate society’s operations and, like the other absences, transparency and invisibility, can serve a range of roles. The current conceptions of participatory democracy allow the individual to cast a secret ballot (Montoya 2008, 261).

Capitalism also requires trade secrets to provide advantages in a free market, hence ACPET’s concern about releasing commercially sensitive training data as part of the VET transparency agenda. National and personal security programs are premised upon the use of secrets (Piotrowski 2010, 25). State and Territory governments also accept the need for and the use of secrets. Despite being the elected representatives of the people, all parliamentary cabinets are conducted in secret. Access to NT Cabinet papers could only be gained after they were made available through the NT Archives Service at the expiry of the ‘30 Year Rule’. 87 Similarly, I required permission from the NT Department of Chief Minister to gain access to the files held in the NT archives to do with the establishment of the National Training System, as they were still within this 30 year period. It took nearly eight months to negotiate my way through the government’s secrecy protection of ordinary public service records from the 1980s and 1990s.

At the most pragmatic level, secrets exist because the winners of conflicts write the history of events (Watts 2003, 244). The progressive defunding by governments and subsequent disappearance of the community and adult education training providers in the NT in favour of concentrating activity at Charles Darwin University (CDU), the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) and private providers, is effectively removing any knowledge about these once vibrant training organisations (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2012b, 16). The evolving NT training discourse pushes the non-favoured providers into secrecy. Any discourse that results “is a distribution of gaps, voids, absences, limits and divisions” (Foucault 2010a, 119). In the Northern Territory such elisions allow for secrets to be made

87 This rule provides for the papers to be held in secret for 30 years. NT Cabinet papers are made available on the first day of January after the expiration date has passed.
and kept by effectively treating the history of CDU, BIITE and the minimally recorded private sector as the true record of training in the NT.

The need to designate the NT as a State in order to implement the National Training System (and many other functions) also contributed to another type of secret. The conventional telling of the self-government story in the NT relies upon the identification of a ‘Territorian’ that has been disenfranchised from the democratic process and is thus at loggerheads with the Commonwealth Government (Everingham 1981; Heatley 1990). As explained by Gerritsen, (2010) this production of the true ‘Territorian’ masks the never-ending conflict between Indigenous traditional land owners and more recent settlers. The Aboriginal history of centuries-long ownership and stewardship of their country has been hidden by the advanced market democracy’s requirement to have a story about economically rational choice-making individuals who have been denied their constitutional privileges. The European knowledge that currently defines the traditions and, consequently, tells the story about ‘Territorians’ hides “what everyone knows” (Addelson 1994, 4). The Indigenous perspective is removed from serious consideration in the creation of the democratic institutions and legal framework of the NT. The knowledge of 30 per cent of the population has been forced into secrecy.

Secrets also serve a useful function supporting interactions between different individuals and groups. Goffman (1990, 26) proposes that communication is actually accomplished through a mechanism that resembles a dramaturgical performance serving to stage-manage the impression one gives to another. Anger, joy, surprise or sarcasm can each be expressed using identical words, but it is the manner and style of presentation used that conveys the intended meaning. This process can often be used to conceal secrets.
Goffman (1990, 141) classifies secrets according to their function. The Labor NT Government resorted to keeping ‘dark secrets’ regarding its enthusiasm for imprisoning Territorians because it did not wish to contradict its campaign image of opposition to mandatory sentencing. ACPET’s rejection of AVETMISS-compliant reporting for private providers represents a type of ‘strategic secret’ which can be used to set direction and exert influence over the amount of information available to the public, thus protecting market share (Australian Council for Private Education and Training 2012, 4). An ‘inside secret’ can be used to increase group solidarity by having information only known to the membership, as demonstrated above, by CDU’s Nutcracker Committee. Knowledge of competency-based training identified lecturers, whereas AVETMISS knowledge defined the administrative staff so strongly that intervention was required to enable inter-group communication. The Unique Student Identifier is built upon a promise from the VET system to keep individual information confidential, representing an ‘entrusted secret’, as a demonstration of trustworthiness (VET National Data Strategy Action Group 2010, 10-11).

It is not the simple lack of information that gives rise to public secrets. Advanced market democracies are swamped with information that continually recites society’s stories, because “these narrations have the twofold and strange power of transforming seeing into believing and fabricating realities out of appearances” (de Certeau 1984, 186). The constant repetition of the need for industry leadership of VET, framed in such a manner to suggest that it has not been achieved in the face of perverse resistance, exemplifies this odd capacity. In a similar way, the prevailing influence of the narrative of skills shortages, addressed in more detail shortly, exerts a significance scarcely supported by the information that is generated by the system and can explain why the NT Government has made no real increase to its training budget since 1995 (Zoellner 2012a, 7). There simply is no unmet demand for VET.
Furthermore, the public discourses that follow from the economic analysis of the information washing over the population and its repeated citation by political leaders leads to many citizens holding and reciting popular beliefs, even though they know perfectly well in their experience “it is a pile of crap” (de Certeau 1984, 188). One of the purported benefits of the Unique Student Identifier allows a student to manage her or his own usage and achievement of formal training (VET National Data Strategy Action Group 2010, 1), although it is absolutely clear that the USI is the primary technical mechanism required to shift the cost of higher level training to the individual and away from industry and government. The various authorities and RTOs must be able to measure each individual’s consumption of VET in order to know if they have used their government-funded subsidy and when to start charging fees for further study. The population knows that the individual’s supposed benefit is minimal when compared to the other uses government has planned for this data.

“Certain things will never be put on view; they are shared in secrecy as part of a type of exchange that is different from the one that involves visibility” (Galli 2008, 72). Even though NT Cabinet papers are protected by the 30 year rule, the actual documentation does not tell anything about the process that takes place in the Cabinet room. When interviewed, NT Cabinet Secretary, Col Fuller, was quite adamant that the original submission and consequent decision record gave no clue as to what actually happened in the meeting. It is highly unlikely that the decision-making considerations to hold training expenditure at the same level, while rapidly increasing expenditure on so-called justice programs, will ever be explained to the Northern Territory public.

Building upon Foucault’s power/knowledge dyad, Taussig’s (1999) propositions about public secrets explain the significance of secrecy in government. Taussig (1999, 57) believes that “secrecy lies at the very core of power”. One of the more
potent outcomes of the exercise of power/knowledge is the production of the public secret – that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated (Taussig 1999, 5).

This can explain Fuller’s observation about the lack of substantive information contained in cabinet submissions and decisions. In my experience of preparing submissions for the NT Cabinet, as well as comparing notes with colleagues who have also performed this task, one rapidly learns that this is a very specialist and expert occupation (Lea 2008, 38). The choice of words, the presentation of options and the general background are all very carefully vetted to make absolutely sure that the propositions being put to Cabinet do not contravene party platform positions or election commitments, except in the most extreme situations and when preparing for damage control after the media exposes that most terrible political sin – the ‘backflip’. As described by John Dawkins (1993, 13) “policy advice is only useful if it is capable of being accepted”.

Even worse for the career prospects of submission writers is to favour an option supported by the opposition party. This is the public secret of the supposedly fearless and non-partisan public service advice. Those who prepare Cabinet submissions must also avoid forwarding positions that are ‘known’ to be less than favourably viewed by their Minister, even if the proposition is considered to be the best option. This knowledge is seldom gained in an overt manner and coming into its possession is a true art form. The continual duplication of training facilities in urban areas and the construction of new training buildings in remote communities (often within sight of last, but now abandoned workshop) make little economic or programmatic sense. But if the Minister and local member opening a building will fill an easily perceived absence, the recommendation will go forward to Cabinet.

Individual government officials and lobbyists, in fact anyone who wishes to influence government, demonstrate the “most important social knowledge – knowing what not
to know” (Taussig 1999, 2). This is particularly true for the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of government agencies and authorities. Syd Stirling, the former NT Deputy Chief Minister, recounted his dealings with CEOs who would or could not learn what not to know in terms of dealing with a new reform-minded government exercising greater amounts of ministerial direction. The fate of the NT Employment and Training Authority has already provided one example. Stirling also cited the introduction of the long service leave pool for construction workers as having been accomplished as a result of an election commitment that had met with initial rejection by the relevant government agency charged with its implementation. Stirling reported that “a senior staffer from my office worked closely with the agency to bring the scheme to fruition, which was a terrific example of Government working closely with the public service to implement change”. In other words, the public servants were carefully instructed and monitored about what to know and what not to know. The previous public service arguments against the scheme, based upon costs, modelling demonstrating low levels of potential usage and that government should not become involved in a private sector matter, were transformed into secrets – matters not to be known.

Public secrets determine the dimensions of the problematisation process used by governments. In describing the sequence of events associated with an external audit of a large American school system, the use of public secrets by the auditors was clearly identified (Radcliffe 2008). This organisation had been singled out for audit by the State Legislature due to its schools’ perceived failure to produce educated and economically employable graduates. New Public Management styles of government favour audits due to their supposed neutrality and impartiality as well as their ability to defer responses by seeming to be in action. In the case of this

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88 Construction workers are highly mobile and seldom remain with one employer long enough to accumulate legislated long service leave of 3 months paid holiday time after ten years’ service. The portability scheme allows for those who remain in the industry to amass enough total employment time to access long service leave.
school district, the auditors made a large number of recommendations concerning financial and information technology requirements, enabling ‘better management’ of the district in the hope of improved student learning outcomes.

The audit report ignored the grinding poverty, dilapidated housing and school infrastructure, poor health status and racial discrimination faced by this community. While everyone knows these things exist, the auditors knew what not to know in order to get the State Legislature to accept, act upon the audit and possibly send more work to this group of auditors. To mention the public secrets would require action to be taken to alleviate much more fundamental social problems rather than the signs, in this case poor management, of the problem. This was perceived by the auditors as being too difficult and not within the realm of their commission. It would also expose the true function of audits – to maintain the status quo. By knowing what not to know, this audit process demonstrates two common public secrets. The first is that the audit inquiry gave the appearance of doing something about poor schooling while not actually addressing the issue. Secondly, it did not divulge or disturb the other public secret of endemic inequality that everyone knew to exist.

**The public secrets of VET**

In advanced market democracies, the ‘needs’ of industry actually provide a reason for having governments. For markets to work effectively, governments are necessary to support an environment conducive to capitalism by providing national security, a robust justice system to protect intellectual and real property rights and to ameliorate the expenses of critical public infrastructure, such as roads, bridges and harbours (Herman 2003, 207). In the Australian version, a requirement for a skilled, productive and flexible workforce has been created and governmentalised in a manner similar to that of essential public works. Consequently, so-called industry requirements have been placed at the heart of training and labour market policy
One of the outcomes of running a national policy of full employment is potential skill shortages in times of vigorous economic growth and this possibility has been a permanent feature of the Australian economy since European occupation (Castles 1985, 59). With few exceptions, such as dealing with those seeking political refugee status, national immigration policy has also been driven through this skills rhetoric (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, 143-144).

Likewise, the need to overcome skill shortages was used as one reason to establish the Northern Territory Apprenticeships Board in 1948. Building the labour market in the NT features consistently throughout the immediate post-war discussions dealing with the development of the jurisdiction (Hasluck 1989; Sayers 1962). When interviewed, former Education Minister Shane Stone described the importance accorded to the establishment of a university in the NT from the outset of self-government. According to Stone, the first Cabinet did not have a single member with a university degree, but they were convinced that the NT could only grow and prosper by producing its own skilled workforce to replace the total reliance upon interstate and international immigration. Every NT Cabinet has since supported the concept of local education and training that could start with pre-school and finish with a Doctor of Philosophy, all completed at a local institution. As described by Chun (2013, 150), there exists “a direct relationship between nation building interests and education in general”. Stone’s views on the importance of addressing skills shortages to promote the NT’s future development were mirrored by each of those interviewees who had worked in the Northern Territory.

In addition, industry has been remarkably successful in creating and maintaining a sense of crisis around skills, even in the face of empirical evidence and economic theory suggesting otherwise:
Our conclusion is that there is little reason to worry about skills shortages, given the flexibility of the economy and the uncertainty associated with supply and demand. The role of wages in equilibrating supply and demand should also not be ignored. Increased wages in particular occupations will both increase the number of persons entering the occupation and decrease the numbers exiting (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011e, 49).

In spite of this little-reported finding, it is perfectly economically rational and financially desirable for industry to problematise skills shortages especially if they don’t have to pay to resolve the matter. As long as governments use public funds to finance training, keeping the story of scarcity alive not only comes at no cost to industry, but also maintains pressure on governments not to redirect these funds elsewhere. However, this tactic is losing its historical effectiveness, with the novel use of imprisonment to manage the unemployed (Wacquant 2009).

Regardless, both the Territory and Commonwealth governments have embraced the problematisation of skills shortages with enthusiasm. Resolving a shortage (an absence by another name) is what governments do best – particularly if it can be measured by a numerical indicator. The discourse of skill shortages is stealthy and subtle. Like training and transparency, shortages are difficult to speak against. Everyone ‘knows’ of a local employer experiencing staffing difficulties, which is then represented as a shortage of appropriately skilled individuals in the labour market. Everybody is also ‘aware’ of a young person, who could be working productively but is unemployed because they do not have the right skills. Without prompting, each and every one of my interviewees described VET as part of the answer to solve skill shortage problems faced by industry. Industry is thus well-placed to maintain and financially benefit from this discourse of shortage or even “crisis” (Dodd 2013b).
The supporting documentation for the legislation to create the most recent Commonwealth Government agency to deal with labour market skills, details the “creation of an industry-led national workforce and productivity agency to replace Skills Australia. The underlying objective of the agency is to place industry at the centre of the National Training System” (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2012, 2). The former National Quality Council does not mince its words in relation to the role of industry in the VET system either. Their goal is to support “one single national system” that produces nationally portable qualifications aligned to “industry-determined outcomes relevant to work” (National Quality Council (Australia) (NQC); Council of Australian Governments (COAG); National Quality Council/COAG Joint Steering Committee 2009, 2). It has been less commonly proposed that that the term ‘industry-led’ is a misnomer. “For it is mainly governments, at both State, and increasingly the Federal level, which shape and fund the system, with employer and other lobby groups voicing their views and demands” (Beddie 2010, 4). While this perspective suggests degrees of influence, regardless of the extent of industry-leadership one accepts, industry clearly has a prominent role to play in determining VET policy when compared to the invisibilisation of the individual student that has taken place.

This focus upon industry’s place in VET is systemic. In its first annual report, the Australian National Training Authority (1995a, 4) stated: “ANTA has a five person board drawn from industry to ensure that that Authority remains focused upon the needs of industry”. The Kangan Report also prioritised the needs of industry: “The optimum use of resources involves determination of the best relationship between all streams of education, teachers and facilities employed, and the requirements of industry and the community” (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974, xxii). In order to achieve the Commonwealth Government’s goal of

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89 This body was replaced by the National Skills Standards Council from 1 July 2011 (http://www.nssc.natese.gov.au/home).
full employment, Prime Minister Curtin's 1945 White Paper also noted the pivotal role of industry: “The solution of this problem of the distribution of resources lies mainly with businessmen” (Coombs 1994, 44).

The casting of industry’s role in VET policy as an aspirational target, or even more hopefully, suggesting that governments alone determine policy (Beddie 2010, 4), implies that the long-stated goal of supplying industry-determined outcomes is yet to be achieved. By framing the discourse as aspirational, a deception leading to a public secret, is being performed on the public. Industry alone determines the content of the training packages through the work of Industry Skills Councils (Senate Standing Committee of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011, 6). The course content in vocational and technical education has been influenced by industry for over four decades, commencing with the first landmark Tregillis Report (Department of Labour and National Service 1969) and the consequent establishment of 14 government-funded Industry Training Councils.

Unless leadership is viewed in terms of industry financing, whereby government does not fund the lion’s share of formal training costs – a move strongly resisted by business enterprises – then VET policy is already in the hands of employers. Industry quickly resorts to the use of evocative terms like “supply-side orientation” (Skills Australia 2011, 3) or “provider-driven” (Skills Australia 2011, 47) when more fundamental questions about training policy and funding are raised. Each of these contributes to the creation and maintenance of the public secret of industry leadership. In addition, industry determination of training policy is also achieved through another, virtually undiscussed process – that of occupational licensing and registration. These processes also serve to provide guidance to the population about how to best conduct themselves and serve as some sort of warranty as to the value and worth of specific types of individuals.
Public secret multipliers

The management of public risk that is promulgated through a “rhetoric of training” (Goffman 1990, 55) allows licensing and registration bodies to specify and guard the amounts and levels of training in a variety of occupations “to foster the impressions that the licensed practitioner is someone who has been reconstructed by his learning experiences and is now set apart from other men”.90 This process, either purposely or inadvertently, establishes a monopoly situation in some occupations by the determination of the numbers of licensed practitioners in the workforce and creating pricing structures that increase the value of holding a licence.

The enactment of this ‘rhetoric of training’ is carried out by persons with experience in the industry. They occupy the majority of positions on the licensing and registration boards. As a consequence, industry has the final say on who can practice what, by specifying the qualifications and experiences individuals must hold in order to work in the vocation. In Australia, some 63 industry areas have been identified that have government legislated licensing or registration requirements (Queensland Department of Education and Training 2011b). With the exception of one publication, A Licence to Skill (Australian National Training Authority 2002), my research has found virtually no critical examination of these bodies.91 The power/knowledge exercised through licensing and registration is such a mundane and common practice that its operation and function disappears from serious consideration (Bowker & Star 1999, 33; Gore 1998, 248). It has become a secret.

90 This narrative consistently reports the exact words of those who have been quoted (in the name of accuracy), but fully recognises the exclusionary impact of particular phrases and words that have been used over the decades.
91 NCVER has issued a report on the interaction of the overall regulatory environment with the apprenticeship system, using ANTA’s Licence to Skill as a main reference. It concludes that licensing and registration bodies “are more likely to affect the qualifications profile of an occupation rather than the use of apprenticeships” (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011b, 22). This observation supports the argument of industry leadership.
Three examples from the Northern Territory represent the Australian variant of occupational licensing and registration. For plumbers and drainers, their five member board is made up of two persons who hold “advanced tradesman” qualifications and are nominated by their trade association, two government public servants from the agencies dealing with building and apprenticeship administration and a lecturer from a NT RTO who holds qualifications in plumbing (Department of the Legislative Assembly 2011b, 4). For electricians, there are also five members. There is one employer who is most likely to hold electrical qualifications, as contractors must also be registered. The other four, an electrical engineer or ‘A grade’ fitter or mechanic, an employee, a NT RTO trainer and a representative of the electrical workers’ union must all hold specified electrical qualifications (Department of the Legislative Assembly 2011a, 5). The NT Nursing and Midwifery Board has seven members, five of which are health practitioners and two are so-called community members – both of whom hold legal qualifications (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia 2013). How do these government-sanctioned, but industry-dominated, bodies exert their influence?

Occupational licensing in Australia is defined as “any form of regulation that restricts entry into an occupation or profession to people who meet requirements stipulated by a regulatory authority” and is one of the “most effective and easily recognisable” techniques available to governments (Queensland Department of Education and Training 2011b, 1). It has been used to mitigate a wide range of public risks that include public and employment-related health and safety, consumer protection and environmental protection (Queensland Department of Education and Training 2011b, 1). These types of considerations motivated the NT Government, soon after self-government, to embrace licensing of electricians and contractors on the basis of ‘public safety’ and ‘reciprocal recognition of interstate qualifications’ to address NT skills shortages (Northern Territory Archives Service 1984-1991c, folio 21). The
continued need to license plumbers and drainers during the same time period was reinforced and further specified, in order to “maintain a high standard of qualifications to enter the industry and consumer protection” (Northern Territory Plumbers and Drainers Licensing Board 1980, 1). This included giving plumbers the monopoly for installing LP gas fittings.

The reasons to use licensing and registration were also addressed during the interviews when more perceived benefits were mentioned. Former NT Treasurer, Syd Stirling, believed these processes “provide an accountability mechanism for government expenditure”. Cabinet Secretary, Col Fuller, feels that licensing and registration can serve as a form of regulation over the occupation, as well as “looking after the unions” by ensuring the involvement of those who are employed in the business. Andy Bruyn, the former Chair of the NT Employment and Training Authority, stated that these activities “ensured credibility of both training and the community perception of a particular occupational sector”. The CEO of Skills Australia, Robin Shreeve, believes it provides a “quality” function for consumers. With such a range of benefits to their credit, licensing and registration resembles VET as an unquestionable common good and ubiquitous response to the problems faced by governments. None of those interviewed spoke against licensing and registration, but the matter was not pursued in great depth either.

In its only major report into occupational licensing, ANTA observed that:

> Australian Governments have imposed occupational licensing in a range of areas, usually as a result of judgments that market forces fail to adequately deal with certain public risks and, hence, do not result in efficient or equitable social and economic outcomes for those occupations (Australian National Training Authority 2002, 3).
In addition, ANTA concluded that there was a major discrepancy between the content of training packages and resultant skill levels produced from the competency-based VET system and the actual requirements imposed by multiple licensing bodies. Because each State and Territory licensing authority could set its own requirements, the establishment of national consistency in training was allegedly being hindered and increased compliance and transaction costs were being imposed upon the Australian economy. Since then some progress has been made in overcoming jurisdictional differences with, for example, national registration of 14 health professions. In an attempt to direct the discourse, ANTA’s report recommended that the industry licensing bodies come into line with the National Training System’s competency-based approach (Australian National Training Authority 2002, 6). As a demonstration of who has ultimate influence in both licensing and VET policy, by 2005 ANTA was disbanded while the licensing and registration boards not only remain in existence but have grown in number.

The ease of use and broad applicability of licensing and registration leads governments to create the bodies that do this work. While the initial reasons for structuring these boards with a majority of members from the relevant industry area has not been clearly identified, one line of thought suggests that the benefits of public credibility and limited expertise inside government (because of a focus upon policy rather than delivery of services) supported industry domination of the membership. Regardless, industry leads these functions. The only major source of consolidated information about vocational licensing and registration, Licensing Line

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92 This function is operated by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency due to a referral of powers by State and Territory governments (http://www.ahpra.gov.au). The various boards in AHPRA are all dominated by health practitioners. The nursing profession proudly clings to its designation of a ‘Registered Nurse’ to signal the qualifications held by a university graduate.

93 This includes some 63 industry areas of traditional occupations requiring licensing or registration (Queensland Department of Education and Training 2011b). NCVER (2011b, 24-28) has identified 178 individual occupations that require licensing depending upon State or Territory legislation in force in 2011. This does not include more generic registrations such as the NT Ochre Card required for any person who works with children or the White Card required to enter a construction site.
News, was closed after the removal of its operating grant by the Commonwealth Government in 2011 (Queensland Department of Education and Training 2011a, 1).

The existence of Licensing Line News and its encouragement of public discussion and observation of industry governance of VET policy exercised through licensing and registration, contravened the most important social knowledge – knowing what not to know. Industry is highly motivated to retain this public secret because policy domination provides the opportunity to shift the cost of training an appropriately skilled workforce to the public purse and/or the individual. Projects like Licensing Line overstep the mark by exposing the actual extent of industry influence.

Additionally, by limiting the number of people allowed to work in an occupation, skills shortages narratives can either be made more or less strident. Economically rational licensing and registration boards are unlikely to flood the labour market with new entrants which would result in reduced incomes for their occupation.

**Who pays for training?**

Industry’s public secret is also supported by the present funding regime for training. According to Tom Karmel (2012, 22), the Managing Director of NCVER, the question of who pays for training is one of the most important public policy issues facing the nation. Any “discussion of the benefits of training is related to the question of who pays for that training” (Long 2001, 19).

The involvement of Australian governments in the provision of a skilled workforce occurred between the two world wars, when State governments progressively institutionalised the long-standing apprenticeship arrangements between unions and employers (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982, 102-103). These governments considered this to be an important contribution to nation-building, by supplying labour capable of productively operating in the increasingly sophisticated workplaces of both the private and public sectors. By the early 1970s, the State and
Commonwealth governments agreed that the individual States were no longer capable of funding skills requirements, more holistic national guidance was desirable and there was a need for a national inquiry into TAFE funding (Goozee 2001, 24-25).

The subsequent Kangan Report recommendations listed the specific activities and facilities that would be supported by Federal funding to the States and proposed the exact sums to be allocated.94 The Kangan focus on the importance of training to the individual, not only as a vocational but also a personal and social benefit, was set in the context of the “requirements of industry” providing primary direction (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974, xxii; Kangan 1964). It is clear, however, that the VET system’s foundational landmark report envisaged that the advantages of training would accrue to the individual and broader society as well as industry. While views can oscillate as to what proportion of training is a public good, the general proposition that governments should use taxpayers’ dollars to support industry training remains at the core of VET public policy (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011; National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011e; Skills Australia 2009). For example, Australia is the only country in the world to pay large-scale incentives directly to employers to offset apprenticeship wage costs in an attempt to influence the training market from the demand side (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011f, 52).

Citing public good as a reason for public expenditure to provide infrastructure or other support that encourages private enterprise is as old as capitalism itself (Smith 2009). For example, from the early 1600s the Netherlands East Indies Company constantly lobbied the Dutch Government for military support and the provision of infrastructure, such as roads and ports, in the then Dutch East Indies, while paying

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94 This included curriculum development, lecturer professional development, provision of libraries, workshops and materials (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974).
very low taxes on their enormous profits (Li 2007, 40). Seeking out public funds to support private profit has not diminished even in the face of a changing industrial landscape in advanced market democracies:

A major thread in contemporary political discourse has advocated allowing the wealthy to profit when risk benefits them and to shift to taxpayers or to the less privileged the costs gone bad, all in the name of the need to promote growth and to create jobs (Fisk 2012, 14).

When recollecting his contribution to the development of the National Training System at the South Australian ‘OctoberVET’ workshop in 2009, the former Commonwealth Training Minister, John Dawkins, succinctly summed up his view about VET funding: “industry always wants taxpayers to pay”.

The Australian Industry Group’s submission (also known as the Ai Group) to the Commonwealth Government on the recommendations contained in a landmark review of apprenticeship funding, Final report of the expert panel: a shared responsibility: apprenticeships in the 21st century (McDowell et al. 2011), exemplifies Dawkins’s opinion when making the following points regarding financial support for training:

- “the volume of current allocation directed to Commonwealth Employer Incentives must be maintained” (Australian Industry Group 2011, 8)
- “consideration needs to be given to a differential arrangement of support so that all employers receive some support” (Australian Industry Group 2011, 8)

95 The Australian Industry Group represents manufacturers and is one of several influential national peak industry bodies such as the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Minerals Council of Australia and the National Farmers Federation. The former Chief Executive of Ai Group, Heather Ridout, is a member of the Board of the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency. The Ai Group also furnishes a member (Megan Lilly) on National Skills Standards Council and the Australian Qualifications Framework Council.
“Ai Group does not support the introduction of an Employer Contribution Scheme” to jointly fund the Australian Apprenticeship system (Australian Industry Group 2011, 9)

“It is important for the Australian Government to increase funding allocations to address this major issue” of low levels of literacy and numeracy (Australian Industry Group 2011, 11).

Attempts have been made to achieve a more substantial industry financial contribution towards nationally recognised training. In detailing his Government’s determination to increase the nation’s skill levels and support industrial reform to make Australia more internationally competitive, Dawkins (1988b) released *Industry training in Australia: the need for change*. This set out a number of actions that would be undertaken by government to make training more responsive to national priorities. The paper stated that, “The Commonwealth Government’s preferred approach was that industry respond to the need to increase its investment in training without government involvement” (Dawkins 1988b, 10).

Due to this preference being rebuffed by industry, in 1990 the Commonwealth Government legislated for and implemented a Training Guarantee Levy to be applied to larger businesses based upon the size of their payroll (Commonwealth/State Training Advisory Committee (COSTAC) 1990). If each business could not demonstrate the requisite level of expenditure on training, they would be required to pay a levy to the Commonwealth through the tax system. Needless to say the levy was detested by industry and popular myth from the time recounts numerous ‘executive retreats’ to the Great Barrier Reef, Bali and other overseas destinations, all designed to be counted towards training expenditure. Due to an economic downturn, the cost of enforcing compliance and low return rates, the Commonwealth first suspended and finally abandoned the levy several years later (Keating 1994a, 25).
In another attempt to increase private investment in training, between 2009 and 2012, the Productivity Places Program was implemented through a National Partnership Agreement between the State, Territory and Federal governments (Council of Australian Governments 2008b). The aim was to provide training for about half a million job seekers and existing employees. For its part, the Northern Territory agreed to generate 13,692 new enrolments in return for $8.3 million of Commonwealth funding that would supply 50 per cent of the total funding (Council of Australian Governments 2008b, 26-27). In addition to the NT’s public contribution of 40 per cent of the funding, the program required that training for existing workers include a 10 per cent ‘private contribution’, from either the individual or employer, in an effort to more widely distribute the costs of training.

Prior to the program commencing, the Commonwealth Government followed a standard strategy of putting out a discussion paper and inviting submissions on the elements of the proposed course of action. The Australian Industry Group replied to that request for feedback by taking the usual position about who pays:

> It is simply not acceptable for some States and Territories to attempt to abrogate this responsibility by choosing not to allocate the requisite funds.

> The other component is the 10 per cent from industry. Our view is that on average companies already contribute well beyond the 10 per cent allocation and we would welcome the opportunity to have formal discussions around what constitutes the elements of that contribution (Australian Industry Group 2008, 5-6).

In keeping with Dawkins’s observation, the Australian Industry Group believed governments should pay but industry should not. In the end the private contribution was included as a financial arrangement in the NT, but there is no strong evidence if
it was employers or individual workers who paid. A detailed evaluation of the now
completed program has yet to be published.

A policy of joint funding of training appears to have gained limited acceptance. Skills
Australia (2011, 8) recommended “a co-contribution financing framework where
individuals undertaking higher-level qualifications, as well as larger enterprises,
share the cost of training with government”. Co-contribution towards higher level
training costs is the model used in the National Workforce Development Fund, a
tightly focused program of industry-based training (Australian Workforce and

This is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it means that discussions about funding
the economy’s training requirements no longer include the possibility of a full
financial contribution by industry. Secondly the middle ground, suggested by Skills
Australia, has been questioned with COAG’s acceptance of a student-entitlement
model for initial training and the introduction of an income-contingent loan scheme
for the individual to pursue second or higher VET qualifications (Council of
Australian Governments 2012, 24). Because of industry’s domination of VET policy,
it has effectively thwarted any attempts to make it fully pay for its ‘needs’. As former
senior VET administrator Kay Schofield observed during our interview,
“Governments have not been able to stem the massive shift to the addiction of
publicly funded training”.

The system of denial about industry’s leadership of the National Training System is
enforced in three major ways. There is a continuous recital of an aspiration to
achieve an industry-led system as if that was not already the case. Its reputed
absence is seared into VET’s psyche and is seldom challenged and then only with
severe trepidation, as demonstrated by Karmel’s ironic reference to his retirement
planning. Karmel knew that he was expressing thoughts that everyone knew not to
know. In addition, unambiguously, industry dominates the licensing and regulation schemes which, in turn, manipulate and influence the labour market in most significantly-sized or economically important occupations. This often includes dictating the content and levels of training required to enter and remain in the occupation, thus holding the capacity to potentially create or eliminate skills shortages. They also support a self-serving rhetoric of skills shortages. Lastly, industry peak bodies are relentless and highly effective lobbyists of government, seeking the most lucrative and attractive financial arrangements for their members. Industry’s capacity to frustrate several decades of public policy intention seeking increased enterprise funding of training, speaks volumes as to who is in charge of the system. In addition, industry is well-represented on each of the boards or councils of the national bodies that most directly influence public policy in VET.  

The consequences of public secrets

The National Training System is an industry-led mechanism that shifts as much of the cost of training as possible away from private sector employers and corporations to the individual or public purse, on the basis that training is an unquestionable good. In order to retain access to taxpayer dollars, it suits industry to preserve a moral panic about skills shortages by dominating the official discourse. Because governments do not have the expertise at the industry level to provide VET policy leadership but wish to mitigate risk, public policy supports the facade of aspirations to industry leadership. Problematisation is carried out by experts and who is more expert about industry needs than industry itself? A discourse of skills shortages creates a space where governments’ desire to manage the population’s behaviour through a ‘will to train’ meets the economically rational desire of industry to minimise

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96 These include the Australian Qualifications Framework Council, the National Skills Standards Council, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, the Industry Skills Councils and the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency.
their direct cost of procuring a skilled workforce in a free market. It is a perfect match facilitated by the keeping of public secrets.

By maintaining the secret, industry has been able to be considered as the major client of the training quasi-market that has matured over the past 30 years (Australian National Training Authority 2003; Robinson & Kenyon 1998; Skills Australia 2009). In accordance with conventional understandings of free markets, it has been able to occupy the theoretically incompatible positions of both producer and consumer. Government’s inability to create a training market (and industry’s part in that failure) generates a constant reproblematisation and reform in search of new approaches to establish an open and competitive market for VET. Due to human capital theory and a governmentalised desire to have a society made up of responsible, self-regulating and economically rational choice-making individuals, a new discourse briefly appeared in VET policy. Industry’s public secret of being the producer, while also assuming the self-proclaimed role of client, was challenged by the creation of the individual as the consumer of VET. Industry’s relentless battle against paying for training has also contributed to identifying the individual as a potential source of revenue, as demonstrated in the ‘student entitlement’ to a single government-funded qualification.

The productive ‘failure’ of previous industry-created and government-executed training policy has fabricated the ‘consumerised’ individual, who inadvertently exposes industry’s public secret and threatens the cosy relationship between industry and the public purse. This consumer was to be joined to the characteristic Australian valorisation of the citizen-worker. It would not be enough to be only a worker and a citizen, each individual in this advanced market democracy was destined to become a consumer. The next chapter will examine how the individual as consumer was enacted, while the final chapter will elucidate the short life of this particular narrative.
Chapter Thirteen
The Citizen-Worker-Consumer
Public policy is usually most concerned with attempting to change citizens’ behaviour.

(Australian Public Service Commission 2007, 5)

Where have you been?

Unlike Frankenstein, the individual consumer of VET is not a novel creation brought to life by mysterious means. However, like Shelley’s (1818) fabrication, the Australian consumer of VET is an assemblage of various bits and pieces that came together at a fortuitous point in time. The restlessness of human capital theory, market capitalism and liberal democracy, has allowed those who enact VET policy to behave like the circus magician and summons the consumer seemingly out of thin air. In reality, they have conjured a consumer who has been there all of the time, but out of sight.

Australia’s distinctive workers’ welfare state and its close relative, active social policy, cemented a nexus between citizenship and employment. The changing nature of work since federation has drastically reduced unskilled jobs, making vocational training the major conduit to employment in non-professional fields. The techno-rational national planning process assumes that even if one attends university and receives a degree, VET can be accessed to provide further qualifications in order to gain employment thereby fulfilling the obligation of Australian citizenship. The VET system serves as a “safety net” (Skills Australia 2009, 37) because every citizen is entitled to a publicly-funded qualification that provides entry into the workforce (Council of Australian Governments 2012, 7).

As an outcome of the Review of Higher Education (Bradley et al. 2008), the constraints upon entry into most fields of undergraduate study have been removed. Previously the Commonwealth Government had determined access to occupational preparation at university level through funding allocation and specification of the number of available positions at each publicly-funded university. The Labor Government has set a target of 40 per cent of 25- to 34-year olds holding a bachelor degree or higher by 2025 as this sector’s contribution to the making of citizen-workers (Gillard 2012). The Commonwealth has reserved the right to limit access to certain of the “handmaidens of privilege – the professions” as described by Denise Bradley.
Each State and Territory government has committed to offer one heavily government-subsidised VET qualification to each Australian resident between the ages of 15 and 64. This ‘student entitlement’ will be to employment-entry standard and, rather controversially, will be in an area of the student’s choice. In other words, COAG’s intention is to have a training market that is driven by student demand rather than being industry-specified, centrally planned or determined by RTOs. Higher level qualifications and retraining to meet future employment opportunities are to be paid for by each citizen-worker, envisaged as a choice-making consumer (Council of Australian Governments 2012, 3). However, the Commonwealth Government’s Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (2013, 100) fundamentally questions the single entitlement per person because the pursuit of lifelong learning and a changing labour market will require workers to retrain. AWPA feels that a lack of government subsidy may hinder this ongoing project of self-improvement through the National Training System.

VET’s guiding rationality of absence can also be found in this space. In order to have a market in anything, there must also be a consumer who pays for the goods or services. If the next phase of VET policy development is going to be driven by student demand, a major conundrum faces both industry and governments in their pursuit of shifting the costs of training to the individual. The student as a consumer is missing. Under the previous ‘cosy relationship’ between government, unions and industry, in which tax payer dollars funded industry’s skill needs and the workforce development of individuals, there was no policy need to see a student – they were literally invisible. However, industry’s overriding desire to shift the cost of training exposes a public secret that inadequately portrays employers as the consumer of vocational education and training.

In order for students to pay for second and higher qualifications, they must become visible as consumers. Similarly, the transparency agenda, as defined through the
gathering of more statistics using a “shared information model” (Council of Australian Governments 2012, 7), requires a visible individual in the role of a consumer of VET. This exposure is to be achieved by allocating the Unique Student Identifier to each individual who enrolls in accredited vocational education and training and full VET activity reporting by private training providers, allowing for monitoring of the entire Australian population and its consumption of training.

The appearance of the individual as a consumer of VET has not been a carefully planned exercise. Like those rare planetary alignments, this discursive formation has come about through a configuration of events, that includes industry’s consistent unwillingness to pay for training, NCVER’s never-ending desire for more information and data, government use of active social policy and the intermittent conceptualisation of a free market in VET. In a Foucauldian sense, power/knowledge has produced the individual VET consumer in a highly contingent process. There is no suggestion of a groundswell of popular opinion demanding the creation of the individual consumer and, in fact, industry is still opposing a student-demand driven system (Dunckley 2012). But VET’s sheer banality masks its capacity to make perceptible the previously missing student.

The making visible of the individual consumer has been driven by questions of ‘who pays’ and ‘who counts’; but there are other consequences. To be an Australian citizen requires all but the most disadvantaged in society to be a worker. In order to be a worker, a person must also be a consumer. This consumption manifests itself in two ways. The first, and freshly made explicit, is to be a consumer of education and training in order to access employment. The other is participation in the consumption-fuelled economy, using the resources derived from work to purchase goods and services in a free market generating jobs and entrepreneurial employment opportunities (Coombs 1994; Smith 2009). This is seen to be a virtuous cycle (Coombs 1994, 4).
This marketplace operates in an economic structure characterised by strong protection of personal and property rights, rational choice-making and individual self-regulation. The citizen-worker-consumer link defines the relationship between the individual and the state in an advanced market democracy. Crucially, there is no apparent end to this type of consumptive relationship. Lifelong learning is seen to be an ongoing project of individual self-improvement, guided by self-regulation achieved through the consumption of VET (Cort 2009, 102-104; Northern Territory Employment and Training Authority 1996, 6; Productivity Commission 2011b, vii).

**The significance of consumption**

Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer (Smith 2009, 1603).

Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, the first systematic and inclusive scheme to explain “how the market kept society together”, was developed nearly 250 years ago (Heilbroner 1999, 73). For Smith, “the great intended beneficiary of the system is the consumer – not the producer. For the first time in the philosophy of everyday life, the consumer is king” (Heilbroner 1999, 73).

The usurpation of the role of consumer in the Australian VET market by industry created and perpetuated a public secret that allowed for the shifting of training costs. This was abetted by public authorities who were willing to allocate tax revenues for industry’s self-proclaimed consumption. The provision of tax-payer dollars for training has been described as a public subsidy to these producers of goods and services and, in the future, individual citizens (Skills Australia 2011, 2). Increased profits can be had by industry if the cost of skilling the workforce can be shifted elsewhere. As long as governments were willing to subsidise training, industry was both happy and able to claim the position of consumer, while hiding its
responsibility as producer of VET policy and consequent leadership of the system. Corporatist domination of the National Training System places the needs of the producer ahead of the invisible individual student consumer of VET. This situation has significant social ramifications because work not only defines our human nature but “we also realise ourselves through the labour of consumption” (Noble 2004, 235). VET becomes a personal technique used in the regulation of individuality.

Smith recognised that monopolies and collusion between producers to increase prices would be the likely outcome of unfettered capitalism driven by self-interest in free markets. He imagined two solutions to counter these restrictive practices. The first was to provide the population with high levels of education, so that they could obtain and process information in order to make knowledgeable choices between producers or have the skills to resist predatory behaviour (Herman 2003, 210). The second, and least preferred, was to have governments regulate the market to protect consumers’ interests. “To Adam Smith the least government was certainly the best: governments are spendthrift, irresponsible and unproductive” (Heilbroner 1999, 68). Smith did, however, recognise the need for governments to provide national security, the administration of justice and non-profitable infrastructure or services that were advantageous to society.98

In an advanced market democracy, there is constant debate concerning the appropriate balance of benefits that takes into consideration the profits of private companies and businesses, the public good and individual gain. The reappearance of the individual as a consumer of VET was an attempt to rebalance this equation. This early 21st century discourse is based upon the human capital proposition that obtaining a VET qualification at higher levels confers personal benefit to the individual in the form of increased wages. Consequently, it is economically rational

98 In VET these are commonly represented as Community Service Obligations (CSOs) or ‘thin markets’ (Skills Australia 2011, 70) and are frequently cited as reasons to maintain a public training sector (Evans 2011b, 2011c).
behaviour for each person to invest in their education in order to be a citizen-worker-consumer. Adam Smith’s contribution, through his description of how capitalism operates, provides the foundations for this dynamic contest between the classic liberal belief in the benefits of the free market, the prosperity of the economically rational choice-making consumer and a permanent distrust of government. Australia’s rather unique adaptation of Smith’s views frequently gives more weight to public good-style arguments. Australians prefer to governmentalise and discount Smith’s deep distrust of governments. Every residents’ ‘entitlement’ to an initial publicly-funded VET qualification comes from public good thinking.

While he agreed with Smith’s position that “consumption provided the great floor of economic activity” (Heilbroner 1999, 275), the esteemed economist, John Maynard Keynes, envisaged a more positive and direct role for governments to influence consumption in times of economic recession or depression. For Keynes, governments can and should participate in the market directly and do more than serve as a neutral umpire. In the Australian VET market, a purist’s application of Keynes’ views of the economic role of the state would position State and Territory governments as the major consumers of VET services (Beddie 2010, 4) because it is public money that purchased $7.9 billion of training in 2011. However, industry’s public secret also serves to suppress any sustained consideration of this point.

It was a Keynesian view of the economic consequence of consumption upon a nation’s wealth that guided the proposed actions for the Commonwealth Government which were detailed in Australia’s 1945 White Paper on Full Employment (Coombs 1994). Prime Minister Curtin placed consumption at the centre of an extensive and integrated national approach to shifting the Australian economy from a war-time footing to a peace-time production of goods and services permitting everyone to have a job. Direct government action in re-training returned military personnel (Dymock & Billett 2010), prioritisation of raw materials distribution
to industry, coordinating State activities in training and infrastructure development, were all aimed at avoiding a repeat of the financial depression that followed World War One. The Commonwealth Government would monitor and coordinate Federal and State public expenditure to “provide a demand for the total production of which the economy is capable when it is fully employed” (Coombs 1994, 31).

Curtin recognised the constitutional limitations upon the efficacy of the Commonwealth Government and proposed special arrangements, such as State Premier’s Conferences, to ensure aligned national action to use the country’s “increasing wealth for gradual expansion of consumption” while avoiding rampant inflation (Coombs 1994, 32). The Prime Minister said, “It will be the Government’s policy to ensure that this increased consumption, while raising the living standards generally, will benefit most those whose need is greatest” (Coombs 1994, 32). The post-war vision required citizens to be consumers to create demand for production. This in turn would create jobs, allowing workers to acquire the resources to consume because “the workplace is a site of consumption as well as production” (Noble & Lupton 1998, 804). In order to stimulate yet more employment, governments needed to pursue policies of full employment in order to increase consumption, leading to improved national prosperity and sustaining this positive feedback loop. Full employment became a subordinated means to facilitate the driver of free market economies – consumption.

Goal displacement

Australian governments’ relentless bipartisan pursuit of full employment policy in a market-driven democracy yields a not uncommon display of goal displacement (Hill & Hupe 2002, 122; Lipsky 1980, 44, 144). Adam Smith’s positioning of consumption as the sole reason for production, reiterated by Prime Minister Curtin, was somehow forgotten or over-looked in the pursuit of providing a job for everyone deemed
capable of working. Employment replaced consumption as a crucial goal in creating and maintaining Australian economic prosperity as well as expressing a person’s citizenship.

The long-standing workers’ welfare state was always an arrangement between the interest associations of employers, unions and government. Similarly, the bold plan to restructure the entire economy envisaged in *Australia Reconstructed* (Department of Trade, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) & Trade Development Council (TDC) 1987) was based upon this same triumvirate enacting quite specific roles. The training to develop the skills of the workforce required by industry was part of government’s contribution delivered through State-owned and operated TAFE systems as a public service. There was no capitalist-style market in VET envisaged in the 1980s and, therefore, no need to have an individual consumer of the service. The Kangan Report did attempt to focus training effort at the individual level, but the politico-economic environment was not yet ready to accept a shift from corporatised behaviour. Other circumstances would have to materialise, such as income-contingent loans in higher education (Chapman 1998; Mather 2012b), the introduction of private providers of VET (Australian National Training Authority 1994a, 18, 32) and the wide-spread application of human capital theory to areas previously considered to be social (Becker 1993, 21).

Much has been written and spoken about the place of the individual in the Kangan conception of national skills requirements (Goozee 2001, 25; Kearns & Hall 1994, 2-3; Kinsman 2009; Wheelahan 2010, 7). It has been argued that those who have chosen to put an ‘educational’ (as opposed to an ‘economic’) interpretation of Kangan’s individual overlook a crucial point being made in the report (Zoellner 2011, 7). The chair of the review committee, Myer Kangan, was “a shrewd and very competent public servant” (Goozee 1994, 15). Kangan’s view of the individual was always framed in terms of each person’s capacity to be a contented, productive and
flexible worker in pursuit of the economic aims of their employer (Kangan 1964). He wrote that “The aim of personnel management is to develop a satisfied labour force which will be efficient” (Kangan 1964, 9). The ‘training function’ was one of the key tools available to a personnel manager in the creation of a fulfilled and productive labour force. Individual satisfaction and development were important to Kangan, but only as part of a much larger framework of employer needs, economic efficiency and national development.

In one of the many paradoxes that have surfaced in this narrative of training, I argue that in spite of the Kangan Report’s emphasis upon the individual, the net result of implementing the review’s recommendations rendered the VET student invisible. Certainly, the Kangan Report makes no mention of the individual as a consumer. For that review committee, the proposition to supply Commonwealth Government funding to the States for TAFE was premised on the economic necessity to improve workforce skill levels – to produce citizen-workers.

The Kangan Report provided the justification and framework to transfer Commonwealth Government funds to the States and to consensually overcome the constitutional difficulties of the Federal Government intervening in a reserved State-level responsibility. This capacity to shift money between governments, and the bureaucratic battles over funding decisions and training policy that would follow, did not require the presence of the individual as a consumer. The Kangan heritage, in spite of its focus upon the individual in the report, only served to postpone the making visible of the consumer. In what would become a more common approach, those who were enacting VET policy in response to Kangan traded personal learning for an institutional process (Billett 2010, 1).

Even though Australia has an idiosyncratic desire and capacity to governmentalise functions such as training, international influences are evident in many of the
national landmark reports (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974; Department of Labour and National Service 1969; Department of Trade, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) & Trade Development Council (TDC) 1987). In particular, the impact of UNESCO and OECD views that complete human fulfilment would come about through people meeting their commitments as both citizens and workers found a comfortable acceptance in the framing of Australian training policy (Dawkins 1989b; Fooks 1994, 39). The displaced goal of creating citizen-workers has been a bipartisan activity and has more recently been extended to encompass “working families” (Australian Council of Trade Unions 2011, 4). Accompanying this valorisation of the Australian citizen-worker is also an internationally unique ‘apparent hostility’ to unemployment benefits being paid by governments, with nearly 30 per cent of the population viewing ‘dole bludgers’ (i.e., the unemployed) as objects of blame and anger, due to their lack of contribution to society (Eardley & Matheson 1999, 10-11, 29). There is also a ‘noticeable propensity’ to attribute at least part of the responsibility for being unemployed to choices made by the individual (Eardley & Matheson 1999; Whitfield 1987, 22).

To be an Australian is to be a worker. The government-sanctioned discourses designed for the public representation of employment and training programs reinforces this foundational expectation at every turn. We have Australian Apprentices instead of plain apprentices. They must register with an Australian Apprenticeship Centre to record and monitor their training. This training is formally recognised by the Australian Qualifications Framework. Previously, they may have attended an Australian Technical College and been employed under conditions set out in an Australian Workplace Agreement. Industrial disputes could be referred to the tribunal Fair Work Australia for resolution.99 The unemployed seek work through Job Services Australia. The quality of the training system is regulated through the

99 From January 2013, this body is known as the Fair Work Commission.
Australian Skills Quality Authority as part of a newly proposed Australian Vocational Qualification System. The major provision of training advice to the Commonwealth Government came from Skills Australia prior to it becoming the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency. To be a worker is at the very core of being a citizen.

In common with the Kangan Report, *Australia Reconstructed* did not envisage the individual as a consumer of VET. The conduct of the national economy, including skilling the workforce, was an activity carried out by the troika of industry, unions and governments guided by the European version of active social policy. The citizen’s responsibility was to be a worker. If economic or social factors increased unemployment, government-funded training programs would be used to impart new, industry-endorsed knowledge and skills to pave the way for individuals to return to the workforce. Rather than being envisaged as a consumer-responsive arrangement, the training system of the 1980s was designed to produce workers displaying industry-friendly attributes and a desire for continual retraining.

The centrality of work and the proclaimed need to develop a more skilled and responsive workforce was strongly aligned with the revamping of Australia’s economy in the late 1980s and 1990s. VET’s capacity to be a solution to virtually any problem saw it become deeply intertwined with broader economic and workplace changes, such as industrial award restructuring and modernisation, enterprise bargaining, increases in productivity and the impact of the floating currency (Deveson 1990; Northern Territory Archives Service 1984-1991e). As pointed out in their interviews, former NT Education Minister, Shane Stone, and former chair of the National Board of Employment, Education and Training, Gregor Ramsey, claimed the Commonwealth minister, John Dawkins, used all of his persuasive powers, as well as the occasional threat to withdraw funding to the States and Territories (Northern Territory Archives Service 1985-1990), to
implement the corporatised approach to training. Dawkins’s enthusiastic representation of the Hawke-Keating Federal Labor Government’s views reiterated the centrality of work to conceptions of citizenship and continued the invisibilisation of the individual in the policy process.

None of Dawkins’s major ministerial statements refer to the individual as a consumer (Dawkins 1988a, 1988b, 1989a; Dawkins & Holding 1987). For the Labor Federal Government, the National Training System had the ultimate aim of producing the citizen-worker. One of the major advisory bodies to his government was the Employment and Skills Formation Council, about which Dawkins (1993, 10) observed: “I always thought that the major role of the Council was really to make the link between education and training on the one hand and the world of work on the other”. His views were equally unambiguous in his opening address to an OECD education and training conference in Paris, when he told the audience:

This conference is organised around three themes: the first, and most vital for the longer term, concerns initial education and the preparation of our young people for working life (Dawkins 1989b, 11 emphasis in original).

As Australia pursued the creation of a nationally consistent training system, the ultimate beneficiary of market economies – the consumer – was supplanted by the production of citizen-workers who would provide industry with ‘work-ready’ labour, paid for by public funds. The myth of industry being the consumer of VET, even though most of the training of apprentices and trainees was paid for by governments, allowed for no consideration of the individual other than as an output of the system. This situation was made operational with the establishment of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard. AVETMISS was purposely designed to make the individual invisible to the
bureaucracy (Australian Committee on Vocational Education and Training Statistics 1993, 70). This was done for two major reasons. The first reflected a general distrust of what governments might do with an individual’s information that had arisen from the Australia Card debate described in Chapter Eight. The second reason was much more practical.

AVETMISS was designed to capture statistical information on the whole VET population instead of using sampling techniques. By using various econometric calculations based upon this comprehensive and statistically significant data set, the need to actually see an individual was removed. The system was constructed to identify, through statistical calculation, disadvantaged groups requiring special attention (Dawkins 1988a; Dawkins & Holding 1987) and to focus upon the numbers and levels of qualifications being issued by the system (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011d). As long as the public secret of industry leadership of training policy production remained unchallenged, industry-dominated bodies could specify numerical quotas of the types of qualifications that were thought to be in demand and government would fund that number of positions in registered training organisations. To the industry-specified positions would be added provision for the statistically problematised equity groups, all funded by public dollars. The individual was not important until the creation of a training market and its restless logic of capitalist consumption and its fellow traveller, human capital theory, re-surfaced. This allowed for the citizen to be reconceptualised not only as a worker, but also as a consumer making rational choices for personal transformation.

**Appearance of the VET consumer**

The Australian version of the individual consumer of VET is not an inevitable outcome of a grand plan on the part of capitalistic governments. Marxist and social democratic economies equally require consumers. Since the early 1990s, in
Australia’s advanced market democracy the various bureaucratic structures (such as authorities, government departments or ministerial companies) that have come and gone have all had a stated but unrealised goal of creating a market-driven training system.

As first theorised by Adam Smith in the 1770s and re-iterated by Prime Minister Curtin at the end of World War Two, the constant expansion of consumption is crucial in the pursuit of economic prosperity. This requires a social order where “consumers are constituted as actors seeking to maximise the quality of their life” (Rose 1996b, 162). From the mid-1980s consumption came to be defined by the language of freedom, autonomy and choice (Miller & Rose 2008, 48). The combined impact of the desire to implement a market for VET (Kemp 1998; Robinson & Kenyon 1998), the application of market principles into areas that had previously been considered to be a public good (Allais 2010, 9; Pusey 1991, 175) and the broad acceptance of human capital theory and its notions of self-investment and improvement (Foucault 2008, 227), have all contributed the making visible of the individual consumer of VET. The so-called student-demand driven entitlement system requires individuals to make consumptive choices in pursuit of the qualifications needed to be a worker and citizen. Choice-driven markets also seriously undermine the traditional access to the VET discourse that accompanies corporatist VET policy, by rebalancing the complex web of power/knowledge relationships between the individual and the state.

Even though the consistent failure of government to achieve intended policy outcomes – such as a VET free-market model – may be viewed by some as an undesirable outcome, it actually plays an important purpose (Miller & Rose 2008, 17). The creative destruction wreaked by capitalism (Herman 2003, 130; Schumpeter 2012, location 1782), when joined with the generic Liberal distrust of government, allows for the flushing of old programs and solutions and creates a
space for different problematisations to be developed. The continual reform of VET is a prime example of the cycle of failure and creative production in advanced market democracies. While the constant changes in VET have been criticised (Beddie & Curtin 2010; Kinsman 2009; Schofield 2009), it has been argued that these only represent normal cycles of government activity (Zoellner 2011, 8), coming from the productive forces of power/knowledge making the space for the citizen-worker-consumer.

The advent of the individual VET consumer has not been a straight forward exercise. One of the key tasks expected from the 1992 establishment of the Australian National Training Authority was the creation of a training market (Australian National Training Authority 1993, 27). Given this priority, it seems rather odd that the first annual report from ANTA does not mention the words consume or consumer (Australian National Training Authority 1996a). However, by 1998, the ambiguous term ‘client’ features prominently in ANTA’s annual performance report (Australian National Training Authority 1998a, 2-4, for example).

By 2003, a brief mention of consumers of VET, identified as either groups of students or employers, is made in the ANTA annual report and the now ubiquitous ‘client’ is defined: “the system’s clients are learners, their employers and the communities in which they live” (Australian National Training Authority 2004, 10). In other words – everyone. The word client is most often used in the plural and frequently appears in the form of ‘client groups’ throughout the document. The individual was yet to be viewed as a consumer because ANTA was still using the corporatist conception of the VET system established to deal with problematised groups, such as unemployed youth, illiterates, immigrants, women or Aboriginal Australians. As with VET itself, the word client is a contested concept because it is

100 This report does mention ‘choice’, which can serve as a proxy for consumer. However, the use of ‘choice’ is most frequently used in reference to a funding category called ‘User Choice’, which gives employers a limited choice of training provider.
used as if it actually means something profound. In fact, it can have multiple meanings (cf Bacchi 2011). Individuals remained invisible to ANTA right up until its demise in 2005. The creative destruction of ANTA allowed for new subjects for problematisation, such as the individual consumer, to come into the considerations of governments. Expertise in the discourse of VET transferred from those holding the long-standing tripartite corporatist view to much more market-oriented contributors.

Industry was seen as a both a client and consumer of vocational education and training by ANTA. The fundamental producer-consumer contradiction that militated against the introduction of the VET market was maintained by industry’s public secret. This is that industry leads the VET system through its dominant position on committees, boards and authorities, as well as through occupational licensing and registration. In other words, industry is the producer of skilled workers. If industry is the producer, it cannot logically be the consumer. That would create a monopoly over both supply and demand. In order for a free market to operate efficiently, driven by self-interested choice-making and competition, the two roles are fundamentally different. As pointed out by Smith, producers will take every possible advantage over consumers – in VET’s case even by usurping their position.

This can explain the inability of both major political parties to introduce a free market into VET over the past two decades, in spite of clearly stated policy intention. In the National Training System, government’s congenital failure has arisen because of confusion between the roles of consumer and producer, masked by the public secret of industry leadership.

However, this situation changed when the Commonwealth Government removed VET policy advice from its department and created Skills Australia in 2008. This arm’s length organisation’s discourse narrowed the clients of the National Training
System to “individuals” and “enterprises” (Skills Australia 2009, 67). Unlike ANTA, Skills Australia brought the economically rational choice-making individual out of obscurity, when supporting the need for an intergovernmental agreement between the States, Territories and Commonwealth seeking “improved consumer information to assist choice” (Skills Australia 2009, 6).

Phrases such as ‘consumer demands’, ‘consumer protection’, ‘consumer-led demand’, ‘consumer policy’, ‘consumer choice’ and ‘consumer information’ litter the first major policy positions put forward by Skills Australia (2009) in *Foundations for the future*. Adam Smith’s traditional capitalist market principles became more evident in training policy. The VET consumer is becoming more important than the producer. Also in keeping with Smith’s views, increased knowledge (in the form of RTO and system performance data) will be given to the consumer and, if required, more government mandated regulation of the sector will be enforced (Skills Australia 2009, 81). With the release of the next major policy document, *Skills for Prosperity* (Skills Australia 2011), any possible ambivalence towards the individual as consumer well and truly disappeared:

> We take the term *student entitlement* to mean a system whereby individual students are ensured a publicly funded place in a VET program. In this report, however, a student entitlement system is assumed also to be demand-based where the resources are allocated on the basis of student choice rather than directly to the provider (Skills Australia 2011, 35 emphasis in original).

In a demonstration of industry’s continued influence and leadership over the National Training System, the making visible of the individual student consumer does not obviate the position of the client. Skills Australia (2011, 157) believes students are the main client of schools and universities, “unlike VET that has two
main clients – industry and students”. However, these dual clients “may sometimes have different objectives” (Skills Australia 2011, 158).

What we witnessed was a demonstration of the productive capacity of government to re-problematise and identify a new target for action – the individual consumer of VET. This represented a shift from an individual with citizen’s rights to one endowed with consumer’s rights (Bacchi 2009, 225). The making of the citizen-worker-consumer of training reinforces the link between the economic health of the nation and the personal choices made by individuals (Miller & Rose 2008, 175). This individual becomes accountable for not only making decisions that are in their own personal interest but also in responsibly exercising choice that improves the national economic prospects. In keeping with human capital theory, this also means being an entrepreneur of the self in a perpetual display of normalised social and economic behaviour and using common sense technologies such as VET.

The re-introduction of consumption re-defined VET’s role as a both a practise of government and a technique of the self that provides individuals with yet more opportunities for choice-making in the pursuit of self-regulation and behaving in a socially desirable manner. Governments have been prepared to actively intervene in this training quasi-market, to encourage individuals to make ‘appropriate’ choices through provision of apprentice wage subsidies in specified fields, licensing and registration, direct financial grants to apprentices for work clothing and tools, VET-in-Schools programs and targeted enterprise-specific training through the Productivity Places Program and the National Workforce Development Fund.

**Implications of consumerism in VET**

What does it mean to have individual consumers of VET in Australia? In crassly commercial terms, the conjoining of the citizen-worker-consumer allows for the individual to share in the costs of procuring training by shifting the balance away
from private profit and public good towards perceptions of personal benefit. As described by Dawkins (2009), industry never wants to pay for training. Governments have also looked to ways to reduce expenditure in training (Dodd 2013b; Ross 2012b). This has allowed for problematisation to focus upon the personal gain that comes from having higher levels of skills and a financial calculation of its net worth, as described by human capital theory. One goal is to have the individual pay for some of their training, through the introduction of a student entitlement model. In my professional career, the discourse about who pays for training has shifted from perceiving it as an unquestioned public good, which ensured that governments funded training, to one where the individual is expected to invest in their own skills development, even if that means borrowing against potential future earnings in order to train. In addition, there has been a further rebalancing of the funding narrative, with the introduction of co-contribution models of funding incorporating both private and public sources of funding (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 62).

Given that Australian labour market theory is dominated by the neoclassical focus upon individual choice-making in a free market (Whitfield 1987, 18), it is somewhat surprising that it took so long for the discourse of the consumer to appear in VET. The Australian preference to governmentalise functions has delayed this development. However, rendering visible the individual consumer, who chooses the type and occupational field of training in order to improve their own human capital, comes with a threat. This *Homo oeconomicus*, the economically rational choice-maker, removes the centralised ability of the sovereign state to exert coercion in the pursuit of political economy (Foucault 2008, 292). In spite of the notorious inability of governments to plan and implement labour market projections and programs (Bullock 2009), leaving the nation’s skill needs to the whims of pimply-faced 16 year-old school dropouts, the long-term unemployed and the various disadvantaged
groups, places a major hurdle in front of the implementation of student-demand driven market in training. The lack of order, accountability and auditability are too hard to contemplate for the bureaucrats and their expert systems that have evolved in the move to governmentalise training.

VET did have its own early flirtation with choice-making through a policy of “User Choice” (Australian National Training Authority 1996c). User Choice preserved both industry’s secretive leadership and government funding subsidisation, as it provided a mechanism for the employer to choose the RTO which governments would then pay to train apprentices. This dabble with market principles, however, was extremely limited because industry was conceptualised as the client, the fields of training were tightly specified and the geographical location of RTOs often served to make so-called choice impractical, particularly in regional and remote localities.

The shift of focus in VET, from the tripartite institutional level to the individual problematised as a consumer, followed a rather inexorable path, given that governments in advanced market democracies have exercised their will to govern through the development of wills to empower and train. Empowerment is represented as an exercise of personal decision-making; to make choices is to be empowered. There has been a relentless extension of choice into more and more aspects of the citizen’s life resulting, paradoxically, in a less social citizen who is expected to make decisions that are consistent with community expectations and obligations. What develops is “an individual whose citizenship is to be maintained through the free exercise of personal choice among a variety of options” (Rose 1999a, 230). People are expected to create a normal lifestyle through their own personal labour, operating “within a sphere of consumption” dominated by signs and images (Rose 1999a, 230). Consumption also locates individuals “in networks of relationships, objects and spaces” (Noble 2004, 234). And as has already been
described by Foucault, it is in these webs of complex relationships where power/knowledge is actioned.

As the National Training System has matured, the policy focus has been upon creating and consecrating the signs of VET, instead of upon the actual transfer of technical and occupational skills. The registration and external quality audits of training providers are not concerned with skills transfer but solely with being able to assure industry and the public that the qualification issued by the RTO is to a nationally consistent standard.\textsuperscript{101} The certificate or diploma is a sign of training and is what the consumer acquires as a product of having ‘done’ VET. Likewise, occupational licensing and registration furnishes yet another symbol that serves to verify the individual’s credentials in the labour market. The documents are intrinsically worthless; however, their value arises from serving as signs of training undertaken by the VET consumer.

Positioning the individual as a consumer places even more responsibility upon the National Training System to protect the value of the signs of VET. The national institutions of the VET system each have a precise role to guarantee the quality and usefulness of VET’s signs and images to government and the public (National Skills Standards Council 2012a). Qualifications are safeguarded by the Australian Qualifications Framework; training packages are developed and defended by the various Industry Skills Councils; the National Skills Standards Council and the Australian Skills Quality Authority determine and regulate national standards for RTOs and NCVER prioritises accuracy and timeliness of the data it collects about

\textsuperscript{101} In early 2013, there are 11 current national standards for registration only one of which refers to teaching and assessment (\url{http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/F2013L00167}). The definition of learning stated in these standards “is the process used by the learner” (page 6). Standards for teaching and assessment are broken into five subsections: a continuous improvement strategy, meeting the requirements of the relevant training package or course, industry consultation regarding staff, facilities and materials to meet training package requirements, a process for recognition of prior learning and staff characteristics. Each is an input activity and none directly address what might be described as educational activities or outcomes (Billett 2010).
the VET system. None of these bodies is solely focused upon skills transfer but each play a vital role in developing and guarding the symbols of VET that will be consumed by the newly visible type of citizen. The problematising of the ‘integrity of VET qualifications’ also challenges the place of the individual as a consumer of training by limiting competition in the marketplace. The establishment of redesigned national standards will serve to strictly regulate the market by intentionally removing a significant number of the existing 5,000 registered training organisations and severely limiting access to proposed new licenses to train (National Skills Standards Council 2013a, 23-45).  

Social functions of VET consumption

The creative combination of governments with a will to train their respective populations and the capitalist ideation of the consumer gives rise to Baudrillard’s view that “consumption – not production – is the basis for social order” (Horrocks & Jevtic 1996, 9). In a manner similar to training, an intellectual narrative accomplished through endless repetition in everyday speech have given consumption such a “force of common sense” that “the only objective reality is the idea of consumption” (Baudrillard 1998, 193). The insertion of the consumer into a whole range of social functions, such as education, training or health, allows consumption to also serve as a process of classification and social differentiation (Mol 2008).

Bourdieu (1979) has demonstrated that various socio-economic classes consume in different, but highly predictable, patterns that reflect and reinforce their social and economic capital. These configurations of consumption differentiate between groups of people and serve to identify them. Each individual needs to know the codes of

\[102\] In keeping with the prevailing logics that accompany the governmentisation of VET, the National Skills Standards Council proposes to replace RTOs with LTOs – licensed training organisations – as a badge issued to providers indicating their alignment with greater levels of national regulation and inspection.
consumption because “consumption is an active, collective behaviour” that demonstrates “group integration” (Baudrillard 1998, 81). Given the Australian proclivity to define citizenship in terms of being a worker and the associated need for the right kind of training to gain entry into the workforce, the role of consumption of training signs reiterates VET’s importance to the behaviour of citizens.

The signs and images of VET, in spite of repeated attempts to counter the perception, are deemed to be inferior to those from universities (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974; Billett 2011; Bradley et al. 2008; Wheelahan 2011a). While some see this as a problem, it ignores the reality that, unlike universities, and because training is an undeniable good, VET is supposed to be for everyone and is a very useful programmatic option used by governments to solve virtually every problem. There is no scarcity associated with these qualifications that serves to increase their value (Australian Public Service Commission 2007, 11-12). VET’s signs and symbols provide the pathway for every member of society to realise their full citizenship as a worker-consumer if, and this is a very big if, they choose rationally and correctly. In support of this position, the newly visible VET consumer now has an “entitlement” (Council of Australian Governments 2012, 7) to initial training and they will be empowered to make the ‘right’ choice through an agenda of greater transparency (National Skills Standards Council 2012b, 3).

Consumerism also provides a rationale for socially acceptable behaviour based upon ‘public munificence’ (Baudrillard 1998, 3). By engendering a myth of service, expenditure by governments upon private individuals can ostensibly be used as a method “to reduce the inequality of distribution of resources” in society (Baudrillard 1998, 37). The making visible of the individual consumer of VET has facilitated the relabelling of government funded training as “publicly subsidised training” (National Skills Standards Council 2012b, 2). The Unique Student Identifier will enable
measurement of the quantity and level of the subsidised training signs consumed by each individual and record this as a private consumption of public generosity. The monitoring of VET consumption will guide governments’ intervention in the market with wage subsidies or other incentives, withdrawal of social welfare benefits, (increasingly) imprisonment or by limiting access to other programs such as the Disability Support Pension. These types of interventions are aimed at ensuring the VET consumers make ‘rational choices' that meet industry’s self-proclaimed needs.

The nation’s prosperity is the accumulation of these signs of consumption and the happiness they confer on each individual (Baudrillard 1998, 31). In post-modern society, it is the duty of each and every citizen to consume in order to share in the national affluence. The responsibilised citizen-worker-consumer is obliged to partake of the public largesse and no longer has the right to be unhappy (Baudrillard 1998, 80). Each and every individual must be involved in the continual activity of consumption of VET, or other educational signs, in order to be a worker and gain the resources to support perpetual expenditure. And they are expected to do so cheerfully, as an empowered citizen of an advanced market democracy (Cruikshank 1999). VET facilitates the power/knowledge relationships between empowered and trained citizens and the state.

The obligation of populations to continually consume the signs of training has an extensive pedigree, commencing with ‘lifelong learning’ in the World War Two-era Walker Report (Tannock 1975). The Kangan Report (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974) made ‘recurrent training’ one of its policy centrepieces by proposing that training should be made available at any stage of one’s life, in order to have the necessary skills to be a worker. The same sentiments were re-imported from Europe in the form of ‘lifelong learning’ (Cort 2009; Department of Trade, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) & Trade Development Council (TDC) 1987), which was to become a permanent feature of
Lifelong learning’s mundanity and common sense characteristics, causing no one to speak against it, make VET into a highly effective mediator of power/knowledge relationships because “perpetual training tends to replace the school and continuous control to replace the examination. In societies of control, no one is ever done with anything” (Deleuze 2009, 91). The mutually accepted technology of VET is available to both individuals and governments and structures their relationships.

The ‘active society’ concepts that underpin Australia’s bipartisan approach to social welfare and labour market programs are intertwined with lifelong learning (Cooper 2011, 18; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2005, 5-6).

The unemployed individual’s responsibility to become an entrepreneur of the self is made operational through expectations of mutual obligation, activity agreements that demonstrate job seeking behaviours and intensive case management by government-contracted employment brokers. If an individual becomes visible to government by requesting unemployment benefits, they are frequently forced to become a consumer of formal training. Recurrent or lifelong learning ensures the production of a permanent pool of VET consumers transforming themselves.

The problematisation of literacy and numeracy skills has also contributed to an insatiable demand for training because “around 50 per cent of Australians have been assessed as having literacy and/or numeracy scores below the minimum standard needed to manage the complex demands of life and work” (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 83). This lack of basic skills is too important to be left to market forces. Each of AWPA’s recommendations to address this ‘mainstream issue’ require action by governments informed by the now familiar processes of gathering of yet more population data, this time in the form of a regular

In order to be eligible for social welfare benefits, intending recipients are ‘obliged’ to undertake certain activities that demonstrate they are actively seeking employment and are not being ‘dole bludgers’.
large-scale survey of literacy and numeracy skills, and normalising the need to acquire these skills through the use of "workplace champions", inevitably to be funded by the Commonwealth Government (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 92). More importantly in terms of public policy’s influence on behaviour, the discursive formation of these burdensome and unskilled citizens is based upon their apparent incapacity to make rational economic choices to improve their literacy and numeracy. Such a large problematic group demands government intervention and the paradoxical integration of the totalising and centralised disciplinary variations of training with the individualised modes of self-management (Oksala 2007, 97).

**The consumer’s burden**

The need for increasing levels of consumption is supported through the provision of credit as an economic right of citizenship. The provision of a loan transfers a basic psychological desire or need onto an economic plane. Financial advances ensure that “they buy so that society can continue to produce, this is so they can continue to work and this, in turn, so that they can pay for what they have bought” (Baudrillard 1996, 160). The obligation of the citizen-worker-consumer to accumulate the signs of VET has been freshly supplemented by the use of credit mechanisms. Students who exhaust their publicly subsidised entitlement to training will be able to access income contingent loans in order to obtain qualifications in another field or at higher levels (Council of Australian Governments 2012, 25).\(^\text{104}\)

The extension of income contingent loans further serves to shift the cost of training to the individual and even further away from industry, as the risk of failure to repay

\(^{104}\) Income contingent loans first appeared in the 1980s as a unique Australian creation previously known as the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) (Mather 2012b). It is a mechanism to shift part of the cost of higher education (and now VET) to the student by offering up-front loans in order to remove disincentives that limit course enrolment, particularly for lower socio-economic groups. Repayment commences when the person’s income exceeds a certain level, currently about $51,000. It is recognised that some individuals will not repay the loan as their income will never achieve the threshold.
the loan is solely born by the public purse. It also means that many individuals commence their working life with a considerable level of debt that might limit their access to further credit-fuelled consumption.

The simultaneous manufacture of poverty is one of the undiscussed side effects of capitalist conceptions of endless economic growth based upon ever-increasing consumption (Baudrillard 1998, 56; Wacquant 2009, location 491). While advanced market democracies are supposed to engineer the disappearance of social and economic inequalities, there remains a group of people who are ‘residually impoverished’, no matter how much growth is induced (Baudrillard 1998, 51). Even the extension of credit to this group does not make them consumers. The inability to transform these persons into entrepreneurs of themselves renders them dangerous. There is no place in consumer society for either savers, those who refuse to consume, or “anarchic consumers”, who exercise their own will to determine if, when and how they will consume (Baudrillard 1998, 82).

The Australian approach to dealing with these citizens has been to gather statistical information about them and use centres of calculation to produce groups that can be problematised and made amenable to training in the VET system. These made-up identities have been variously described as ‘disadvantaged’ (Dawkins & Holding 1987, 15), ‘equity groups’ (Mawer & Jackson 2006, 13) or those who need to be ‘socially included’ (Productivity Commission 2012a, 2). Those who do not accept their inclusion into these groups and/or refuse to become consumers of the VET signs allocated to them are seen to be sceptical and uncooperative people. They may even be capable of “answering back” to the state to protest the way they have been problematised (Shore & Wright 2011, 17). Their resistance can be manifested in many ways, such as refusing to register for unemployment benefits, living on the streets, committing petty crime and refusing to undertake training. By not consuming VET, they cannot be made into citizen-worker-consumers. Even though VET is for
everyone, those who choose not to consume the signs of VET in pursuit of employment and citizenship, with its implied rejection of social discipline, have been made into dangerous individuals that risk incarceration as “clients” of the justice system (Productivity Commission 2002, 548).

**A perilous place and a sudden change**

The free market can be unpredictable and treacherous. Consumers can be capricious and erratic. Or they may even be considered to not have the necessary skills to participate in an efficient market. There is the ever-present potential of market failure contributing to skills shortages (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 46). Student-consumer choice is unlikely to align with the needs of a modern, rapidly changing economy. Industry’s role of the producer of VET policy is exposed by a free market in VET. Suddenly the consumer poses a threat to a wide variety of interests.

Following Foucault’s advice to look for the unexpected masked in the familiar, I made a close examination of the recently published *Future focus: 2013 national workforce development strategy* (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013). One of the conspicuous features of *Future focus*, when compared to most other government documents and national landmark reports, is that it is frequently written in the first person using “we”. This is common to many of the Skills Australia and AWPA documents but remains unusual in governmental writing genres. By focusing upon the use of “we”, as representing the views of Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency experts, a clear attitude towards individual consumers of

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105 In a personal communication, AWPA has indicated that it believes the word “we” conveys two meanings. Firstly, it represents the views of the Board and its corporatist membership. Secondly, it is meant to be an inclusive word that invites others to feel as though they are participating in a conversation. Of course, this interpretation ignores the normalising capacity of this language and how it places those who might have other views in a position of having to personally argue against these government appointed experts.
VET purchasing training in a free market can be inferred. More accurately, AWPA’s rejection of any such conception of individual VET consumers is made visible.

The document contains no reference to a ‘free market’ or a ‘VET market’ and only two mentions of ‘training market’ – both used in references to support increased government regulation to reduce the numbers of training providers. ‘Demand-led’ provision of education and training receives a few more mentions, but these are qualified with phrases such as:

- “difficult to anticipate future supply of qualifications” (p 11)
- “more challenging to model the future supply of qualifications, which may depend more on student demand and less on the rationing of student places” (p 42)
- “although the affordability for SMEs was raised as an issue” (p 62)
- “provided quality is assured” (p 104).

In other words, AWPA is subtly making problematic the student demand-led system that might support a free and competitive market in training. If there was any doubt about the role of the individual, AWPA’s position is unambiguous:

In *Skills for prosperity*, we cited the scores of initiatives – at both national and State levels – directed at preparation for job placement and improved connections between employers and learners. These initiatives encompass a wide range of activities, policies and programs, yet a common success factor in recent years has been recognition of the need to look beyond the development of the individual worker and consider local, organisational and strategic systems (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 63).

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106 SMEs refer to a group of businesses known as Small and Medium Enterprises.
The individual as a consumer of VET has flashed across the policy sky like a briefly significant meteor. During its journey, it captured lots of attention, but its ephemeral attraction has faded. Just as surely, another version will return in the future. However, the use of the first person “we” by AWPA represents the time-honoured threesome of industry, unions and governments reasserting their ownership of the VET discourse. The student consumer of VET disappears and the invisibilisation of the individual resumes – this time as a consequence of problematising the numbers of qualifications required by the economy. In a truly curious statement, the economy becomes the “consumer” of skills symbolised by qualifications (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 28). The forces of governmentalisation may well call their plan for workforce development Future focus, but the corporate eyes are firmly fixed on the rear-vision mirror because “each thing we do or know depends upon that which we already can do or know” (Noble 2004, 234).
Chapter Fourteen

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Market
The individual is the true black box of transparency, the obscure space between information inputs and desirable social outputs.

(Hetherington 2012, 243)

Hey presto!

Now you see it, now you don’t. It took Skills Australia several years adopt the discursive formation that positioned the individual as a choice-making consumer of VET in an advanced market democracy. But since 2012, corresponding with Skills Australia’s reincarnation as a Commonwealth Government agency, the individual consumer has disappeared without a trace. All of the references to student-demand driven consumption of VET, described in the previous chapter, that were to guide training policy are no longer relevant or worthy of mention by the exact same set of people who represented themselves as capitalistic free-marketeers only months earlier.

This about-face in the development of the public policy discourse that structures the National Training System gives a clear indication of how VET has been created and the power/knowledge relationships contained in the assemblage. The public secret of industry leadership of both VET policy production and the consequent flow of public funds is threatened by genuine transparency in support of consumer choice-making in a capitalist-style market for training. In addition, the rebalancing power/knowledge relationships between industry, union and government bodies and informed consumers, operating in an open market with strong price signals, strikes at the core of the historical conceptualisation of Australian VET and its role in active social policy development and implementation. We are witnessing the next skirmish in the development of the VET policy discourse. All this in languages and styles of expertise that are so banal, they command neither media nor academic attention.
As reported frequently throughout this analysis, Australians have a strong preference to governmentalise. Governments are expected to solve problems. This final chapter chronicles how the briefly important individual consumer of VET was rather suddenly re-problematised in such a manner that made this purchaser disappear, without so much as a whimper of public discussion. The mundanity of VET provided the environment for that most difficult political feat, the policy ‘backflip’, being accomplished without debate or questioning. There will not be a free market in VET in Australia because this highly inclusive disciplinary technology to conduct the conduct of the population in ordinary and broadly accepted processes of hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and examination (Foucault 1979, 170) has moved onto and now also incorporates technologies of the self into the assemblage (Foucault 2007a). VET structures the power/knowledge relationship between the individual citizen and the state where disciplinary society is joined by the social control of active citizenship (Deleuze 2009; Miller & Rose 2008, 214-215). Because vocational education and training was defined by what it was not, its public policy positions demonstrate a cosmopolitan capacity to oscillate between disciplinary and self-regulatory techniques. VET is best understood as a technology characterised by ‘both-and’ rather than ‘either-or’.

What is the problem represented to be with the consumer?

Australian governments are driven to seek solutions through the process of problematisation – something has to be presented as problematic to someone, often expressed through a technical language, and with related resolution lying within expert systems. In the Australia of 2013 there are five major government sanctioned, training-related bodies that furnish this expertise and exercise the VET discourse. Each is directed by a sometimes overlapping set of corporatist

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107 The Australian Workplace and Productivity Agency (AWPA), the National Skills Standards Council (NSSC), the Australian Qualifications Framework Council (AQFC), the
ambassadors, who contribute to (and frequently seek to dominate) the VET policy discourse. These bodies administered the last rites to VET consumers partaking in a free market of training by creating a range of problems that are, unsurprisingly, capable of solution through the technical expertise of their own organisation’s capacity and specialisation. The corporatist apparatuses and contrivances have no desire to deal with anarchic consumers and individuals who are capable of answering back and believed to be incapable of conducting themselves normally or rationally. A genuine free market represents danger to the two decades-old web of power/knowledge relationships that have become enshrined in VET that allows it to operate as one of the practises of government that “try to conduct, to determine the behaviour of others” (Foucault cited in Oksala 2007, 68).

For the National Skills Standards Council (2013a, 10), the lack of centralised regulation of the training system will lead to problems with the signs of VET, where “damage to the reputation of Australian vocational education and training and national recognised qualifications represents a significant threat to Australia’s prosperity”. The setting and enforcement of new standards will not only reduce the number of providers who are likely to “behave poorly” (National Skills Standards Council 2013a, 10), but also “assure the integrity of vocational qualifications” (National Skills Standards Council 2013a, 16).

This New Public Management-style of standard setting and auditing can shift the focus from “local cultures of first order practice”, in this case skills transfer and acquisition, to an intense focus upon “the integrity of the structure of self-observation and control” (Power 2000, 115). The forces of governmentalisation have been instrumental in “the creation of industries of checking which satisfy a demand for signals of order” (Power 2000, 118) because a free market is too
chaotic and lacks the predictability and certainty of outcomes sought by politicians, bureaucrats and the Australian public.

Unlike the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, the NSSC allows for the possibility of the individual consumer of VET by referring to "vocational education and training consumers (learners, employers and community)" (National Skills Standards Council 2013a, 12), which is the same definition of clients used by ANTA twenty years earlier (Australian National Training Authority 2004, 10). NSSC also refers to purchasers of training represented by “the learner, government or employer” (National Skills Standards Council 2013a, 5). The prevarication around the definition of a consumer, plus amplified regulatory activity and taking explicit steps to reduce the level of competition in the VET market (National Skills Standards Council 2013a, 46), hardly portends support for a consumer-demand, market-driven system on the part of the NSSC.

Instead of following Adam Smith’s belief that governments should minimally meddle with the market mechanism (Heilbroner 1999, 69), the National Training System has relied upon national standard-setting and audit from its inception with the National Framework for the Recognition of Training in 1992 (David Rumsey and Associates 1993) followed by the Australian Recognition Framework and replaced by four successive versions of the Australian Quality Training Framework (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011g). A current recommendation before governments calls for the establishment of the Australian Vocational Qualification System Quality Framework (National Skills Standards Council 2013a, 24).

Each of the earlier so-called quality schemes created behaviours (forms of cognitive narrowing) on the part of RTOs that focused upon inputs, record-keeping and compliance to technical detail. The rationality of governmentalisation of functions has ensured that the desire of the Australian National Training Authority (1994c, 9)
for “facilitation, not regulation of standards” would never be achieved because
governments must be seen to be active.

In advocating yet more centralised regulation, to ensure consistency and the ever-
elusive contested concept of quality (without fixed meaning but used as if everyone
knows exactly what it is\textsuperscript{108}), the Industry Skills Councils problematise the alleged
lack of industry confidence in the qualifications delivered by registered training
organisations. ISCs are in the business of setting standards through the use of
Training Packages that specify the competencies attested to by the qualifications
issued by training providers. Because of this, their proposed solutions rely upon
greater levels of specification for teaching and assessment processes (Allen
Consulting Group 2013). Like AWPA, the ISCs give no consideration to either
consumers or a free market in VET training. Their recommendation is to apply
standard setting and auditing to the teaching and learning processes that have
previously escaped the attention of those who regulate.

NCVER also remains silent on the matter of a free market for VET. The 2011-2012
Annual Report (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2012a) makes
several generic references to possible consumers of VET (without indication of who
these might be) but stresses NCVER’s long held position that the information and
data provided by the organisation should be of the highest standards, accessible
and used to improve the quality of the VET system, in addition to their persistent call
to collect more data in order to increase transparency in the system.

The Australian Workplace and Productivity Agency problematises the dangerous
individual consumers of VET in a variety of ways that makes them amenable to the
disciplinary technologies used by governments. By using the predominant rationality
of absence, AWPA makes a comprehensive case that anarchic consumers making

\textsuperscript{108} (cf Bacchi 2011)
personal choices in a free market will detract from the quality of education and training systems more generally. For example, student demand-led funding in higher education, which allows for many more citizens to choose to attend university “must not come at the expense of quality” (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 104). Similarly, AWPA envisages a supervisory role for itself in VET-in-Schools, to ensure “that ultimately industry has confidence in the quality of the qualifications delivered” (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 117).

In order to exert significant influence on the discourse of training in the higher education and schooling sectors, AWPA helpfully offers to conduct research and reviews in order to provide advice on threats to quality and to meet the skills outcomes required by industry.

AWPA seeks to eliminate any of the logic associated with individual consumption of training that had been canvassed by the Kangan Report and was reborn with the student entitlement and demand-led provision of training. Using the now familiar rationality of absence, AWPA believes that “Australia could be 2.8 million short of the number of higher-skilled qualifications that industry will demand” (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 9). The interaction of the citizen-workers with the state is reduced to abstractions in the form of the signs of VET – qualifications. The apparition of an individual consumer of VET, replete with consumer rights, threatens the hegemony of industry, unions and governments. Substituting quantifiable and calculable qualification levels and occupations (in the form of absences) disguises the potential for self-transformation inherent in the training system and ignores personal satisfaction or otherwise. Citizen-workers-consumers are expected to be content with the qualifications (and consequent employment options) that have been assigned to them be the workforce experts. This is no place for individual choice.
In addition to valorising qualifications over individuals, AWPA goes to extensive lengths to demonstrate that individual consumers cannot be entrusted with the responsibility of making the ‘right’ choices that will meet the requirements of industry when undertaking training:

Around 50 per cent of Australians have been assessed as having literacy and/or numeracy scores below the minimum standard needed to manage the complex demands of life and work (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 83).

The responses proposed by AWPA to the problems of illiterate and innumerate potential consumers of VET are well known to those who seek to governmentalise (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 83-96). Hierarchical observation is recommended through a regular government funded national sample survey of adult literacy and numeracy levels. Normalising judgement is to be accomplished by another government funded program, to develop a national public awareness program promoting low levels of literacy and numeracy as a “mainstream” issue and a Workplace Champions Program to promote lifelong learning. Examination of those requiring remediation will be done by training more expert literacy and numeracy practitioners, online assessment tools and a national information service to link the problematic group with service providers. Discipline remains a feature to direct self-improvement, but the ‘society of control’ understanding of power/knowledge relationships also is invoked with a recommendation for techniques of the self.

In this demonstration of ever-optimistic governments' will to govern, empower and train, AWPA believes their proposals will bear fruit even though “past initiatives and programs have failed to have significant impact” because “it will build people’s
capacity to self-assess, empowering them to take control of their own LLN\textsuperscript{109} skills development needs" (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 96). The outcome of this range of programs is anticipated to be a responsibilised citizen-worker who will make the ‘correct’ choices from the limited range of options that are officially endorsed by the corporatist leaders of the VET discourse. Both disciplinary and self-management technologies are being invoked in a highly regulated market.

Furthermore, the highly suspect aspirants to citizenship through work require guidance to make the ‘right choices’, in the form of ‘career advice’. As is always the case for those who wish to governmentalise, the absence of information is debilitating. “Currently there is little research or data about career advice, but indications are that access is patchy and quality is variable” (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 13). AWPA advocates the creation of a national brand for career development advice, “so that student interests and those of mobile job seekers can be aligned with industry needs” (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 13). The lack of data does not discourage AWPA from drawing a negative conclusion and raising the spectre of absence of quality as a reason for further government-funded intervention into citizen’s lives, to ensure that their choices are made with reference to the needs of industry, actively discouraging free-willed consumption of training in pursuit of personal goals and ambitions.

There are a number of other recommendations made by AWPA about the possible problems posed by individual consumers of VET. The workers who have jobs also require better and explicit leadership and management on the part of their employers, to ensure increased development of the human capital and its contribution to the firm’s value (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 58). In fact, AWPA believes that instead of individual consumers of VET, there should be “employer ownership of skills” (Australian Workforce and Productivity

\textsuperscript{109} Language, literacy and numeracy.
Agency 2013, 60). The familiar process of creating groups in the population who demand specialised government attention, but not as choice-making consumers, is also used by AWPA. Those who are not citizen-workers and, therefore, not contributing to the aspirational target of 69 per cent workforce participation, includes those with low skills, older workers, men and women segregated in traditionally gendered occupations and the disadvantaged groups such as the disabled, youth, sole parents and Indigenous citizens (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 67-80). AWPA seems to believe these groups cannot use the technologies of the self in an appropriate manner and require coercion and direction.

In another display of the distinctive Australian antipathy towards social welfare programs, *Future focus* singles out the more than 800,000 people on the Disability Support Pension as being in need of more flexibility in determining the individual levels of disability. This is supposed to help men, in particular, as well as all recipients “with disability into work” with the option of moving back onto the pension “quickly and seamlessly” if their health deteriorates (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 74-75). The disabled are not envisaged as consumers of VET. Instead they are a potential addition to the national workforce, who can better meet their obligations of citizenship by moving away from social benefits and into employment. This also represents another significant shift in the policy settings that have made such a large number of people ‘invisible’ to the workforce and its associated training technologies through medicalisation (Wacquant 2009, location 251).

*Future focus* is a consistently well-constructed argument against a VET free market inhabited by individuals who make personal choices about the type, style, quantity and quality of training. Consumers carry too many risks and the outcomes of market-driven approaches are uncomfortably unpredictable for techno-rational planners. A free market is also the antithesis of governments’ will to govern,
empower and train a population of self-managing citizen-workers in the exercise of biopower. Citizens might choose non-linear pathways, turning panel beating and repair skills into graffiti tagging, not the other way around.

In spite of two decades of explicit policy seeking a more market-driven training system, the implications defy contemplation by those currently exerting domination over the VET discourse. The easiest way to deal with the threat posed by free markets and individual consumers is to make the market ideation invisible and remove it from the discursive formation. Free-willed, choice-making citizens may also choose not to become workers by resisting the narrowly defined, yet common sense, needs of industry. For example, the government systems and programs in the Northern Territory struggle to understand how to engage with more traditional Indigenous citizens, who display a semi-nomadic lifestyle and practice ancient cultural customs that do not fit into legally sanctioned workplace standards and definitions of the hours and conditions of employment. This unacceptable behaviour requires modification through the use of prosaic assemblages of governmentalising programs and machinery that have included training and, more recently, prison.

**Discipline and industry’s public secret**

I have argued that the Australian advanced market democracy displays characteristics derived from *The Wealth of Nations* (Smith 2009) and refined through human capital theory (Becker 1993). These position the individual as an economically rational choice-maker who consumes goods and services to improve personal and family well-being and status in a free society, and thereby contributes to national prosperity. The needs and desires of this consumer should be the sole purpose of the process of production, or in this narrative – training.

It has also been argued that Australia has produced its own version of an advanced market democracy that expects governments to solve problems and rejects a
laissez-faire minimalist government. Australian society demands that governments take action through problematising processes that demonstrate wills to govern, empower and train. Governments are expected to provide a disciplined social environment in which citizens can live a (narrowly defined) productive and satisfying life. The ideal socio-economic situation is theorised as a nation-state populated by citizen-worker-consumers.

However, the ongoing influence of the workers' welfare state, active social policy and the priority given to the skills demands of industry, has ensured goal substitution by the citizen-worker, and consequent invisibilisation, of the consumer part of the equation. The Australian penchant for governmentalisation brings with it an expectation of social order predicated upon self-regulating individuals behaving in normal ways. For those individuals who do not conform (ie, are not 'normal'), a range of behaviour-changing technologies are available to mediate the power/knowledge relationship between the population and the state. VET is one such manifestation of this biopower that has been conjoined with ways in which individuals work on themselves. Given VET's inclusive historical development, it is a perfect technology to simultaneously embrace both discipline and self-transformation.

The making visible of economically rational, choice-making consumers of VET presents a threat to most of the current organisational entities that are party to the Australian National Training System. With nearly two-thirds of all VET students enrolled in government operated RTOs (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2012b, 7), these training providers have nothing to gain from increased market competition, notwithstanding that the State government owners in some jurisdictions are reducing funding for their training systems (Ross 2012a, 2012b). The other major group of RTOs, dualistically lumped together as private providers, have also actively resisted attempts to promote more open markets that provide
greater amounts of information to potential consumers (Australian Council for Private Education and Training 2012).

Certainly, industry does not wish to have its public secret of leading VET policy (along with the possibility that they are not very good at it, giving rise to the need for continual reform) and related funding arrangements subjected to greater scrutiny. Similarly, the major national bodies that meet to hold the VET discourse perceive no advantage in allowing a voice for individual consumers that might disturb the deeply ingrained corporatist arrangements for the provision of advice to governments and the monitoring of its programs. If there is any doubt as to who should be participating in discussions about VET, the following excerpt from *Improving vocational education and training – the case for a new system* provides clarity:

> National targeted consultations will be held with governments, regulators, peak RTO and industry bodies, and other key stakeholders throughout March and April 2013. Invitations will be sent to relevant individuals (National Skills Standards Council 2013a, 2).

In order to contribute to the discussion, an invitation must be received from the same three groups that have guided the development of the National Training System since the 1987 report, *Australia Reconstructed*. After a close call with making the individual consumer of VET visible, the prospect of a free market in training is just too threatening to the existing hegemony. According to Roberts (2010, 80), this situation arises from “a deep suspicion about the reliability of the democratic processes combined with faith in the capacity of professionals to make decisions that would be in the long term public interest”.

The contested concept of quality (whatever it really means) has been invoked in order to portray a problematic population of anarchic consumers who do not have the high level qualifications required by industry. Because half of this potential
workforce is illiterate and/or innumerate, there are significant threats to quality and the integrity of qualifications granted, unless tight regulation is provided by government. Counselling and close monitoring of those who must undertake training is required because they might choose the wrong qualification to study. Private individuals are obliged to make themselves transparent to non-transparent government organisations (Ballestero S. 2012, 162). There is also the distinct, and apparently unpalatable, possibility that citizen-workers, if left to their own devices, may wish to be qualified in things that have social impacts that are not subject to economic calculation, rather than those that are deemed useful to industry.

As expected, the seemingly unlimited range of threats to quality in VET is best ameliorated by the use of the product or service developed by experts. The National Skills Standards Council promotes stronger legislation, regulation and audit processes. NCVER proposes more and better data. Both the Australian Qualifications Framework Council and the Industry Skills Councils believe increased specification to be instrumental in the protection of quality; while the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency believes better planning and policy advice combined with increases in government-funded programs, supported by their own research and monitoring, enhances quality.

Discipline for a problematic and untrustworthy population, masquerading as another slippery concept called quality, is what is being promulgated. As with VET itself, quality is a multiple object and is enacted in various manners, while serving as a useful boundary object to link different paradigms (cf Mol 2002) into the amalgam of sub-logics that comprises the National Training System. The techno-rational networks that have been created enmesh industry in complexity, leading to legitimate complaints of government red-tape while ignoring the societies of control associated with lifelong learning and self-help that have followed on from purely disciplinary technologies (Deleuze 2009).
Neither grand nor trusting

The power/knowledge relationships in VET display the predominant characteristic of the sector – its common banality. Because, apparently, anyone can ‘do’ VET, there is no scarcity factor or glorification of excellence that serves to convey higher levels of status to this activity (Australian Public Service Commission 2007, 11-12; de Botton 2004). Training is attractive to governments seeking to solve problems precisely because of the modest techniques, the humble machineries, simple instruments and minor technical procedures that characterise relationships defined by this practice of government (Foucault 1979) that has been joined with the technologies of self-transformation (Foucault 2007a). The inclusiveness of VET, arising from its definition by absence, has allowed the simultaneous acceptance of both discipline and personal responsibility into a mutually acceptable and ‘common sense’ power/knowledge relationship between the state and the population. The ideal being sought in the advanced market democracy attempts to ensure minimal domination by one group over another through the rules of law, techniques of management and the ethics and practices of the self, according to Foucault (Oksala 2007, 68).

Due to an uninhibited desire to enumerate virtually any characteristic of the potentially problematic population, the technologies that capture and calculate this data require experts and their technical languages. These systems of expertise serve to make the VET system even more tedious for most people. The production of the citizen-worker operates through humble modalities, which escape serious consideration because of their sheer ordinariness. As described by Noble (2002, 54-56), Australia as “a nation is experienced as ordinary, familiar and natural – indeed, as homely” in its pursuit of comfort that “constantly involves the complex articulation (though not separation) of private and public, personal and social”; Australia has “a
very banal nationalism”. To be an Australian is to be employed and the processes that produce the citizen-worker-consumer are simple and modest.

VET’s power/knowledge relationship is also suspicious. The frequent calls for transparency, in reality, display a lack of trust in the expert systems that support the VET system and those who actually deliver training. This is somewhat perverse as the international transparency agenda has traditionally been invoked to hold governments to account (Bennis et al. 2008, 9; Piotrowski 2010, 32-33). But for the Australian VET system, it is governments that have appropriated the language of transparency in order to maintain hierarchical observation of the very system they have created (Council of Australian Governments 2012). Analysing the amounts and types of transparency, in the form of sufficient information to support regulated quasi-market operations and protect against market failure, exposes those technical assemblages that are used to create and manage a national system of training.

A genuine free market reduces the need for regulation, standard-setting, licensing, registration, specification, accreditation and extensive data collection/analysis. Consumers with the capacity to exercise authentic free-choice and to use the ‘discipline of the market’ to address issues of training quality and RTO service levels are a serious threat to those who operate these temperate and cautious sub-doctrines. A free market does not require the existing and proposed higher levels of regulatory intervention, but the Australian preference to governmentalise dominates and marginalises any discussion about how best to use the government practise of vocational education and training that simultaneously relies upon “subtle integration of coercion technologies and self-technologies” (Foucault 2007a, 155).

Too much transparency, an individual consumer and a free market in VET each contribute to greater demands for an open examination of industry’s public secret of leadership that results in the massive public financial contribution to developing the
skills required by the private sector. In one final example of the pervasiveness of this public secret, *Future focus* (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2013, 19-22) makes 26 recommendations for action in order to address absences of skills and quality in the provision of qualifications as part of a national workforce development strategy. Of these recommendations, 23 require government funding while the other three suggest a private ‘co-contribution’. John Dawkins’s observation of industry’s desire for the public purse to fund its training requirements remains firmly ensconced in the public policy systems and regulatory processes.

During the final weeks of writing this analysis, the conclusions drawn in this Foucauldian-style theorisation and narrative summary of VET’s power/knowledge relationships were further reinforced. The National Skills Standards Council (2013b) has proposed yet more reform of VET, this time in the shape of the Australian Vocational Qualification System with registered training organisations to be replaced by licensed training organisations:

> . . . this shift from registration (i.e. which, in its simplest form, is adding a name to a register) recognises that providers are awarded the right and privilege of issuing *vocational qualifications that are nationally recognised and which are essentially developed for and the property of all Ministers responsible for skills and employment*, on behalf of all Australians (National Skills Standards Council 2012b, 17 emphasis added).

As the signs and symbols of VET, qualifications are not to be owned or consumed by the individuals who do the training. Licensed training providers will certify that an aspiring Australian citizen-worker-consumer is a normalised, responsibilised, self-managing individual who makes appropriate choices in order to meet the needs of industry by conforming to the mundane tactics and techniques evident in the
power/knowledge relationships mediated through vocational education and training. This government-guaranteed warranty describes a person’s value as a potential worker and protecting its processes will become the centre-piece of VET policy and action. These signs allow governments to ‘know’ the population in a specific way and, through the same mechanism, allow the individual to measure their own transformation. Discipline and self-improvement are joined in the mutually acceptable, but highly complex, assemblage of vocational education and training.

Mr Elliott was wrong

Chapter one contained a quote from Merv Elliott, the Executive Officer of the then very influential Northern Territory Master Builders Association. He described the act of registration of training providers as an ‘exercise in stupidity’ and as an ‘invalid activity of government’ that would not be accepted by the private sector. With the comfortable application of hindsight, it turns out that Mr Elliott did not understand the full benefits of the power/knowledge relationship manifested in the National Training System. For those members of private enterprise who could get a seat at the various policy tables (and endure the endless meetings while learning and contributing to the technical language and expert systems development), the direct financial benefits of working with governments and unions came to be highly valued. The free market principles to which Mr Elliott alludes pose a threat to a long-lasting and comfortable arrangement that provides government funding to meet the skills needs of industry in exchange for industry support for the operations of both coercive and self-technologies that conduct the conduct of the population and its particularly problematic sub-groups.

In contrast with the views of Mr Elliott, industry now demands that a whole range of activities, each with its own expert knowledge, be undertaken by governments in pursuit of something called quality. The Australian VET system is a conglomeration
of sub-doctrines that seldom forms a coherent whole, leading to the complexity (and an endless supply of acronyms) for which the system is famous. These various rationalities do have several things in common, however. They are most often conceived in the form of an absence that requires remediation and are implemented as a series of modest and ordinary technologies. These ways of thinking and related technologies are aimed at managing the population by making self-regulating individuals who will behave normally and economically rationally, even in the absence of a free market. To answer my query how did we come to have this thing called VET, we can now say, Australia’s vocational education and training system has haphazardly come about in response to the unique Australian preference for government action. Because these governments actually have quite a limited range of public policy options available, a widely-accepted social contract has developed in which governments are to ensure the availability of jobs and citizens are to gain the skills and knowledge required to be employed. This relationship is conducted through a mutually acceptable vocational education and training system characterised by an expert, complex and technical assemblage that concurrently tells stories about itself that are based upon the coexistence of both disciplinary technologies and societies of control.
Appendix One
List of Interviewees and brief biographical highlights:

**Denise Bradley AC** – Emeritus Professor and the former Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of South Australia (UniSA). She was a member of the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission (CTEC) (1986-1988) and a member of the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (1988-1994). She was a member of the TAFE Council of CTEC (1983-1986); a member of the Advanced Education Advisory Council of CTEC (1986-1988); a member of the Commonwealth Review of TAFE funding in 1985; a member of the Higher Education Council of National Board of Employment, Education and Training (1988-1994); and Deputy Chair (1991-1994). In 2002 she was a member of the Australian Government’s Higher Education Review Reference group as well as chairing the expert panel that produced the 2008 Review of Higher Education Report.


**Philip Bullock** – has a strong industry background and a commitment to education and training and holds the position of Chair of Skills Australia (now the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency). Bullock has more than 25 years’ experience working with IBM, culminating in his appointment as Vice President, Systems and Technology Group IBM Asia Pacific Region. Prior to this Bullock was CEO of IBM Australia and New Zealand. He also served on the Board of the Australian Information Industry Association, the Business Council of Australia, where he also chaired their Skills and Innovation Taskforce, the Victorian Schools Innovation Commission and the Advisory Committee to the Australian Graduate School of Management. He is currently a non-executive director of Perpetual Limited, a major
provider of financial services and CSG Limited, which is one of Australia’s leading IT and print services companies. He was previously a non-executive director of Healthscope Limited a significant provider of private health services. He also serves on the Federal Government’s Education Investment Fund, which provides billions of dollars to tertiary institutions to enhance their infrastructure and the Australia-India Education Council.

Colin Fuller – Former Northern Territory Government senior bureaucrat has served as the CEO of many NT Government agencies since self-government. His previous NT Government post was the CEO of the Department of Chief Minister and Cabinet Secretary until the election of the Labor Government in 2001. He is still active in political circles, serving as policy strategist and Shadow Cabinet Secretary for the Country Liberals in the NT. In August 2012, has returned to the role of NT Cabinet Secretary in the new Country Liberal Government.

David Hawkes – NT Commissioner for Public Employment for thirteen years between 1989 and 2001 and was, at his retirement, the longest serving Commissioner in Australia. He was the driving force behind the creation of the Public Sector Employment and Management Act (1991), regarded at the time as the most advanced of the new devolved public management models in Australia. In his earlier career as a public sector union official, he played a major role in the development of redeployment and voluntary redundancy arrangements in the Australian Public Service. He also served as both the CEO of the NT Employment and Training Authority and as Secretary of the Department of Labour and Administrative Services in the NT during the time when these agencies had responsibility for apprenticeship and training policy. He is currently a consultant on workforce development.
Peter Noonan – General Manager at the Australian National Training Authority where he played a key role in shaping the national VET system. He was also the former Deputy Director General (VET) in the Queensland Department of Employment Training and Industrial Relations, General Manager of the State Training Board of Victoria, an adviser to the Federal Minister for Employment Education and Training and member of the Expert Panel for the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley Review).

Peter Plummer – served as the founding principal of Batchelor College in 1980 after a number of years teaching in Papua New Guinea. He spent 15 years in a variety of senior executive positions within the NTPS, including Chief Executive of Mines and Energy; Chief Executive of Health; and as the first Chief Executive of Employment, Education and Training until retiring in 2005.

Gregor Ramsey AM – Chair of the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership. He was responsible for the merger of six colleges of advanced education, which are now part of the University of South Australia, and has held several senior Commonwealth positions in education and training, including Chair of the Higher Education Council and culminating in his appointment as chair of the National Board of Employment, Education and Training. In 1991 he became managing director of the New South Wales TAFE Commission. In November 2000, he completed a review of teacher education in New South Wales: Quality Matters – Revitalising Teaching: Critical Times, Critical Choices. In 2003 he led a team reviewing secondary education in the Northern Territory and was project director to establish the Desert Peoples Centre in Alice Springs.

Kaye Schofield – Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Technology Sydney, Chair of the NSW Board Adult and Community Studies, Interim Chair and CEO of Australian Skills Quality Authority, VET Research Consultant,
VET writer and commentator. She served as CEO of the South Australian Department of Employment and TAFE and was subsequently appointed as CEO of the South Australian Department of Labour, Public Works and Administrative Services. She has also led many national, State and organisational inquiries and studies, including reviews of the apprenticeship and traineeship systems in Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria. Schofield also has had a significant influence on national policy directions in adult and vocational education and training, through her policy research and in various roles which have included: Chair of the TAFE South Australia Board, Member of the NSW TAFE Commission Board, Trustee of the Dusseldorp Skills Forum and as a Director of the International Centre for Excellence in Water Resource Management.

**Peter Shergold AC** – the current chair of the Board of Directors of NCVER, Chancellor of the University of Western Sydney and head of the Centre for Social Impact. In 1987 he began working for the Australian Federal Government, initially as head of the newly established Office of Multicultural Affairs. Having become deputy secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in 1990, he was appointed the CEO of the Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Commission (1991–1994) and Comcare (a Federal Government workers' compensation authority from 1994–1995). From 1995 to 1998, he was the Commissioner of the Australian Public Service. He has also been the Secretary of the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business (1998–2002) and the Department of Education, Science and Training (2002–03). In 2003 he was appointed Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

**Robin Shreeve** – served as the CEO of Skills Australia and became the first head of the Skills and Workforce Development Agency in 2012. He has worked in the skills sector for more than 30 years in Australia and England and has been the Chief
Executive of two large Tertiary Institutions – one in Australia, the North Coast Institute of TAFE and one in Westminster, Central London. For different periods between 1989 and 2005 he worked for the Department of Education and Training in New South Wales. His final position was Deputy Director-General for Technical, Further and Community Education (TAFE). He has also been a Board Director for a number of organisations including the NSW Board of Studies, AeSharenet, Worldskills Australia, TAFE Global Pty Ltd, the Paddington Development Trust, the London Apprenticeship Company and the Westminster Small Minority Business Council. He currently sits on the Advisory Boards of the Critical Skills Investment Fund and the L H Martin Institute. Shreeve holds degrees from the Universities of York and Sheffield and has spoken and published widely on vocational education and training and marketing topics.

**Syd Stirling** – a long-serving Labor politician in the NT Legislative Assembly who became Deputy Chief Minister when the Labor Government was elected in 2001. He also assumed the role of Minister for Employment, Education and Training. Before entering Parliament, he was a VET lecturer and employee of the Commonwealth Employment Service. He remains active in NT politics as the Senior Policy Officer for the Northern Land Council.

**Shane Stone AC** – a teacher and lawyer was elected to the NT Parliament in 1990 and served as Chief Minister of the Northern Territory from 1995 to 1999 following stints in a wide variety of ministerial roles including education and the arts, Asian relations and trade, mines and energy, industries and development as well as employment and training after being elected to parliament in 1990. He also served as the national president of the Liberal Party during the Howard Federal Government. Stone currently works in the private sector as a business consultant with interests in mining and a number of other international activities.
Appendix Two
Questions used to frame the contents of interviews of key VET policy informants:

1. Is VET an economic or educational activity given the number of movements between portfolios that have taken place since self-government in the NT and by governments at the national level?

2. What are the advantages/disadvantages of the authority-type structure versus Ministerial control through department structures?

3. What is the role and place of Advisory Groups?

4. What is the problem being solved by training and VET?

5. Why is training a solution to virtually every problem/issue framed by governments?

6. Can you conceive of a time to speak against training?

7. How do problems become an object governments choose to act upon?

8. How does the policy process work in practice?

9. What are the relative roles of ministerial advisors and senior public servants?

10. Why are academic pathways so conceptually easy but so difficult in practice to implement?

11. What do you understand by the very common usage of the word transparency?

12. Who else would be useful for me to interview?

13. Are there any missing parts of the process used to implement training reform that did not make it onto the public record that you would be willing to share or that I should seek out?

14. Do you have any questions that you would like to ask me about this study?
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