Journal of Vocational Education & Training

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjve20

Promoting 'learner voice' in VET: developing democratic, transformative possibilities or further entrenching the status quo?

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Published online: 14 Nov 2013.

To cite this article: Lawrence Angus, Barry Golding, Annette Foley & Peter Lavender , Journal of Vocational Education & Training (2013): Promoting 'learner voice' in VET: developing democratic, transformative possibilities or further entrenching the status quo?, Journal of Vocational Education & Training, DOI: 10.1080/13636820.2013.855648

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2013.855648

Journal of Vocational Education & Training, 2013
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2013.855648

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Promoting 'learner voice' in VET: developing democratic, transformative possibilities or further entrenching the status quo?

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(*Received 5 September 2012; final version received 11 October 2013*)

In order to critique the notion of 'learner voice' in vocational education and training (VET) policy, this paper draws from a project conducted by the authors on behalf of the Australian National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC). The term 'learner voice' is used extensively throughout NVEAC documentation to describe the engagement of 'disadvantaged' students within the VET system. However, the concept of 'voice' being advocated, we argue, is a particularly 'thin' one which is linked to notions of client feedback, managed participation and the commodification of training rather than any broad sense of democracy, equity or social transformation. The paper critically examines current practices in relation to learner voice within the VET policy framework and their implications for the contested role of VET in contributing to social equity and redress of social and economic disadvantage.

Keywords: policy analysis; philosophy of VET; VET and economic development; pedagogy; access to HE; class

This paper draws upon research conducted by the authors on behalf of the Australian National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC), a body established in 2009 to provide independent advice to the Australian State, Territory and Commonwealth governments on 'how disadvantaged learners can achieve better outcomes from Vocational Education and Training (VET)' (NVEAC 2011). NVEAC's major publication, *Equity Blueprint 2011–2015 – Creating Futures: Achieving potential through VET* (NVEAC 2011), employs the term 'learner voice' throughout, and, by continually particularising the term by adding, 'particularly the voices of disadvantaged learners', implies that 'learner voice' is largely a proxy for the concept of student equity. A key message of the *Equity Blueprint* is that 'there is work to be done [in terms of equity] to ensure systemic inclusion of the learner voice' (NVEAC 2011, 43). Such resonance of 'voice' with notions of equity and inclusion is not unusual in education literature, as we discuss later in the paper. Within contemporary Australian VET policy, however, the identification of learner voice with equity and inclusion is interesting since other research (Angus 2006; Figgis et al. 2007) has shown that it is the 'voice' of business and industry that has, for the last 20 years at least, unashamedly dominated the VET policy discourse.

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Exploring 'learner voice' in VET

For the purposes of this paper we draw on interviews conducted in 2011 and 2012 with 49 VET managers, staff, students and a range of VET stakeholders in all Australian States and Territories. The numbers were as follows: Victoria, 8; South Australia, 7; Western Australia, 7; Northern Territory, 7; Queensland, 8; New South Wales, 4; Australian Capital Territory, 3; and Tasmania, 5. These participants were drawn from the following categories:

- Adult and Community Education provider managers (3)
- Disability Services Officers (3)
- Head Teacher, Adult Education (1)
- Higher Education Orientation Officer (1)
- Indigenous people who are managers of Indigenous VET programmes (4)
- Managers of National Centre for Vocational Education Research (3)
- Managers of Registered Training Organisations (non-Technical and Further Education [TAFE]) (4)
- Migrant Information Centre Manager (1)
- State Training Authority Managers (10)
- State VET Equity Managers (4)
- Students: Student Liaison Officers (2); other students (2)
- TAFE Institute Managers (4)
- VET academics (3)
- VET Apprenticeships Coordinator (1)
- VET peak body managers (2)
- VET Programmes Manager (1)

Clearly, the total number of interviewees is relatively small and there were different combinations of interviewee types in each of the jurisdictions. With this in mind, we need to emphasise that the data and interpretation offered below are not intended to be definitive. Rather, we have taken the opportunity, through the NVEAC project, to conduct semi-structured conversations with a diverse range of participants about the extent to which VET in Australia is inclusive of 'learner voice'. Importantly, we did not provide any definition of 'learner voice', although we did point out its usage, in conjunction with notions of equity and disadvantage, in the *Equity Blueprint* (NVEAC 2011). Our interpretations and conclusions should therefore be taken as suggestive and, we hope, illustrative of the currently ambiguous discourse of 'learner voice' and 'equity' throughout the system in Australia. We also need to highlight a serious limitation of the research. Somewhat ironically, although we were asked to investigate 'learner voice', the research brief required us to concentrate on the perceptions of VET stakeholders who, actually or potentially, were likely to be engaged in implementing learner voice mechanisms. Therefore, we were not able to include many students in interviews. Only four were interviewed, two of whom were student representatives. In the paper, therefore, we draw on data provided mainly by non-students who were expressing their ideas about the nature of learner voice. It goes without saying that further research is necessary to gain insight into the day-to-day nature of the variability and complexity of students' experiences of VET.

It is important to note that the meaning of the term 'learner voice' is contested and problematic. Although the notion has been utilised in literature on school

education for some time (Angus 2006; Fielding 2004), its use in Australian VET is quite recent. A sense of the many meanings of 'voice' in educational discourse in higher education generally is provided by McLeod (2011, 181):

> Voice is not simply speech; it can mean identity and agency, or even power, and perhaps capacity or aspiration; it can be the site of authentic reflection and insight or a radical source for counter narratives. Voice can be a code word for representing difference, or connote a democratic politics of participation and inclusion, or be the expression of an essentialized group identity … [I]t has methodological and pedagogical dimensions and is rarely – if ever – simply a matter of creating opportunities for unfettered expression.

'Voice', then, implies much more than just allowing learners to speak. Indeed, the term 'learner voice' has long been associated with notions of educational reform in the interests of disadvantaged and minority students, and with concepts of student empowerment and agency. The idea of 'giving' voice to students/learners, which is strongly implied in the rhetoric of the *Equity Blueprint* (NVEAC 2011), is nonetheless contentious (Ellesworth 1989) and is associated with the notion that learners have not generally had sufficient power to influence learning environments. However, the particular concept of 'learner voice' found in the *Blueprint* is a particularly 'thin' one (in the sense that Barber [1984] refers to 'thin' and 'strong' democracy), which is linked to rather innocuous notions of student 'feedback' rather than to any broad sense of authentic engagement, educational reform or social transformation. Despite this, the *Blueprint* authors do seem to reject any factory-like model of VET in which students are, as it were, merely cogs in a machine. They tend to regard students, 'particularly disadvantaged students', as knowing participants who should have a say in what and how they learn. If this approach were adopted throughout the VET system, it would imply that the onus would be on teachers/trainers and institutional staff, including managers, to recognise and respect the diversity of student backgrounds and the great variety of knowledge and cultures that different students bring to educational contexts. However, as we shall go on to argue, such a view contrasts starkly with the current realities of the Australian VET context.

In the following sections, we briefly locate the renewed attention given to 'learner voice' within the social and political context of VET in Australia. We then discuss the contested nature of the 'learner voice' concept and the different ways it is employed in various literatures in relation to student identity, educational participation and equity and social justice. In the later sections, we present interviewees' views of the nature and significance of learner voice within the policy dynamics of VET in Australia, and attempt to interrogate their perceptions using a broad policy sociology framework. We conclude that the elision in VET policy of 'learner voice' with 'client satisfaction' demonstrates that there is an urgent need for educators, politicians and the community to seriously consider what the purposes of VET actually should be.

The Australian VET context

Australian State and federal governments have been accused of reducing vocational education to a crude training market. The process, according Moodie and Wheelahan (2012), has involved cost-cutting and a parallel mechanism of government-induced

market competition, which has been ongoing since the late 1980s but which has accelerated in recent years. Throughout this period, cost-cutting and privatisation has occurred (Angus and Seddon 2000; Seddon and Angus 2000). Numerous private organisations now compete with historically public (now corporatised and quasi-privatised) TAFE institutes in offering training qualifications on a fee-for-service basis. According to Moodie and Wheelahan (2012, 326), the various Australian governments have been 'seeking to expand the role of private providers to increase competition between providers' and to increase their responsiveness to employers' 'needs'. This process has tied vocational education even more tightly to the voices of industry. The resulting 'debilitation of education in general and VET in particular' (Hyland 2011, 129), in Australia and elsewhere, has been critiqued in the pages of this journal by commentators such as Ainley (2007), Avis (1999), Avis et al. (2011) and Hyland (2011).

Since the election of an Australian Labour Party federal government in December 2007 (and re-election in 2010), a renewed official discourse of equity and social inclusion in VET has been linked with what Rizvi and Lingard (2011, 18) refer to as 'a new human capital theory' that is concerned with the needs of the global economy and 'the competitive advantage of individuals, corporations and nations within the transnational context'. Social inclusion and equity are related to this version of human capital in that the economic self-interest of individuals, according to the theory, should be facilitated by their having equality of access to education and training. Rizvi and Lingard (2011, 19) point out that in this new take on human capital theory, despite a 'strong rhetoric of social equity', equal opportunity to participate in education and training is viewed as essential in enabling the nation to remain economically competitive. Most importantly, as the policy rhetoric makes clear, greater inclusion in education and training is needed for the efficient *utilisation* of human capital. That is, social inclusion is promoted as facilitating the twin virtues of equity and economic efficiency. The presumption is that 'by developing human capital and the talents of all, economic and social well-being will be enhanced' (Avis et al. 2011, 116). The explicit aim of broadening VET participation, therefore, is not just a social goal but also, and more importantly, an economic goal.

While the views of students are expected to be respected and taken into account in current 'learner voice' rhetoric, the broad policy framework continues to insist that the needs of business and industry should drive training delivery. And clearly, the needs of students, particularly disadvantaged students, and those of business and industry, are not necessarily the same. For example, the majority of VET students in Australia fall into at least one disadvantaged group category, and the most disadvantaged are in several. Historically, in Australia as in many other industrialised countries (Morrison 2010; Thompson 2009), education has been highly stratified by social class such that VET providers 'remain ghettoised as working-class institutions with all the attendant sense of inferiority which that brings' (Morrison 2010, 68). Such stratification remains particularly significant because, although issues of equity and social justice in education have slipped dramatically in priority since the 1980s, it is important to remember that dealing with disadvantage and social justice has historically been the norm for publicly funded TAFE institutions in Australia. In the 1970s, for instance, the Kangan Report (Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission [CTEC] 1974) contributed to a brief period of consensus on VET with a strong and unambiguous emphasis on the educational importance of equity in the development of non-vocational and social skills as well as vocational training

through 'second chance' education in TAFE institutions. This vision, and the choice about vocational education it implied, is summarised in a particularly prescient paragraph of the 1974 Kangan Report:

> There are at least two alternative emphases that can be given to the purpose of technical colleges and like institutions. A manpower orientation expresses their purpose as being to produce the skilled manpower necessary to the development of the economy. And educational and social emphasis is on their function to enable people to develop their potential as individuals but within the realities of the job opportunities by means of which they are aiming to use their education to earn a livelihood. The committee has adopted the educational and social purpose of TAFE as the more appropriate without overlooking TAFE's vital manpower role. (CTEC 1974, xvii)

The Commission articulated a vision for TAFE as a major social and educational institution, not just a provider of workplace skills. Although we must be wary of 'golden-ageism', it remains significant that TAFE was seen as capable of making a substantial contribution to the common good. That was its moral purpose. But over recent decades, these priorities have been reversed to the point where the 'dominant if not sole' (Moodie and Wheelahan 2012, 323) acknowledged purpose of VET is to provide a 'trained' product for the economy. The Kangan vision has dimmed as VET has become a tool which serves the needs of employers and industry rather than students and society. By 1993, 20 years after the Kangan report was pblished, Ahearn (1993, 14) noted:

> … a quite remarkable ideological eruption which saw a swing away from what could be loosely described as the Kangan student-centred 'culture of access' to an industry- and employer-centred culture of the 'new vocationalism'.

By then, the social and educational ideals proposed in the report had largely been pushed to the side by the almost total dominance of neoliberal themes of competition, market and managerialism, as well as somewhat simplistic, numerical notions of efficiency, accountability and choice (Figgis et al. 2007; Pusey 1992; Ryan 2011). According to Ryan (2011), by the 1990s the Kangan philosophy had effectively been replaced by the National Training Reform Agenda, which made it clear that 'vocational education should no longer be regarded as a community service but as a training market' (Ryan 2011, 11).

VET reforms in recent decades have been influenced mainly by politicians, employers and industrialists, and hardly at all by educationalists. This period has given rise to the 'two cultures' of VET that Kangan had foreshadowed – the Kangan culture of social and educational ideals, and the post-Kangan culture which sees VET largely as a tool of the economy. The current priority is clearly a top-down, instrumentalist, policy-driven emphasis on technical preparation for doing a job (Moodie and Wheelahan 2012, 318) rather than social and relational obligations. The curriculum is all about 'work competences' (Moodie and Wheelahan 2012, 320). Such a restricted curriculum, along with a behaviourist approach to instruction and assessment (Blunden 1999; Colley et al. 2003), according to Moodie and Wheelahan (2012, 323), has resulted in severe limits to the transformative potential of VET.

The result of the narrow and instrumental model that has prevailed, and which is concerned almost exclusively with preparation for entry-level jobs, is that VET is

typically 'incapable of supporting progression within work, and offers a very weak foundation for subsequent general adult learning' (Keep 2012, 320). It also contributes to a very narrow conception of VET that depersonalises students (Blunden 1999; Colley et al. 2003). As Blunden (1999, 166, 167) explains:

> In Australia, but elsewhere as well, a nationally mandated competency-based approach to curriculum design through the development of training packages and the evaluation of work-related skills proceeds unabated. This process purports to respond directly to the needs of industry and enterprise, rather than allowing curriculum to emerge from the teacher-student relationship. Competency-based training, the development of training packages and a new conception of teaching that highlights the function rather than the role of the trainers are all premised on conceptions of the self that belie the complexity of persons, and the depth, subtlety and educational importance of interpersonal relationships.

The deliberate and persistent attempts by successive Australian governments since the 1980s to reinforce such a 'training market' through the subsidised introduction of private providers and making the provision of VET subject to competitive tendering, best indicate the currently prevailing ideology and culture. The ubiquitous use of the term 'client', in which students are sometimes regarded as clients and sometimes not (and in which students are often regarded as the 'product' being marketed to the real clients – employers and industry) is illustrative of the ambiguity that now exists. The result of all of this is that there is now an urgent need to seriously address the question: what are the purposes of VET? It would seem axiomatic that any serious attempt to be responsive to VET students must necessarily entail some degree of student-centredness in order to engage with learners' aspirations and lifeworlds. It seems significant that the countries whose VET systems are apparently working best are ones like Norway's, where technical and vocational education is not totally distinct from more general education, and where there is a 'richer learning experience' (Keep 2012, 320) with a broad focus on careers in occupations which may entail further learning and, particularly, on the concept of the worker-citizen. However, the entire VET policy framework in Australia (and many other countries) militates against anything like this happening. As we have emphasised, the prevailing discourse is about Australia's international economic standing and performance, and the unquestioned need for the VET system to provide the basic skills that are believed necessary for Australia to better compete economically in a globalised, marketised world.

The complex notion of 'learner voice'

As we have emphasised, VET in Australia, as elsewhere, has been driven over the past three decades by a strong policy agenda directed at improving international economic competitiveness. The recent inclusion of 'inclusion' and 'learner voice' in the VET policy discourse is directly linked to the economic competitiveness agenda through an emphasis on increasing the pool of skills available for workplace participation in order to lift economic productivity (Skills Australia 2010). As we have also illustrated, the accountability emphasis in VET is extremely strong. The use of surveys of 'clients' is the main method of institutional evaluation and enforcement of regulatory and compliance rules. It almost goes without question in the current environment, then, that surveys of students would be regarded as an

appropriate mechanism for identifying 'the' learner voice. In fact, learners in Australian VET organisations are subjected to many surveys, but our research indicates that very little even of this extremely thin representation of student voice is being fed back to individual institutions, and less again to students. This is despite 'learner engagement' being one of the three 'quality indicators' (the other two being 'employer satisfaction' and 'course completions') of VET specified by the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF 2008).

In reporting on learner engagement, VET providers are required to use the feedback they receive from applying a nationally mandated 'Learner Questionnaire' (LQ). The particular reason for this, stated in the *AQTF 2007 Learner Survey Guide* (AQTF 2008, 2), is that the data can help support 'continuous improvement processes' in relation to 'quality training and assessment', 'principles of access and equity', and being 'responsive' to the needs of clients, staff and stakeholders. Given all that we have stated above about the complex and problematic nature of learner voice, the inadequacy of any mass questionnaire, particularly one that is designed to be completed in less than 15 min (AQTF 2008, 7), to provide serious feedback, much less any insight into 'genuine' learner voice, is almost laughable. In any case, our research indicates that feedback reported in the LQ is rarely discussed at the level of individual organisations, and extremely rarely, if ever, with students. The use of such surveys would appear to be more about accountability and ranking of institutions through 'governing by numbers' (Lingard 2010; Ozga 2009) than about promoting participative, democratic or socially reformist educational organisations.

We would argue that the continuous reinforcement within government policy of the message that VET reforms are related to the promotion of national economic growth, while reasonable in itself, reinforces concerns with efficiency and productivity at the expense of any genuine consideration of social and educational equity and the importance of engaging with learners. It would appear that the very thin attempts to acknowledge and respond to learner voice have been limited to human capital considerations instead of addressing the social and moral purposes of education and training. Principal among these is the promotion, not just of vocational skills, but also of equality of opportunity and social justice aspirations that are broader than just workforce participation and which avoid deficit conceptions of disadvantaged students.

Black and Yasukawa (2011, 33) note that deficit approaches to education tend to ignore structural inequalities in society while reinforcing the erroneous belief that people, regardless of inequality and disadvantage, should be held responsible for their own failures. These authors argue that alternative pedagogies are required to challenge 'deficit accounts by drawing on the existing skills and practice … [of both teachers and students] … to question the pedagogical status quo' (37). They identify 'considerable scope to draw on the existing resources of students … to make learning more enjoyable and relevant, and to improve VET pedagogy' (40) through critical enquiry *with* students, rather than focusing on delivery models that assume students have skills deficiencies. Such an approach, they claim, is an essential prerequisite for genuine multi-directional dialogue among learners and teachers. This is the kind of open learning environment that would be genuinely responsive to student voice and student aspirations, and which, we argue, is needed in VET institutions in order to acknowledge and respect the knowledge that learners, including disadvantaged and minority learners, bring with them and which can be built upon collegially by teachers and other students. According to these authors, the

model of disadvantaged groups that typically underpins education and training policy causes unnecessary barriers to learning for many students because the VET system in Australian 'reflect[s] accommodation to the status quo' (39) rather than encouraging any kind of social transformation. VET teachers, they maintain, 'are usually required to 'fit in' to existing VET pedagogical practices' (39).

When VET students are required to fit in to the status quo in this way, those who are already disadvantaged are extremely likely to have already 'failed' within traditional schooling. They need opportunities to talk about what learning they value, what they are able to bring to the learning context and how they have experienced their VET programmes. As emerging citizens and members of the twenty-first century workforce, they should be included as legitimate participants in the education and training process. However, the reality is that much of the discourse in VET is based on a unidirectional 'delivery' model of instruction that presupposes that the industry competencies and skills that are meant to be taught in particular programmes are, in fact, transferred directly to the learners as intended through traditional, didactic pedagogies.

Perspectives of VET participants

When asked about 'learner voice', even quite senior VET personnel tend to see it as yet another area of compliance for which they must go through the motions of collecting and reporting data. Most interviewees claimed that the compliance burden of government policies and regulations results in 'unnecessary overload' in terms of the data required. They can see little in the reporting mechanism that is effective, timely or helpful, either in informing them about how to better engage with learners or in addressing the needs of disadvantaged students. There is a widespread view that the students 'who matter most', and who most need support, are most likely to be reluctant to become deeply engaged in VET courses or to express honest feedback. This is likely to be true of all students who are marginalised in any way. For instance, disability managers and advocates were consistent in their view that VET institutions should not only be more inclusive of students with disabilities, but also much more outspoken in asserting their commitment to the education and training of people with disabilities. One stated: 'People who have an intellectual disability have less voice than anybody else, and there are people in that cohort who literally have no voice, they are non-verbal, they don't speak'. This comment is consistent with recent international research into the relationship between learning and well-being (Cooper et al. 2010) which highlights the adverse impact of social marginalisation on learning and mental well-being, and the vicious circle that tends to connect them. As Kirkwood and colleagues (2010, 30) state:

> People who are marginalised have relatively little control over their lives and the resources available to them; they may be stigmatised and are often on the end of negative public attitudes. Their opportunities to make social contributions may be limited and they may develop low self-confidence and low self-esteem … A vicious circle is set up … The impacts of marginalisation, in terms of social exclusion are similar, whatever the origins and processes of marginalisation.

This is an important warning. Moreover, teachers who presuppose that students of certain backgrounds *will* be less capable than others have been known from decades of research to produce self-fulfilling prophesies. Any teaching method that

presupposes deficit and lacks respect for diverse students and their views is unlikely to encourage learner engagement. Instead, it risks entrenching unfair labelling and categorising. Research shows, for example, that, on average, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are significantly disadvantaged in all sectors of education and training (ABS 2010). There is a tendency to wrongly presuppose, on this basis, that *all* Indigenous Australians will be similarly disadvantaged in the teaching and learning process. In essence, there is a slippery and dangerous slide between average disadvantage and perceived universal deficit. In the case of Indigenous Australians (and any group identified by self-defined criteria such as impairment, sexuality or ethnicity), there is a real danger that their social marginalisation can be compounded due to their lack of voice, lack of respect, and by being labelled and shamed by the dominant, hegemonic and often negative social attitudes of more advantaged groups.

During interviews conducted in the Northern Territory, strong views along these lines were expressed about the voices of Indigenous Australians seldom being sought, heard or acted upon. This is despite the copious evidence that VET programmes are generally not working in many parts of remote Australia where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders comprise a significant proportion of the population (37% in the case of the Northern Territory) (ABS 2011). An industry interviewee in the Northern Territory describes the disengaged, utilitarian and impersonal relationship between institutions and learners that currently exists:

> There is no learner voice, especially in remote communities. No one could give a rat's … Everything in remote communities is centred around there being enough trainees to make it economic for a trainer to go and train … And once you get below that [number of students] you stop training. … Once you have lost someone you have lost them. … No one is interested in why.

Our data, although limited, suggest that VET personnel in the Northern Territory are painfully aware of the long-standing failure to engage with students from the most disadvantaged group in the country. Judging from the comments, there is little realistic hope that, regardless of the current policy rhetoric of inclusion, the situation is likely to change any time soon. A similar conclusion regarding other groups in relation to concerns with learner voice and social justice issues was apparent to a greater or lesser extent among most research participants. The typical attitude towards student feedback obtained by survey is that: 'to me [that] is not the student voice'. While we agree wholeheartedly with this widely held sentiment, we would also emphasise that, even at the minimal level of trying to garner some student opinion through surveys (which, as we have also emphasised, is a far cry from any serious engagement with learner voice), the VET system in Australia performs remarkably poorly. There was considerable frankness on the part of interviewees who are generally critical of the minimal use, even by industry training bodies, of the data that are collected. One industry training representative expressed the point particularly bluntly:

> We get a lot feedback from students but it's not made use of in any shape or form to my knowledge … No one analyses it. No one reports on it. It sits in those files never to be seen again.

On the basis of our evidence, it seems fair to conclude that students in general, much less disadvantaged students and those with disabilities, are rarely consulted or

heard. Moreover, students are rarely included on training provider committees or boards. And even when they are, there is typically only one person with little effective voice or mechanisms to hear or consult with the student body. There is a widespread perception among the interviewees that, in the competitive training market, learner voice is rarely sought much less heard – other than when students make their feelings known 'by their feet' – that is, when they stop coming to programmes. As one VET academic put it, there is little thought given 'to really, genuinely give voice … It's a low order priority. I don't think much is done at all'.

Interviewees agree that there is a particular lack of evidence about students who leave before completing their programmes, and there is virtually no data about, or effort to identify, who is *not* participating in VET programmes. One industry manager stated: 'I don't think at the moment that anyone is asking questions of people who don't participate. I think it's extremely important to ask'. At the system level, however, there does not appear to be the capacity or will to follow up non-participants in training. An informant from the National Council for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) noted: 'From the administrative collection [of data] we are only looking at those who are participating, so we don't know very much about the people who don't enrol'. This view contrasts with that of the majority of interviewees who expressed concern about the lack of any attempt to connect with people who are not accessing VET services to see if their participation can be facilitated. One manager illustrates the general view:

> It's just a common sense approach – rather than asking people who [already] have lots of access to education how much they value the education, I would be much more interested in looking at parts of Australia and particular cohorts who have really limited access and talk to them about whether there are barriers to their participation or whether … the offerings don't suit their particular needs.

A VET manager pointed out that since those who drop out or are forced out of training programmes are likely to already have experienced some level of school failure, their needs, sense of exclusion and sense of failure are likely to be compounded:

> We can have all these outreach things and we can go out to the market, but unless we can fundamentally change the system … to engage [students] in authentic learning that speaks to where they are at … they are going to encounter the same problems that excluded them in the first place and they get double failure.

Student engagement may or may not be working at a lecturer/teacher/trainer-to-student level in classrooms and workplace learning, but from a system perspective there is general agreement from industry training boards, VET teachers, institution managers, student representatives, policy-makers and researchers that, in terms of learner voice and engaging with students, as one manager put it, 'we are not doing that [i.e. very] well'.

Discussion

According to our data, VET students are considered by government and policy-makers as, essentially, clients and consumers of a vocational product. When (and if) they complete their courses, the intention is that they will have become suitable 'products'

for industry on the basis of the industry competencies they have learnt. Obtaining a job is therefore regarded as the principal outcome of students' engagement in VET. Little attention appears to be given to other desirable outcomes or to the reasons for a significant proportion of students not completing their programmes. Our interview participants typically commented that the large amount of statistical data that is collected leads to a false sense that, as one put it, 'since everyone has been counted, everything is OK'. But the official surveys are generally centralised, conducted mainly for regulatory purposes, and do not result in useful learner feedback, much less any expression of learner voice. Survey data can be useful, of course, in that it can show that things have changed in a broad-brush sense, but it is impossible to gain insight from massive data-sets into the backgrounds and perceptions of students, the nature of their experiences of VET, or ways VET might contribute to greater social justice and empowerment. Nor does survey data explain *why* changes have occurred and what potential outcomes of VET would enhance the life experiences of VET participants. Such data cannot provide the kind of rich description that could be generated by engaged participants in particular contexts by producing honest, considered narratives about their attempts, successful or otherwise, to hear and respond to the voices of learners and to work with them to address the needs of particular students and students in general. As Gannon (2013, 10) explains:

> It is important to know more about the micropolitics of pedagogies in context and about the productive little swerves that teachers and students make as they work together to co-construct knowledge from the resources that all of them bring to the pedagogical space. Narratives that provide thick description of practice are important sources for this sort of insight.

This sort of insight is particularly important. Teachers and students working together in such ways would seem the most direct and powerful way of promoting, engaging with and responding to learner voice. Relational teaching and learning of this kind would recognise students as authentic and agentic beings who would be positioned as active constructors of knowledge and not just passive recipients. As Raby (2012, 2) explains, socially just education requires recognition that students 'are invested and competent social participants [and] that their views are valid and important'. Within such an approach, teachers are able to see their students, and students are to see themselves and each other, outside of the passive identity that is typically constructed for them within deficit discourses about 'typical' VET students. We have long recognised that educational organisations, including VET institutions, tend to reflect the power structure of society. But VET is also a major social institution that contributes to the production of, as well as the reproduction of, as well as resistance to, the power relations of society (Willis 1981). In arguing for a relational, non-deficit approach, we are also arguing that 'student equity is not simply about removing barriers to participation for individual students, but about changing institutions to make access and participation more possible and desirable to a wider set of groups in society' (Sellar and Gale 2011, 129). That is why the issue of learner voice is so crucial.

Some interviewees suggested that the term 'learner voice', if used at all, tends to be employed in somewhat trivial or tokenistic ways. This happens, for example, when the voices of learners are restricted to 'safe' forms of managed student participation which give the impression that learners' perspectives and views are

taken seriously, when, in reality, students might merely be participating in exercises that, rather than promoting transformative possibilities, tend to coopt them into institutionalised forms of governance (Angus 2006; McLeod 2011). In a Foucauldian sense, within such practices the subjectivities of learners can be shaped so that they will accept as 'normal' the parameters of their own governance within the prevailing neoliberal frame (Bragg 2007; Foucault 1978). Of particular concern, here is the kind of managed participation that takes the form of 'preparation to become consumer-driven, decision-making subjects, a shift resonant with a movement towards understanding people as consumers first, rather than citizens' (Raby 2012, 3). Such initiatives 'reflect a more governmental than liberatory agenda' (Raby 2012, 3). Managed participation also occurs when the multiple voices of diverse students with different backgrounds and different needs, strengths and weaknesses are reduced to the voice of an 'official' student who is admitted as a 'representative student' on boards or committees. In such circumstances, the level of student diversity is minimised, which is similar to the way in which diversity and complexity are reduced to averages on VET survey responses yet regarded as valid 'learner feedback'. None of these 'thin' mechanisms of engaging students can be regarded as promoting genuine learner voice. We would argue that stronger, or thicker (Barber 1984), forms of engagement are required, such as direct involvement in negotiating with teachers and instructors to shape the curriculum, and an inquiring, relational disposition on the part of teachers who are prepared to engage with students on their (i.e. the students') terms. That is, from a relational, democratic perspective, unless their voices are part of a dialogical process that has possibilities of re-shaping the way VET is 'done', and therefore of leading to genuine transformation, then the full potential of learner voice will not be realised. The point is that 'learner voice' should not merely refer to opportunities for students to express opinions. At its core is the principle that learners should have sufficient power to influence change. The voices of learners should therefore become essential to relational forms of learning and teaching – but conceptions of learner voice must not remain static or uninterrogated. Genuine student voice, we believe, can potentially be used as part of a larger emancipatory project that can promote equity and social justice and 'be transformative not just of individuals, but of the oppressive hierarchies within educational institutions and even within society' (Bragg 2007, 344). The focus would be on giving voice to learners and would-be-learners whose voices, for various reasons, have been silenced or marginalised within contemporary social relations.

Although such relational pedagogy might seem improbable in the context of the realities of VET in Australia today, such an outcome would be consistent with the views expressed by many of the participants in this research. Moreover, such thinking is also consistent with the recommendations of recent reports on the need for 'practitioner-driven' VET professional practice (Figgis 2009; see also Mitchell et al. 2006). We accept the argument that the systematic introduction and extension of a national training market in Australia, and of open competition between providers for students and government funding, have, over a period of three decades, had persistent, system-changing effects on the VET sector. One effect has been that the values associated with social justice and the redress of disadvantage, once championed in the sector, particularly during the 1970s and early 1980s, have lost traction as policy priorities. Yet, such values appear to be still widely held, at least tacitly, by many of the participants we interviewed within the field of VET practice.

This finding, although it might seem surprising given the seniority of many of our research participants and their level of engagement with policies of market efficiency and economic competitiveness, accords with findings of other recent research in VET (Angus and Seddon 2000; Bean 2004; Figgis et al. 2007; Ryan 2011).

Conclusion

The ubiquitous association of 'learners' with 'clients', and the resultant tendency to approach student issues in VET as if they were merely issues of client satisfaction, or issues of accountability for the providers' market performance, results in thin conceptions of both 'learner voice' and 'equity'. Building the kind of relational learning and teaching institutions in which issues of disadvantage and learner voice can be approached honestly and genuinely requires attitudinal change within VET rather than more regulation. There is an urgent need for educators, politicians and the community to seriously consider what the purposes of VET actually should be. It is clear from our interview data that the majority of our research participants expect more than the delivery of cut-price training in increasingly narrow, specific 'skills'. It is time to modify the ideology of markets, competition and cost-cutting in VET and to fund the kind of vocational education that will produce multi-skilled workers and active, empowered citizens. On the evidence of our research, this emphasis would be attractive to many participants and stakeholders in the VET sector who, despite the current level of policy rhetoric about markets, competition and narrow skills training, still tacitly hold to much broader educational values that include a high regard for the principles of equity and social justice as well as student-centred, inclusive teaching and learning. While we reiterate our caution that the effectiveness of student participation and the expression of learner voice are 'contingent on how it is conceptualised and practiced' (Raby 2012, 2), we nonetheless argue that promoting, recognising and acting on learner voice, particularly the voices of disadvantaged and marginalised students, can help to provoke the kind of social, economic and political reform that can result in a more democratic society in which social justice and equality can prevail.

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