



INVEST IN
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The ten market MYTHS of Australian vocational and higher education*

There is nothing natural about a market in complex educational environments. The stark realities of market failures on an international scale should remind us that markets are an imposed and wholly contrived way of seeing how education works. Market organisation is imposed to drive down costs, erode working conditions and shift responsibility from governments to providers, not to enhance educational quality or student learning.

Myth 1: Quantity equals quality

The most fundamental myth of the market is that by driving down cost, more places can be offered at a broad level of similar learning quality. The recently revealed evaluation of the failed Productivity Places Program demonstrates this myth-in-action: more places doesn't equate to quality VET outcomes. Uncapped places at universities and greater contestability of VET funding may mean more student places to announce, but the quality of learning experiences for those enduring this growth will be lowered. Public providers, though under enormous resource pressure, offer invariably higher quality outcomes than those motivated by profiting at the expense of students.

Myth 2: The market can best determine what institutions do (and how they do it)

The essential idea of demand-driven approaches based on student entitlement is that this will produce the most rational outcome. However, instead it is more likely to produce irrational clusters around more desirable vocational destinations and pressure on educational providers to reduce levels of required student commitment, lower standards and incite demands for a more manipulable (i.e. casualised) teaching workforce. Insightful planning and regulation by governments and public education have delivered generations of high quality outcomes for a reason.

Myth 3: Institutions are most effective when students behave as consumers

A related orthodoxy of the market in education is that by recasting students as consumers, institutions become more efficient and effective in what they do. This means elevating such things as student opinion surveys to be a determinant of teaching quality and forcing teachers to engage in 'customer-focused activities'. In essence, this allows governments to privatise their social responsibility to institutions and providers, providing useful cover for elevating expectations and declining resources.

Myth 4: Institutional histories and cultures can't matter

Markets in education increasingly defy the important legacy in civil society of institutions that are the product of generations of public funding and social histories of communities. The market also cares little for the educational cultures that have also been developed over time which give institutions their unique identity. However, these traits of institutions do matter to communities, graduates and prospective students. It is a myth that cost alone is an appropriate arbiter.

*from a forthcoming article in The Australian TAFE Teacher by Stephen Darwin called *Merging on a road to nowhere*.

Myth 5: There is an endless capacity to transform, re-badge, restructure, absorb

Another key myth of the education market is that institutions and educators within them have an infinite capacity to absorb radical changes in profile, loss and gain of major tenders and the disruptive effect of related organisational restructures. Public education increasingly is sustained by the commitment of those who work within it, however the market model in which they have been cast is draining of this commitment and motivation as the long term professional mission is supplanted by the short term expediency in order to 'compete'.

Myth 6: Large institutions are more desirable than smaller ones

The mantra of competition is that amalgamations are required to enhance the ability of institutions to reduce costs and offer a 'scale' to the market. Where institutions are turned over to this logic, the value of smaller, local and more specifically discipline-focused institutions is diminished. At one level, this creates a further logic for the answer being a mega-institution. Yet paradoxically the market also allows micro for-profit providers to hollow out the highly profitably profile of the established institution, leading to it further cost-cutting and efficiency drives.

Myth 7: Student support infrastructure is dispensable

The cost driven conception of vocational and higher education puts at risk one of the strongest features of the public education institution: student support infrastructure. A reductive focus on costs per nominal hour or student place automatically discounts the highly significant educational and social value of student counsellors, libraries and learning centres, indigenous centres and literacy support. Such support grounds and deepens student engagement and learning, yet a one-dimensional market evaluation of raw cost cannot understand the value these bring to enhanced learning quality.

Myth 8: Institutions need to compete rather than co-operate to be effective

Markets demand that institutions develop a competitive rather than a co-operative posture. However, if institutions are 'small market players', they can't and most often don't want to compete. They actually want to do what they do effectively. Hence it is myth that the market should determine institutional aspirations. This not only excludes institutions, it excludes teachers, students and the community who have supported a productive history of educational achievement and alliances.

Myth 9: VET feeds naturally into higher education (and is of good nutritional value)

The emerging higher education market is designed to pit university against university. The more students the more funding, the less and decline beckons. The introduction of a higher education *survival of the fittest* has forced many universities to re-consider the high potential nutritional value of TAFE students. However, despite the market drive, vocational education cannot be reduced to a feeder system for a struggling higher education institution thrown into a contrived market. Vocational learning has its own value and a focus of a broad occupational knowledge should not be diminished to be merely a preparation phase for higher education. This is not to say students should not be encouraged to further learning, but that it is they, rather than market, making this decision.

Myth 10: A university is the future and TAFE is the past

A key underlying assumption of the post-Bradley market orthodoxy is that any new entity has to be a university (or connected to a university) to be credible. Aside from undermining the long and proud traditions of public adult education outside universities, this demonstrates another myth of the market: the university 'brand' is critical to the credibility of the qualification in a marketplace. This is a superficial assumption that creates a false pathway of weak to strong in education that is neither real nor desirable in practice. A TAFE College and the qualifications it issues continue to enjoy high public credibility and industry regard.