

## **A reflection on continuing professional education research**

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This paper has arisen from my research on the first study of the story of Continuing Professional Education in Australia and the publication of my UNE PhD thesis by Springer, *Continuing Professional Education in Australia. A Tale of Missed Opportunities*. I will continue to work with the professional associations on their profession's CPE and the development of CPD. However, this paper is focused on issues that have arisen from the introduction of Australia's national registration regime for select health-related professions.

In addition to material gathered as part of the research on CPE/CPD, there has been more recent discussion as I have sought to promote my book. The subjects discussed have been CPE/CPD but also more general issues related to the National Registration scheme or concerned with questions of the future of professional education. Those involved in these discussions have been linked to the professional associations, university faculties concerned with the education of those in a profession or those involved with organisations with an interest in a particular area such as learning or how various emerging issues may be dealt with. I have been surprised at the wide range of issues raised and the depth of the concern by some of the need for activity and action, decisions not just another report. The scope and nature of the questions

raised and the variety of the sources from which they have come have been the reasons for the writing of this paper.

Three areas have been selected for comment. The first is the new type of vocational education that has been clearly identified. The second is a question that needs to be answered and there is a hole that needs urgently to be filled. These areas have become clear to me in my seeking to understand the implications of the decision by the commonwealth government to establish the registration process for professionals at the national level. I accept that the process has not been completed but that there are certain foundations that appear to have been established.

The first point I wish to make is that the creation of national registration for professionals, but initially not all professionals, has created and identified a new part of Vocational Education and Training (VET). I have called it Continuing Professional Vocational Education and Training (CPVET). This identification is something 'new' but really only brings together three, what I have always called, 'sectors'. They are the initial university based period to induction and thirdly the old CPE (now CPD) sector that covers the professional development of the practitioner for his or her entire career.

This is an important development process of three sectors (though not broadly acknowledged or recognised). I have spent many hours arguing with professional associations that the three sectors are closely related with common goals. On one occasion, I think I helped a professional association CPE manager to accept that he could really conduct mentoring programs for his university students about becoming members as well as experienced practitioners. There were common factors in these two sectors.

While I have used the term 'sector' to identify the three areas, overseas the term 'continuum' is used widely and Knox (2000) has constantly argued in the USA for their use together, ie. of the three sectors, in a continuum. This term does stress the linkage and developmental aspects of the three sectors.

There have unfortunately been many instances when the lack of an agency created problems for the discussion of a potentially new approach within the three sectors. I was asked to review a book on a new approach to vocational teaching within universities. The book

was entitled *Work Integrated Learning* and proposed that much of the students' learning would take place on the workplace site, not the university campus. My review praised the quality and detail of the book. However, in exploring the ways in which two universities may have become interested in examining this new approach, I was informed in both examples that there was no 'channel' through which to explore the potential of this process. There were too many agencies/organisations with some connections to this new approach but there was no formal means of assessing this new approach. A CPVET-focused agency may have been able to provide a means to permit useful discussions. A colleague, who was critical of my praise for the book, made the comment that having the students' learning in a real workplace for large slices of the first two sectors placed a good deal of stress on the concept of a continuum across the three sectors. Gaining co-operation from organisations associated with the three sectors would not necessarily be an easy process.

The lack of means to assist the sharing of ideas and the development of techniques and methods across the three sectors is not just a current problem. Around the turn of the century, there were some arguments about the comparative value of the use of models and mentors in the three sectors being discussed here. There were no actual face-to-face discussions between those involved in the three sectors. There were however many responses to a paper I wrote for this journal (Brennan 2003). The argument from those who actually offered 'mentoring programs' was that the choice of 'models' was probably best used with reference to adolescents and their 'teenage dreams'. Cross sector discussion was needed at that time, as it is now. However, creating this discussion across the continuum may however continue to be a difficult task.

A more recent telephone message from the director of a general training unit was that she was very keen on mentoring across the three areas/sectors noted here. From the school leaver going to university to the just-graduated about-to-join the company person to the experienced practitioner who just needs some guidance, she had a wide range of potential users of their own experiences as the volunteering mentors. There were advantages in noting the varied requirements for persons in different settings, such as those in the three sectors of CPVET. Her perception acknowledged the presence and advantages of the continuum.

This newly identified group (if it is really at this time an accepted part of the current scene) may have a great deal to gain by sharing not only problems but possible solutions to common concerns. That can be through their professional association or perhaps with other providers of courses for various practitioners at different stages in their careers, or just other providers of advisory services to workers within VET. Progress may be made from the bottom up as well as from the top down.

One professional association has informed me that until last year (2016) there were three different types of mentors operating, under different sets of orders, in three different 'parts' of their association. They are proceeding to an integrated mentoring unit and have streamlined their management, have fewer staff but more members volunteering for one or other of the mentoring roles. My contact stressed that the association as a whole was made aware of this development and members offered the opportunity to participate.

The story of CPE's development stressed the number of missed opportunities that were such a significant feature of its story. One that needs to be stressed at this point is that related to the professions and VET (Vocational Education and Training). The professions through their associations did not foster a strong relationship with VET. But as the title I have given to this 'agency group' stresses, it is concerned with Vocational Education and Training and those three final letters are VET.

The point can be simply made that the vast majority of the professional associations became CPE providers. However, there were generally not the best relationships between VET and those associations who sought to be RTOs (Registered Training Organisations), the formally recognised VET providers. Positive comments about the relationship were usually outnumbered by examples of problems and difficulties. Few associations had an ongoing link with VET as RTOs.

The associations complained that the regulations from VET were regularly changing. The associations also were concerned that there was not a clear understanding by VET regarding the special features of professionals' CPE.

There is probably general agreement, though not necessarily shared by the associations, that there should be much stronger connections between VET and the professions. VET has a strong national focus: the

status of the new registration process and CPD are clearly national. If there is strong representation of the professions at the national level ... noting for example the national registration scheme ...then there must be a greater effort from the associations to raise their status.

There are several, rather different, features linked to this first point. There is not necessarily clearly identified means by which the different issues and problems identified can be given attention. The various groups with an interest must first discuss the problem or issue. To work under a single banner will be one step towards making progress and getting 'things done'. But action at the national level must be the result of the work of those operating under an established CPVET banner.

The second point links strongly to the topic 10.4 on 'The failure to recognise developments about learning' in the book based on my thesis (Brennan 2016, pp. 202-208.). The section presents a case outlining some of the developments - many of which are Australian research cases - that clearly demonstrate that research has shown how learning may be more effectively assisted through the results of a very wide range of research. The evidence is presented in the book chapter: the evidence of the use of this research on the learning of students is not able to follow on the earlier hoped-for promises.

This is an issue that has not been fought in open battle. Perhaps the opposing forces have never faced each other. The battle is between the technology that has been in the developmental stages since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and those who carry on the experiments and research with the procedures and techniques that have been developed to assist the learning of material and information. I listened with colleagues for about 30 minutes to a group of academics and support (ie technical) staff at a university explain the technical procedures associated with the use of new 'teaching machines' and other relevant material as part of the presentation associated with the application for approval to teach a particular health-related professional undergraduate course for the next three or four years.. When the technical staff retired from the meeting, there was no one remaining who could answer the questions that were posed at the meeting by the visiting committee members and they were eventually answered in long written reports sent to the national office of the relevant professional association some weeks later.

I was not directly associated with the final report but I understand that

there was no satisfactory report presented from the university in answer to the questions posed at that meeting noted above. I was informed informally that money had more weight than difficult questions.

To reduce the discussion of this issue regarding learning and its status and the concern about its effectiveness and acceptance and relevance to the students concerned is to renounce all responsibility for the whole process of training these specially selected students for particular important roles and duties within the health professions.

This is at one level an issue about technology to service various functions. The implications of this question far exceed the scope of this paper. However, from the evidence of the above incident, it appears that the 'final decisions' about this particular area of teaching/learning will be decided, or that is the more likely outcome, than after more detailed examination of answers, such as those that may be given to the enquiry that was not answered but mentioned above.

The issue noted in this section is primarily about the conflict that appears to have arisen about the best, or most effective or most economical for use with undergraduate students.

The examination of this question does not proceed beyond this point. It has been offered as an example of the practical problems associated with the challenge that faces institutions about differences in the costs of various methods to assist on their students' learning and funds available. In this examination, the question of the struggle between technology and research on learning has also been raised with an outcome not proposed. The need for a solution is noted.

Having introduced the need to develop a link with VET, the necessity of an organisation of some sort to fulfil the needs of those who contribute to this field of professional activity, becomes more significant. So the third point is the absolute necessity for an organisation through a national agency that represents those organisations with an involvement in CPVET.

This is a requirement for which there have been requests from various agencies and individuals for many years. In association with my first published book on CPE – *Continuing Professional Education* (Brennan 1990) -- I communicated with the Australian Bureau of Statistics but was informed that the field of CPE was not of sufficient importance

to have data on the field formally collected. A similar response was received to a similar enquiry in relation to my PhD thesis.

With an extension of the data collection to include the three sectors of this field, then there is further justification for data collection in the three related areas. Having access to reliable national data will strengthen the three sectors and particularly those organisations involved in delivering the services.

Organisations providing programs and activities in these three areas have commented that with national data collection and an agency representing the three sectors, the efficiency and effectiveness of the activities offered will be developed on a sounder organisational basis.

The CPVET organisation must be national, have close relations with agencies associated with national professional registration, with higher education (through universities' involvement in the first sector), professional associations and agencies and organisations (government and non-government) and potentially others with a stake in the field. Developing the list of members qualified to become associated with the CPVET agency will be a complex task, and of vital importance.

The notion of those who provide education and training in these three sectors may find themselves in a new situation, with those offering similar programs and those who may offer programs in other sectors. A new identified level of unity may be one of the key factors to be produced from such an organisation. However, having data available in the long and short term planning of their education and training programs will be a significant positive factor in their planning.

It is not just the agencies involved in conducting programs and activities in this three-pronged field with a stake in the use of the data produced by recording who is involved in these programs. All those who employ professionals will have an interest in the participation of their staff member professionals in their mandatory CPD for example.

It may be an indication to the country as a whole that this new phenomenon, not really so new, has reached a stage of importance where it is absolutely necessary that the data on the participation of professionals in their CPD are recorded and known and appreciated by the wider community and those who use the services of professionals.

The discussion above suggests that the time appears to be appropriate

for the recognition by the government and those who use the services of professionals and who are involved in providing the programs and services that are the backbone for professional practice. The call for the provision of the relevant data for example and the need for an organisation to offer a means by which the area of Continuing Professional Vocational Education and Training may be established and recognised as a key part of the national apparatus to provide a base for these significant programs and activities to be planned, provided and assessed.

Many may argue that this is work that should have been carried through to the operating stage many years ago.

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