

Productively independent: three decades of national research capacity

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Abstract

As one of the enduring features of the vocational education and training sector, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research clearly plays an important role. This paper draws upon analysts using French philosopher Michel Foucault's theoretical approach to policy analysis to identify some of the reasons for NCVER's stability and prosperity in a sector characterised by constant administrative reform. Through questioning the emergence and usage of the word 'independent' and its derivatives in the company's annual reports, insights can be gained into NCVER's role in lubricating intergovernmental relationships and the production of the Australian National Training System.

Introduction

My doctoral research into Australian VET policy has made me very familiar with NCVER. Longevity, in a sector characterised by constant reform to administrative arrangements (Kinsman 2009), is a unique feature of this organisation. Commencing operations in 1981 as the TAFE National Centre for Research and Development, its single change of name in 1992 was made to reflect the emerging range of training providers that would operate in a new national training system (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 1992). An analysis of NCVER's 30 annual reports exposes important, though unstated, reasons for its survival and prosperity. Its independence facilitates communication between levels of government and is instrumental in the continued development of the VET system.

The nine owners of NCVER are the ministers with responsibility for training in the Australian, state and territory governments. The strategic directions of the company are determined and monitored by a Board of Directors whose membership is drawn from experienced individuals with an interest in training, such as public servants, training providers, union officials and employers.

The notion of government as a problem-solver is widely accepted. For example, Colebatch (2006, p.1) depicts the object of government policy as 'what is the problem, and how is government trying to address it?'. Given that NCVER is a creation of the various governments, a question arises about the nature of the problem(s) that it might address. Certainly, NCVER's financial position demonstrates that it is meeting the expectations of its owners and directors. Its first annual income, in 1981–1982, was nearly \$0.5m with net assets/total equity of \$0.22m (TAFE National Centre for Research and Development 1982). In a linear progression, these figures have grown to an annual income of over \$21m and a positive balance sheet position of \$3m in 2011 (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011).

Ninety per cent of NCVER's funding comes from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations¹¹ and the majority of this funding is dedicated to managing and reporting upon VET statistics (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011, p.23). The VET research program is funded at much lower levels and the projects that are conducted are based upon sets of statistical relationships. For example, the atypical research project into the issue of disclosure of mental health matters by students started with a statistical relationship between mental health and course completion rates (Venville & Street 2012).

Australian-based feminist policy theorist, Carol Bacchi, provides Foucauldian-inspired tools that can probe the initial conceptualisation of problems by governments. Importantly, she proceeds from the position that problems amenable to government action do not actually exist prior to definition of the problem, also known as problematisation (Bacchi 2009). She calls this a 'what is the problem represented to be?' methodology.

Findings and discussion

In order to determine what the problem is represented to be that governments are addressing through NCVER's existence, a comprehensive analysis of the annual reports was undertaken. At a simple level, this scrutiny indicates the focus of NCVER's activity over the years has shifted from the teaching of technical skills to the gathering, analysis and dissemination of statistics about VET and links between the labour market and education. This view is confirmed in the *2010–13 strategic plan* (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2010a). In other words, the problems being addressed by NCVER's activities have altered over the years from a concern about pedagogy to one of accounting and research emanating from data considered to be vital to VET.

However, this observation does not directly address the issue of the company's prolonged existence. Returning to the annual reports, closer examination shows that in the first five years, descriptions about the role of the company were contained in objectives with literally the same words relisted as aims until 1991 (TAFE National Centre for Research and Development 1985, 1991). Along with the change in name, NCVER developed a mission in 1992, values in 2001, a vision in 2003 and principles in 2005 (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 1992, 2002, 2003, 2006). Comparing the contents of these items revealed the increased usage of the word independent, or its derivatives, over the years since their first appearance in the 2000 mission statement (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2001). The organisational mission, values, vision and principles remain in place in 2011 and independent/independence, referring to NCVER's status, appears eight times in the annual report including the mission and values (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2011).

My focus on the word 'independent' arose partially because it has no obvious, direct relationship to the VET sector. Other major national providers of statistical information and analysis to governments also stress their independence even though they are either wholly or substantially funded from government sources (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011; Australian Council for Educational Research 2011; Productivity Commission 2011a). The Productivity Commission's Chairman, Gary Banks, has delivered a spirited defence of independence (2011a). He stresses the importance of maintaining a perception of independence to ensure an apt separation between those who provide information and the government of the day. This ensures that the interests of the community as a whole are promoted over more narrow interests.

¹¹ In 2012, the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education became the funding source for a large proportion of the income previously supplied by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

NCVER's Managing Director, Tom Karmel, describes the use of the word independent in a similar manner. Karmel states (2012), 'we present data and research to promote an understanding of education and training and its links with the labour market, and not to support the views of particular parties, whether government or other'. He also notes that independence is not absolute and can be subject to contractual obligations on the part of those who commission research.

What is the problem represented to be by the word 'independent' in relation to NCVER's permanency? Independence from government is obviously crucial. This concern is likely to be in response to criticisms of research directions, usefully summarised by long-term VET administrator and writer, Kay Schofield. In reference to the early years of VET policy development, Schofield stated (2012), 'Punches were pulled everywhere' and what was not said was often more important than what was said. In her view, the contents of most major reports into VET either depended upon the views of the bureaucracy or reflected political considerations. The concept of independence as used by NCVER squarely addresses this type of criticism by positing that the company is not beholden to particular views.

How has the representation of independence as a problem come about? The seeds of this matter date back to the start of the last century and from outside of VET. The agreement to create the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 has provided for an unending set of struggles between national and state levels of government (Butlin, Barnard & Pincus 1982), recently exemplified by the need for the comprehensive review of school funding tensions (Gonski et al. 2011).

In 1974, the Kangan Report into Technical and Further Education (TAFE) provided the mechanism that allowed the Australian Government to furnish financial assistance to provide for the skilled labour force needs of the national economy (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974). This report recommended 'further and more detailed research' into the TAFE problems (1974, xxii) by taking steps to gather and widely publish 'systematic evidence and information concerning the vital aspects of TAFE' (1974, p.103). Within a decade, it emerged that the states and territories would be required to provide sets of nationally consistent data, for purposes of accountability, in order to continue to receive Australian Government funding for VET (Northern Territory Archives Service 1985–1990). In response to intergovernmental contests about accountability measures, the Australian Government transferred its VET statistics functions to NCVER in 1991 to ensure the flow of funding to public training providers in each state and territory in exchange for information through a seemingly neutral body.

Questioning the process of problematisation also turns to the silences of a particular representation. The focus on NCVER's independence completely ignores the more fundamental question as to why there is a need for a national centre at all in the light of its change from pedagogical to statistical-based research. Given that the states and territories control the delivery of formal training, why do they not report on the outcomes in a prescribed format? After all, this type of reporting is the norm for many activities with national policy significance such as schools, the justice system and community services (Productivity Commission 2011b). Yet the necessity of having an independent body to process, interpret and promulgate VET statistics is treated as unproblematic. NCVER's presence as an independent data collection and research agency soothes anxieties about fairness and truth, which in turn implies that statistical processes conducted by NCVER are socially and politically neutral. However, this neutrality is at best a fabricated description. In analysing the emergence of education systems, Australian historian Ian Hunter (1996, p.154) notes, 'the role of social statistics is not so much to represent reality as to problematise it'.

As the major business of NCVER has become more statistically dependent, Canadian Philosopher Ian Hacking's comments on the making up of people are relevant:

I claim that enumeration requires categorisation, and that defining new classes of people for the purposes of statistics had consequences for the ways we conceive of others and think of our own possibilities and potentialities. (1990, p.6)

Upon enrolling in a formal VET course, each of the 1.7m students must furnish over 90 fields of information about themselves and their study to NCVER each year (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2010b). Through econometric analysis of both NCVER data and that held by the other 'independent' information providers, statistically significant relationships can be identified as the basis for research. These, in turn, can be used to make up groups of individuals who can be assigned certain attributes – both positive and negative. In simple terms, the productive and dividing work of NCVER provides the knowledge that creates groups of people, described in a specific manner, making them amenable to government intervention. For example, the 2009 Work Plan (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2009) nominates the disabled, older workers, youth, Indigenous, the illiterate and equity group members for research attention.

A Foucauldian approach requires an analysis of the effects of the problematisation, in this case of 'independence', on the limitations of what can be said or thought. The control of the national discourse on VET can be summarised by one acronym – AVETMISS. The Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistical Standard sets the parameters as to what can be known about VET. In addition to very detailed specifications collected from every student who enrolls in government-funded courses, information is collected about providers, apprentices and trainees (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2010b). AVETMISS was originally established in 1993 as a cooperative effort between federal, state and territory governments – the owners of NCVER. AVETMISS is described as the 'authoritative national reference' on information that 'is considered necessary' pertaining to Australian VET data (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2010b, p.7). It is so influential that changes to the standard are carefully considered as to need and the impact upon business processes of both NCVER and training providers (Pattison & Alliston 2010). My personal experience is that the reporting of hours of training that complies with AVETMISS can become all-consuming to the point that it replaces the actual delivery of training as the major organisational goal for many training providers. The effects of the national management standard create a set of behaviours that determine the priorities and operations of the national training system.

Conclusions

Through analysing the problematisation of NCVER's self-proclaimed independence, two major conclusions can be drawn. Governments that prioritise economic considerations must have information in order to function and an independent NCVER allows the Australian Government to purchase information about VET from the states and territories *on mutually agreeable terms*. The Australian Government's contribution to VET funding does not actually purchase training; it buys information in a specified format.

Secondly, Foucault's linking of power/knowledge is used to describe a positive and productive activity. Instead of seeing power/knowledge as only coercive and negative, he saw this complex as always relational. Thus viewed, it shapes abilities to do things and, in particular, helps produce groups that are voluntarily amenable to government action (Oksala 2007). The independence of

NCVER enables it to be an acceptable contributor to the production of the VET system and the groups of people who require training. This is accomplished through control of the things that can be thought, known and discussed about the system through AVETMISS, other sets of statistics and the related research program. These determine the behaviours of the various groups and organisations in the system.

This work is not accomplished in a secretive manner. Indeed, NCVER goes to great lengths to make its information widely available. The productive capacity of NCVER arises because of its avowed independence *from* the governments of the day. NCVER's longevity can be explained by its ability to serve as a vehicle to overcome the political and financial areas of contestation between the two levels of government by fostering a training discourse that is disconnected from the distinctive nature of actual training process.

However, NCVER is not independent *of* the VET system. The company exerts a productive capacity through the application of statistical and econometric techniques to determine what we know about VET and the citizens who use it. The very genetics of the VET system are engineered by NCVER. This role is significantly more than that of a passive observer and reporter. By questioning the problematisation of independence, and making visible its role in intergovernmental relationships and the production of the national training system, NCVER's permanence and success can be understood as exceeding its function as a neutral observer and reporter.

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