



TAFE & human capital

By Henry Richardson

Like many other people I have been wondering where TAFE is these days. The messages from Labor are mixed, if not also a little confused and confusing. As public institutions, TAFEs are given due recognition for their importance, especially in regard to equity and access, yet the extension of open contestability rings their essential death knell. What is happening here?

Since Labor gained power nationally a good deal of busy energy has been taken up in disputing the degree of prominence given to the prevailing notion of VET as a market, and a set of subtle refinements has been introduced so as to make it more consistent with a Labor tradition. The VET market is now more fully recognised as being designed by government, and as being assisted in its efficient functioning by government or by its appointed agencies. I am not wishing to deny the importance of these redefinitions. They are long overdue and carry some not insignificant practical implications. But at the heart of the Labor model seems to be the claim that it can manage such arrangements better than the previous political administrators, hence the huge emphasis being given to "competition, transparency and quality".

Even with these various refinements, the continuing enthusiasm for the market approach is difficult to fathom. How such a position can be retained in the face of a long history of market malfunction is anyone's guess. The very same bureaucrats and consultants of years past who

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assured us of the wonders market reform would deliver are telling us the same things once more. Only this time they are doing so in trenchant denial of a long decade of malfunction, helped along by some very inventive fabrications of history and conjuring of false achievements on their own part. But when all is said and done the result is the same. More critically the ends of the system, and the primary way by which that system goes about its business, are left intact and unexamined.

Despite the various changes in policy and funding arrangements introduced by Labor, the essential underpinning framework remains. This is not to deny the importance of some of the subtle shifts, the qualification now placed on the dominance of the market model being one of them, and in this regard perhaps we should be grateful for small mercies. But the fundamental logic of the system and the framing public account given by way of its justification goes unchallenged. The human capital perspective still dominates the VET landscape. Indeed, given its bi-partisan origins it now appears to stand in absolute supremacy.

Does it though? Strangely, at this very moment of its supposedly grand ascendancy, this official narrative is looking not only tired but unconvincing. There are many reasons for this. The ethical impoverishment of the human capital agenda is one good reason. It was no doubt seen as a piece of tricky political coinage when the Liberals were in power and state Labor governments, with their talented and sympathetic mandarins in support, were eager to find a way of securing some sort of reference and concern around human possibility. One can too easily forget how narrow and restricted a view Liberal governments have of TAFEs and of those who go there. But behind some clever political manoeuvring made necessary at the time, there also lies a substantial conviction in the essential tenet of the very notion of human capital formation, and a belief that somehow this perspective manages to reconcile the competing demands of economic imperative and human potential. The very language itself is saturated with one assumption, and it can be seen in the sole criteria now used as the ultimate measure of the value of vocational education: the amount of profit any quantum of skill will produce.

What is obvious — and yet inexplicably either not fully acknowledged or simply accepted with resignation — is that this claimed reconciliation between contrary interests is achieved only through the subordination of human endeavour to the service of capital production. No surprise here that the system’s designers and managers should assert the full harmony between the two, although the ordinary experience and knowledge gained through practical life thankfully tells the rest of us otherwise.

If the political operators of the system are full of fervour and enthusiasm for this barren ideological account, cynicism now abounds amongst many of its practitioners. The training system itself would appear to be in deep trouble, with the latest proposed remedies only taking it further into the essential logic of its demise. The crisis is working at many levels. The so-called market system for VET has always been heavily dependent on the very qualities of the system it seeks to replace, foremost being the commitments and deeper understandings of its teachers and its tradespeople. It is impossible to do justice to the complexity of this issue here, but one thing can and needs to be said; in the “living-off” of these commitments and practices, the market system has at the same time

substantially undermined the very conditions necessary for their on-going creation and renewal. TAFE as institutional places of learning are essential to that condition.

Many things are either overlooked or unable to be understood within the human capital model. Given the near hegemony of its bearing, contrary views are more often hunted out than engaged with in any exchange of competing ideas. Above all, there is missing in this perspective a sense of both practical life and a proper conception of human possibility. There is much to be written here, and the baldness of the observations above shows well enough the difficulty in doing so. But surely it is time that the dominance of the human capital model, and its accompanying obscenity and nonsense, was put to the test. Stripped away from its location within a cocoon of largely unquestioned power, what it says and what it offers may then come to be seen to be far less triumphant. And the education necessary for a valuable, capable and meaningful working life might also be seen to be separate, indeed very different, from the interests and needs of capital. It is high time a distinction was made between the two. ❖

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