

Scholarship as emergent labour: higher education teachers in TAFE and the making of scholarship

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Abstract

The recent *Review of Australian Higher Education* (the Bradley Review) has recommended the formation of a tertiary education sector to formalise the increasingly blurred higher and vocational education boundaries. The growth in delivery of higher education programs by TAFE institutes is contributing to these blurred boundaries and the debates surrounding the emerging notions of a tertiary education sector. The delivery of higher education programs in TAFE institutes has created significant challenges for teachers working in these settings. They work within a TAFE culture but confront the regulatory frameworks demanded of higher education providers. Scholarship is a particularly problematic issue because it has not been an expectation in TAFE providers but is a key feature in higher education. This paper examines the emerging nature of scholarship in TAFE providers offering higher education programs. We report on an analysis of AUQA audit reports and associated documentation, which begin to formalise the notion of 'scholarship' in Victorian TAFE Institutes. We then compare this emerging official definition of scholarship in VET with higher education TAFE teacher's experience of scholarship using interviews. We argue that higher education teachers and their TAFE institutes are forming distinctive hybrid scholarly cultures and practices as they take on external expectations (eg via AUQA) and navigate through existing orientations to industry, educational commitments to teaching and the absence of scholarly structures and values in TAFE.

Introduction and context

In the contemporary Australian educational landscape the boundaries between VET, school and higher education have shifted with the sectors converging and the boundaries between them becoming blurred. Schools and universities now deliver VET programs, VET providers deliver accredited qualifications to senior-secondary school students and some VET providers, such as TAFE institutes, have begun to develop and deliver higher education qualifications. Dual-sector and mixed-sector institutional forms have emerged in both public and private provision, from varying historical foundations. Higher education in VET has gathered policy momentum to the point where an integrated tertiary education sector is presented as a possible reality in the post-Bradley landscape.

If VET providers play a more significant role in the provision of Australian higher education in the future, how might this affect the work of its teachers? Some TAFE institutions are shifting their strategic statements to include values of free intellectual inquiry and developing strategies to support scholarly activities. Yet teaching staff are confronting a series of tensions created by epistemological, pedagogical, industrial and institutional conditions as they straddle the two sectors (Kelly, Wheelahan and Billet, 2009). While universities have time-honoured traditions and established definitions of scholarship and research, VET providers have no such traditions and expectations.

Running parallel to internal reconfigurations within VET providers are the external forces shaping scholarly practice at these sites. Protocols (MEECTYA, 2007a) establish the

criteria against which non-self accrediting institutions, such as TAFE institutes, demonstrate their capacity to deliver higher education and have their courses judged for accreditation. As higher education providers receiving public monies in the form of HELP loans from students deferring their fees, they also commit to quality audit by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). The current state-based registering authorities and the AUQA espouse 'official' notions of scholarship and research, which influences the internal policies and procedures of these providers, which in turn cuts to the core of teachers' work.

Despite 'official' notions and traditions of scholarship embodied in regulatory arrangements and institutional values, policies and procedures, higher education teachers in TAFE filter, contest, evade and embrace new scholarly practices. What emerges in practice at TAFE institutes is rarely what the policy agenda say it should be (Angus and Seddon, 2000) and, ultimately, distinctive orientations towards scholarship and understandings of the 'space for action' will emerge for individuals and collectives. In an attempt to define what is distinctive about scholarship in TAFE, this study explored the ways an official definition and the practical work of scholarship is developing in Victorian TAFE institutes. Assuming the position that scholarship is a product of teachers' labour, we sought to understand how scholarship is being made in this emergent space and to explore what it's like for the individuals involved to undertake scholarly activities in this context.

Literature review

Kelly, Wheelahan and Billet (2009) note that higher education provision by TAFE institutes parallels the more established provision of higher education programs in internationally analogous institutions, such as community colleges in the United States and Canada and further education colleges in the United Kingdom. Therefore, much of the literature on higher education in VET contexts and the work of teachers in these settings is to be found in North America and the UK, although Australian-based studies are increasingly contributing to the knowledge base.

Higher education in VET: local and international perspectives

Parry (2009) suggests that reinventing the mission of further education colleges (FECs) to include the delivery of short-cycle sub-degree qualifications has resulted in an unstable, uncertain and increasingly complex environment for colleges. Parry, Davies and Williams (2004) argue that 'HE in FE' should be regarded as a hybrid form, which relieves colleges from the need to use the defensive language in relation to their higher education delivery and gives claim to FECs being regarded as normal and necessary settings for higher education. In the North American context, Levin (2004) argues that the expansion of community college missions to include full baccalaureates delivery not only alters the institutional purpose, but challenges institutional identity. Like Parry, Davies and Williams (2004), Levin suggests that this hybrid organisational identity leads to a new institution, which may cause insoluble problems and resource stress. In the Australian context Wheelahan *et al* (2009) conclude that the sectoral distinctions between VET and higher education, with their different curriculum, funding, reporting, quality assurance and administrative arrangements, make it more difficult than necessary for TAFE institutes to develop their higher education provision. The authors call for consistent regulatory and funding arrangements, a national framework of academic standards, a single tertiary education industrial award and support for development of higher education staff, pedagogy and curriculum within TAFE.

Higher education teachers' work in VET institutions

Turner, McKenzie and Stone (2009) depict the identity of FE teachers as being fragmented owing to their vocational background and their associated professional values and skills, but find that general traits of higher education lecturers in FE settings can be identified in regard to the relationship they have with their students and their teaching and learning focussed approach to scholarly activity. Likewise, Young (2002) concludes that FEC higher education lecturers' professional identities tend to be more strongly rooted in teaching, with a weaker identification with subject-based disciplines. Kelly, Wheelahan and Billet (2009) argue that, in Australian TAFE institutions, higher education teachers' identities are bifurcated along sectoral lines. Their location within a dominant VET environment, on the one hand, has physical, industrial and resource implications and brings with it expectations of industry connectivity and responsiveness. Yet, they are also expected to have or be undertaking post-graduate qualifications, engage in scholarship and research activities and provide teaching and learning programs that engage students in higher order skills and knowledge appropriate to higher education studies.

Young (2002) evokes a sense of isolation and lack of recognition in describing the experiences of the higher education teachers in the FE college in which her study is located. Young argues that the culture of the college is anti-academic and managerial and that, despite staff being conscious of the kinds of scholarship they would like to be involved in, there are many perceived barriers to academic development of subject knowledge and to scholarship. Lack of time, loss of opportunities for promotion on the basis of teaching, poor support for scholarly exchange amongst staff and insufficient physical resources lead the author to conclude that "the managerial ethos has squashed academic culture and created an environment, then perpetuated by staff as well as management, in which 'scholarship is the word that dare not speak its name' (p. 285). Turner *et al* (2009) likewise argue that it is around discussions of scholarly activity and research that barriers associated with cultural mismatch become most apparent.

Kelly, Wheelahan and Billet (2009) similarly conclude that higher education teachers in TAFE are organisationally located in a culture that has incongruent values to those that underpin higher education and often management practices are not informed by understanding or insight into the work of higher education teachers. Wheelahan *et al* (2009) conclude that institutions must engage in discussion and debate about what it means to construct a higher education culture and how higher education provision is, or should be, distinguished from VET. The authors remark that higher education teachers in TAFE need institutional and policy support to engage in scholarship and consider what this means in relation to research "otherwise students will be short-changed" (2009a, p. 38). Fundamentally, however, Wheelahan *et al* (2009) find key parallels between the experience of higher education teachers in TAFE and their counterparts in UK further education colleges. Teachers acknowledge that scholarship should underpin their higher education teaching, but that it is problematic. Workload arrangements, resourcing and lack of management support make this difficult to achieve.

In summary, the literature confirms the problems created by the blurring of sectoral boundaries and the shift of institutions into non-traditional sectors of education provision, such as the emerging delivery of higher education within VET institutions. Organisational and professional identities shift and institutions and its agents emerge as hybrids of both traditions. Alongside notions of shifting identity and culture are other aspects of the

teachers' work perspective (Seddon, 1994), which were used as an organising framework for this research. These included the:

- structures shaping this work including its regulatory framing and internal conditions
- work practices of teachers as they negotiate and engage in scholarship
- agency of teachers to create distinctive orientations towards scholarship.

Methodology

The methodology for this study considers one set of resources that establish external expectations for scholarship in VET providers and contrasts these with teachers' commentaries about their practice of scholarship. We use a case study approach comprising two data collection methods.

- A document analysis of key regulatory documentation and the reports of three AUQA audits of TAFE institutes, which frame the emerging 'official' definition of scholarship in VET.
- Interviews with three higher education teachers to reveal the distinctive orientations they have towards scholarship and the ways scholarship is developing at the case site.

For logistical reasons, a Melbourne metropolitan TAFE institution was selected and is referred to as Metro Institute within this paper. Teachers at the site were made aware of the nature of the study, the data that was to be collected and how it was to be used before they voluntarily agreed to participate. An explanatory statement was developed and consent forms were completed following the templates provided by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee, who gave ethical approval for the research to be conducted. All Metro Institute teachers expressing an interest in participating in the study were interviewed, audio-recorded and transcribed. The interview participants were anonymised as far as possible by de-identifying them and the organisation through the use of pseudonyms, which ensured confidentiality during and after the research process.

Punch (2005) identifies issues of generalisability as a common criticism or perceived limitation of case studies. Clearly this is a single case, with a small number of participants. The scope of this research, as a minor thesis within a Masters program, also limits the extent to which internal and external documentation and reports can be analysed. While this study was designed to give insight into wider issues of scholarship in VET, it is a preliminary exploratory work into the ways meanings and practices of scholarship are developing in Victorian TAFE institutes. Our purpose was not to generalise, but to problematise. We sought to identify the questions that need to be asked to better understand the context in which scholarship in VET providers is situated and the scholarly practices being developed by higher education teachers and to establish the potential for further and larger studies.

Results

The documentation selected for analysis included the *National Protocols for Higher Education Approvals Processes* (MCEETYA, 2007a), the *National Guidelines for Higher Education Approval Processes* that relate to non self-accrediting institutions (MCEETYA, 2007b) and the reports of the three TAFE institutions audited to date by the

AUQA (AUQA, 2009a, 2009b and 2010c), together with the Audit Manual (AUQA, 2010b). The following key points summarise the outcomes of this analysis.

- Scholarship is ascribed a central position within higher education. Scholarship is variously referred to as being a ‘core function’, ‘fundamental concept’ and ‘underpinning concept’. The nexus between scholarship and research and teaching and learning is described as a ‘distinguishing characteristic’ of higher education.
- Scholarship is conceptualised within higher education as being cultural, socially constructed and disciplinary.

A ‘culture of scholarship’ is consistently referenced across the audit reports. Linked with this cultural conception, is the notion that scholarship is a socially constructed phenomenon. While being broadly conceived, the definition of scholarship within the National Protocols is clear - that scholarship involves interaction; interaction with peers and students (MCEETYA, 2007a, p.19). The National Guidelines reflect the established higher education connections between scholarship and the disciplines in which academic staff teach, in addition to scholarship related to teaching and learning (MCEETYA, 2007b). This understanding is brought into sharp focus in the audit report of Box Hill Institute. Here the panel criticises the institute’s conception of scholarship as being essentially pedagogical and concludes that the institute must “support staff in maintaining their scholarly currency in the disciplines in which they teach” (AUQA, 2010c, p 19).

- Scholarship within VET providers is being characterised culturally and structurally on established norms with its roots in university traditions.

The audit report of Box Hill refer to scholarship as being a normative orientation and that TAFE institutes should reference their understandings, practices and policies to external and established norms (AUQA, 2010c). Paradoxically, while the audit panel at Box Hill make much of collegial discussions with the higher education community to develop definitions of scholarship that is consistent with sectoral norms, the Gordon panel note that “part of the difficulty in applying the concept of scholarship in relation to a VET provider is that it is not even consistently defined across the higher education sector” (AUQA, 2009a, p. 14). The panel go on to note that Boyer’s framework of scholarly functions is commonly used within the sector and that TAFE institutions could be “relatively well-placed in the scholarships of teaching and integration, and of application” (p. 14).

- Scholarly cultures in VET providers can be enabled through ensuring common understandings are held by internal and external stakeholders and developing supportive HR practices and policies.

The foundation step in the development of a scholarly culture is the development of a shared understanding across the institution of how the organisation defines scholarship, research and connected concepts such as critical and open intellectual inquiry. Managerial staff with VET experience are particularly targeted as having a deficit of understanding (AUQA, 2009b, p. 14) and recruitment of academic and educational leaders with prior higher education experience and qualifications is suggested (AUQA, 2010c, p. 3). The audit reports also consistently question workload allocations and suggest that current practices are unsustainable and do not allow sufficient time release or allowance for scholarly activities.

The document analysis revealed that the definition of scholarship being developed at the case site would be an important consideration in being able contrast the ‘official’ discourse and the teachers’ commentaries. The perspectives and traditions influencing this definition and the extent to which teachers’ scholarly work provides a point of differentiation from normative positions were also investigated further in the interviews.

Teacher identities and definitions of scholarship

Three teachers from Metro’s higher education programs agreed to be interviewed for this study. Two interviewees occupied teaching-only positions and the third interviewee held an academic leadership role as the head of one of the degree programs. They taught across three degree programs; two within the visual/performing arts field of study and the other within the sciences. They represented a mixture of part-time and full-time teaching staff and their prior working experience and qualifications varied greatly. Two had PhD qualifications and one had prior experience as the head of a university teaching department. None of the teachers had worked in TAFE prior to their recruitment to Metro, although their prior teaching experience included school, university and industry-based educational settings.

Metro’s higher education teachers demonstrate a merging of connections to the practice of their profession in industry contexts, their role as teacher and the scholarly traditions of their discipline, but with different priorities. The issue of connections to professional practice and industry was very important for the teaching-only staff in particular. Both teachers articulated strong sentiments about the importance of being able to “do what you teach” and that staff should be current in their professional experience. However, The head of a centre’s higher education programs described his role primarily in the context of his engagement with the academic discipline and being ‘known’ for his work the field.

The official discourse and the teachers’ commentaries were in clear agreement regarding the centrality of scholarship to teaching and learning in higher education. Both hold that the connection between scholarship and teaching is what sets higher education apart from VET; from its role in informing higher education curriculum and teaching practice and also from the perspective of the role and work expectations of teachers. However, there are dissonances between the views of the auditors and teachers on how scholarship can be understood in VET environments. AUQA’s understandings of the structure of knowledge and how that affects the practice of knowledge generation, abstraction and application is primarily framed as a disciplinary notion. While the teachers at Metro also tend to define scholarly activities within a disciplinary framework and the particularities and traditions of their academic field, they do stress the importance of more applied ways of knowing through the practice of their profession. Bearing in mind that all three staff interviewed had research-based higher qualifications and/or extensive teaching experience in university settings, they were unequivocal that professional practice and generation and application of knowledge in a vocational context was an important feature of their programs **and** their approach to scholarship and teaching.

In considering how they conceptualised their roles as scholars, all interviewees made reference to scholarship as supporting their own learning. All three make observations around the need for scholarship to be prioritised if Metro values their higher education staffs’ continuing education and learning. In elaborating on how scholarship informs teaching practice, interviewees made statements about teachers learning while teaching. As one interviewee succinctly stated “good teachers say they learn like their students and students with good teachers learn together”. Two interviewees in particular used strongly

worded expressions to articulate the importance of the connection between scholarship and lifelong learning for staff and students. These ranged from positive perspectives of scholarship enabling inspired teaching when staff remain engaged in learning and exploring the vast field of their discipline to the converse when staff stop learning they “may as well shrivel up and die”.

Exercising agency in the practice of scholarship

The analysis of interview data suggests that teachers and managers are exercising their agentic capacities to make sense of the organisational space they occupy and create hybrid scholarly cultures. This space is described by higher education teachers as predominately managerial and exhibiting a lack of scholarly structures and values that they hold as important and necessary. The perceptions of the interviewees were that managers at the site saw work as productive if it aligned to existing VET paradigms about teaching and the duties directly related to teaching. They acknowledge the organisation’s efforts to take on expectations of scholarship and create mechanisms to support its practice, but time to undertake scholarship was consistently raised as a significant barrier; a challenge that they struggle to resolve. Given the strength of the interviewees’ commentary about the importance of scholarship to them professionally and personally, it was perhaps unsurprising that they articulated sense of loss over their inability to devote the time to scholarship. Their discourse on this issue was often ardent and their situation was variously portrayed as “de-skilling”, “untenable” and a “real struggle”.

In response to this managerial culture and despite the limitations imposed by the terms and conditions of their work, the interviewees all provided evidence of their agentic capacities to shape their work practices. Self-directed and individually-constructed scholarly activities are occurring at Metro informed by individuals’ biographically informed notions of scholarship and the traditions of their discipline. One interviewee remarked that they are inventing their own things to do and ways around the issues. Another commented that their scholarship was occurring “off their own bat”. These are “extra-curricular kinds of things you do because you believe in it and think it’s important”, [although] it would be easier not to”. The interviewees were collaborating on works with others, consulting in industry, sourcing and performing alongside seminar guests, writing editorials and research papers, developing and reviewing curriculum and submitting abstracts and presenting at conferences. The social construction of scholarship and the sharing of academic pursuits are, however, largely occurring outside the institution. One interviewee again observes that this is largely workload driven and that the volume of teaching occurring across the timetable makes it difficult for staff to meet collegially.

Forming hybrid cultures

At Metro hybrid cultures are emerging, including differing views on the extent to which Metro should emulate the culture and practices perceived to exist in a university. The analysis of interview data also suggests that the agentic orientations of teachers and managers fill the absence of strong scholarly cultures and structures to support the practice of scholarship. Being neither a VET nor a university space, within higher education at Metro there is a blending of managerial, corporate and academic identities, cultures and communities, each carrying with them distinctive orientations to scholarship and its connection to teaching. As the interviewees are reconciling their scholarly beliefs, understandings and practices within the organisational spaces they occupy, they provided evidence of their adaption, resistance and filtering of these expectations in varying

degrees of reactivity. At one extreme there was talk of “campaigns” and at the other a more passive response of saying “well I’ll just forget my higher ed load and I’ll be happy with just my vocational diploma load”.

The introduction of higher education at Metro has introduced sub-cultures and two values systems as higher education provision matures and the proportions of higher education teachers and students increase. The interviewees all spoke of opportunities to involve these emerging academic communities, if workload redistributions and allowances were made. All interviewees called for more dialogue between staff and managers and for centres to take a lead role in the development of scholarly cultures. Metro’s higher education teachers also suggested that the organisation give more recognition to the capacity of these academic communities to shape their own direction and practices. By developing stronger centre-based communities with responsibilities for supporting scholarship in a way that makes sense for the discipline and the teaching and learning priorities of the particular programs, one interviewee suggested that this also enabled the tensions over administrative versus academic issues to be resolved. This clearly signals a shift in the traditional arrangements of influence and decision-making at Metro, where control is exercised through VET managerial structures.

Discussion

The pursuit of scholarship, practice of their profession and commitment to education are central to Metro teachers’ notions of themselves and their roles as higher education teachers. Scholarship is seen by these teachers as a mechanism for remaining connected to and known in a professional sense within the field and their colleagues in the academic community. The identities of higher education teachers in VET providers have been found to be strongly rooted in teaching (Young, 2002) and therefore teachers tend to perceive scholarly activity in terms of enhancing their teaching and the student experience and ensuring mastery and currency of existing knowledge (Harwood and Harwood, 2004). While maintaining mastery and currency is important for Metro’s teachers, so too is their contribution to the generation of new ideas and knowledge with an applied focus. Scholarship is, however, problematic in VET providers (Young, 2002 and Wheelahan *et al*, 2009) and the struggle over its practice has clearly emerged in this study and mirrors the findings within the literature. A lack of time, scholarly values and cultures and prevailing managerial traditions make the pursuit of scholarship difficult and restrict teachers’ agency. Teachers are however, variously filtering, contesting and accommodating this reality with examples of passive and active resistance.

Young (2002) and Harwood and Harwood (2004) recognise the enormous commitment of further education lecturers working on higher education programs, despite the challenges. Turner, McKenzie and Stone (2009) call on providers to give teachers time and space to develop as HE in FE professionals and this study has also highlighted the capability and commitment of higher education teachers in TAFE to contribute to the body of knowledge within their disciplines and in teaching and learning. For this potential to be realised however, institutions must recognise the value and the time it takes to be engaged in these activities and its importance for quality higher education teaching in general. In this process existing paradigms will be challenged as to what constitutes teachers’ work in these settings. Also contested will become questions over who supports, manages and evaluates this work. Policy makers and regulators also need to develop new ways to frame and support scholarship in VET providers. Not least of which, is the recognition that in becoming both VET and higher education providers, TAFE institutions have by default become new hybrid forms regardless of whether these are ‘officially’ recognised in the

regulatory protocols or not. Like the hybrid 'HE in FE' culture (Turner *et al*, 2009) Metro's identity as an organisation is not at a mid-point between TAFE institute and university. The identities of mixed-sector organisations and their higher education teachers are a fusion of educational, professional and academic notions and the extent to which this diversity is acknowledged and given legitimacy is important in establishing the role of TAFE in the tertiary education environment.

Concluding thoughts

The practice and defence of scholarship by higher education teachers in TAFE and the emergence of new institutional communities, flags that a range of problematics will emerge for further inquiry. The evolution of an integrated tertiary regulator and policy settings will continue to reframe the meaning and practice of scholarship in VET. The establishment of TEQSA will see some shift in the forces that shape scholarship in VET providers, as will potential changes to higher education funding regimes. How this restructuring occurs and its affect within these hybrid mixed-sector institutions warrants continued attention. Furthermore, as Angus and Seddon (2000, p. 169) note, new ways of working and forms of rationality can be constructed within the boundaries of possibilities and limitations through the exercise of agency. They foreground however, that these "politics of possibility" are not the work of solitary, calculating individuals, but of collectives that strive to shape their practice within the institutional spaces they occupy and the discourses of their communities. Shifts will occur internally within these institutions as academic communities grow and establish themselves within the fabric of the organisation. Therefore the agentic capacities of teachers and managers to continue to shape practice and create possibilities for action also reveal potential for future research.

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