

Opinion piece: Marketing matters – a blueprint for placing **TAFE** and **VET** front and centre

By **Nicholas Wyman**



As CEO of the Institute for Workplace Skills and Innovation, I spend a large amount of my time overseas, working with governments, industry groups and companies to help build apprenticeship programs and address skills shortages.

In following the developments of vocational training trends, it concerns me that Australia may be getting out of cycle with what is happening in the vocational education space.

While the VET sector is expanding programs and enrolments across the U.S. and Europe, in Australia it seems that we are treading water.

In the U.K. in 2010, David Cameron's government introduced a target of two million apprenticeships by 2015, and having met that, set a target of an additional three million by 2020.

The U.S. saw a tenfold increase in the funding available to initiate apprenticeship programs during President Obama's last year.

In Germany, policymakers have attributed some of the success of the country's high-wage, high-skilled, high-growth, and high-employment economy to the equal priority given to vocational pathways.

So, why are we not seeing a similar resurgence of VET prestige in Australia?

I don't mean to minimise issues around governance and regulation, uncertain and special purpose funding. I am aware many readers have been striving to deliver under extremely difficult circumstances.

Given Australia didn't have a 'great recession', it's possible we missed the 'catalysing' event that spurred other countries to action. Our shared funding models continue to roll along, the gap in funding between VET and other sectors widens, and VET continues to lose ground as a viable career choice.

It's clear that we have to try something new in the way we market TAFE and VET to young people and to industry.

Focus on marketing and outreach

Although it's still anathema to many educators, marketing and branding matter.

The sector needs a total overhaul of its marketing strategies, with the TAFE system repositioning itself as dynamic, viable and accessible.

Preparing for the last TDA convention, I was looking at the Department of Employment's skills shortages information, and was shocked to see that 21 traditional trades were in shortage – 30% of all vacancies were unfilled and 37% of technician and trades positions were unfilled.

There were skills shortages for motor mechanics, automotive electricians, bricklayers, panel beaters, roof tilers, refrigeration mechanics, chefs, butchers, hairdressers and cabinetmakers.

And yet, the SEEK employment data, also from August 2016, showed job ads for these same positions and other Level 1 tradespeople growing by double digits.

Why can't we get people into these roles? In my view, we need to focus on some key issues.

Improve messaging to employers and potential students

How do we make the decision of employers to partner with TAFEs for training less risky? Can we adopt marketing and promotional activities, and refine what works accordingly?

Overcome misunderstandings and stigma

There may be reasons why the traditional trades roles remain unfilled – the job ad may require minimum experience levels, or request a 2nd year apprentice. Or maybe a potential student thinks they don't possess narrow technical skills when they have enterprise skills of equal value. If there

is a mismatch, we need to understand why and educate those involved as to why their perceptions are not reality.

Forceful media engagement

We need to fight harder – rebutting outdated perceptions with realities at every opportunity, rebuilding sectoral prestige, and demonstrating how we stack up against university education.

Make the economic case for apprenticeships

Estimates show that investment in VET and skills is a ‘no-brainer’ – EU figures suggest just a 1% increase in intermediate skills can boost economy wide GDP by 0.99%. With a need for productivity gains, we should be pointing out this low-hanging fruit.

Targeting prospective apprentices using skills and wage data

Economic incentives drive choice in education more than ever. If we cannot entice people to enrol using current and projected wage and employment outcomes, we might as well change games.

Improve knowledge of HR professional about VET

Matching people to jobs is costly. Very few firms have the scale to utilise skilled and sponsored labour programs, or the capacity to churn labour project-by-project. Most want to pick and stick. We need to make HR professionals aware of the flexibility, comparative cost efficiency and relevance of VET.

Given the makeup of the current Senate, and the unlikelihood of higher education reform in the near future, it could be VET’s time to seize the day, demand more media attention, and take its rightful place in the public education debate.

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