The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education
Volume 46 ▮ Number 1 ▮ pp. 54–63 ▮ © The Author(s) 2016 doi 10.1017/jie.2016.24

Mission-Driven Adaptability in a Changing National Training System

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This case study of an adult and community education provider based in far north Queensland describes its capacity to balance various iterations of public policy against its vision for the future of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islanders. Community-controlled organisations wanting to contribute to economic and social development in regional/remote Australia through the use of formally recognised vocational education and training have adjusted to at least three major sociopolitical changes at the national policy level since the early 1990s. These include redefining equity, marketising the delivery of public services and increased centralisation. The contemporary orientation of vocational education and training as part of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy has become a highly prescriptive and heavily centralised mechanism for the establishment of employment outcomes. This has been framed as an obligation and right of Australian citizenship as opposed to the other wellbeing and personal development benefits of education. This registered training organisation has navigated four burdensome (re)definitions of equity that have made planning and delivery of true lifelong training objectives difficult. The provider has embraced the marketisation of the sector and navigated other policy changes in order to provide the services and knowledge set out in the college mission statement.

■ **Keywords:** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, vocational education and training, governance, equity, marketisation, centralisation, mission

This is an analysis of an independent, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled, registered training organisation (RTO) established in 1983 and how it has dealt with the fairly rapid reiteration of public policy while remaining faithful to its vision since that time. It will show that Wontulp Bi-Buya College (WBBC) has been responsive to fundamentally different policy directions introduced by state and federal governments in their seemingly endless desire to reform vocational education and training (VET). Because of the complexity of the national training system, a mixed methods approach to the research has been undertaken in order to produce a historical case study (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009, pp. 241–242). In addition, state and national policy documents have been subjected to a Foucauldian discourse analysis to scrutinise their underpinning ideological foundations (Oksala, 2007, p. 43) while the operations of the college have been described through the use of autoethnographic techniques (Anderson, 2006).

The public policy discourses associated with VET have frequently given prominence to notions of equity and socioeconomic improvement (Kell, 2012; Wheelahan, 2010). Organisations that seek to remedy broader social and economic inequities through the provision of nationally recognised training are required to respond to programme logics built upon these discourses. It will be argued that community-controlled organisations engaged in the improvement of human capital in regional and remote Australia, through the use of formally recognised VET, have had to adjust to at least three major sociopolitical changes at the national policy level. These are the redefinition of equity, increased marketisation and greater centralisation of decision-making. Each change directed the behaviour of the population in directions that were centrally determined by politicians and bureaucracies at state and federal levels.

VET has always played an important role in various governments' responses to Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander peoples' affairs regardless of the macropolicy environment. Guided by British middle class philanthropy, VET was used by missionaries as a means to ease

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https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2016.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the pain of a 'doomed race' destined to die out (Joynt, 1918, p. 5) and whose presence was comprehensively ignored and discounted in official planning for European settlement in northern Australia (Gregory, 1925). By the 1950s, vocational training had become the key instrument in the attempted assimilation of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islanders into 'mainstream' society (Minister for Territories, 1958). From the early 1980s, VET morphed yet again into the central mechanism to give Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people the knowledge and skills to undertake increasing levels of self-determination and self-management (Strike, 1981). For example, in 1980, the Northern Territory Cabinet adopted an integrated set of policies to promote community development premised upon self-realisation; 'vocational training begins with the community and because it is provided in response to their wishes it is able to move in the direction that is consistent with their values' (Northern Territory Archives Service, 1980, p. 3). More recently, VET has been deployed as a highly prescriptive and heavily concentrated mechanism leading to Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander employment in 'real jobs' as part of their obligations and rights as Australian citizens (Forrest, 2014).

When it became apparent in the mid-20th century that the demise of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islanders was not likely to occur and their socioeconomic position in society could no longer be ignored, public policy increasingly turned to notions of equity to frame the discourses guiding government actions. For example, the seminal Kangan Report into Technical and Further Education (TAFE) noted that Aboriginal people were not experiencing equitable access to vocational training due to language barriers (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education, 1974, p. 17). By the early 1990s, the state, territory and federal governments moved to create a centrally regulated training market, resulting in the public providers' monopoly in VET delivery being subjected to increasing levels of competition by other training organisations (Deveson, 1990). The introduction of a contestable market created the space and bureaucratic rationale for formal vocational training to be offered through Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander controlled bodies like WBBC in order to improve access and training outcomes.

Government financed training is normally justified on the grounds of market failure resulting in 'inequitable access' to VET (Productivity Commission, 2012, p. 62). Critics believe this community service obligation style of delivery to rural, regional or remote areas is frequently poorly coordinated, non-client-centric and not brokered in real place-based, developmental opportunities (Dockery & Milsom, 2007). The shortcomings are exacerbated in Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander communities where the discourse is something like this: high levels of joblessness in low-skilled entry level openings in remote areas lead directly to low income; poor living standards; greater rates of poverty as well as higher rates of health problems, all of which can be linked to lower life expectancy (Dockery & Milsom, 2007).

This paper accepts that the problems associated with marginalising practices are very real and seeks not to question the empirical evidence of such claims. It is not disputed that the system's policy intent to meet skills and knowledge needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners is obligatory:

> The VET sector has an important role in addressing the diverse needs of Indigenous learners and thereby in making a significant impact on Indigenous educational disadvantage. Its strengths are based on its ability to accept adult students who have not completed secondary education into lower-level programs, and to offer a pathway through to higher level programs and qualifications, and, ultimately, into employment (Helme, 2007, p. 454).

However, the reality is that practices of government that support the VET system, combined with the governance of economic and social development in communities and regions, constructs and reinforces routines that perpetuate a pragmatic inequity of access to, and benefit from, training. In addition, the continued inability of the training system architects to recognise and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and cultural systems ignores the original intent of post-secondary TAFE systems as articulated by Kangan in 1974 — a system intending to meet the needs of individual learners based upon equal access to relevant training, taking into account their personal circumstances, culture and geographical location (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education, 1974, p. 17). Even though the previously mentioned Northern Territory integrated community development approach remained official policy for years, the various government agencies comprehensively refused to relinquish funding or decision-making to self-determining local councils citing their lack of organisational capacity and the need for centralised coordination (Northern Territory Archives Service, 1980, p. 9).

The introduction of a training market created the opportunity for culturally responsive, not-for-profit organisations like WBBC to access public vocational training funds; providing an alternative to state-controlled institutional delivery through the TAFE system. Since its establishment in 1983, WBBC has had to navigate three major (re)definitions of equity, as well as shifting degrees of regulation accompanying greater marketisation of the sector and intensified centralisation of funding and policy decisions. These changes have, at times, fragmented locally responsive coherent planning and delivery of lifelong training goals. It is only through the continual adaptive practices of the college's management committee and leadership team, guided by a strong sense of purpose, that organisational survival has been achieved. As Coombs (1973) observed over 40 years ago, 'Aborigines know how

https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2016.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

important it is that what they propose should appear reasonable to white administrators, and their justification is often framed to conform to what, in their judgement, will receive white approval' (p.18).

The College

WBBC in Cairns, far north Queensland, has been providing adult education across Australia for over 30 years. Assisted by a range of churches, Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islanders originally founded the institution to deliver courses in theology and course offerings were expanded in 1992 to include community development studies. Today, it promotes courses that train people to work in the human services sectors, emphasising addictions, counselling, suicide prevention, community development and organisation studies. This work was initially focussed in North Queensland regional communities but has grown Australia-wide and now includes some urban communities. The college is a RTO with the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) and its courses conform to the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) to provide graduates with nationally recognised qualifications. These two features allow the college to meet the requirements to apply for public funding from both the state and federal governments. Philanthropic funding sources are also used by WBBC.

Responding to Changing Notions of Equity

In the early 1970's, prior to the advent of WBBC, Australia's workforce lacked the technical skills to meet emerging labour market requirements and modern applications of technologies in the increasingly globalised economy. The response was to establish the Kangan Review of TAFE which made the initial recommendations to use Commonwealth monies to deal with 'the confusion of institutional eccentricity' represented by the chronically disparate state training systems (Whitelock, 1974, p. 269). This move by the national government into an area constitutionally reserved to the states marked the first of many steps towards centralisation in VET. Hermann (1982) states the style of equity encompassed in the 'Kangan philosophy' was 'essentially aimed at meeting the educational needs of individuals and access to education is especially important' (p. 21).

However, there are many other conceptualisations of equity. Wolf (1993) contrasts and compares the characteristics of markets and non-markets (governments, philanthropies and not-for-profit organisations) and proposes that while causes of market failure are well known, there is much work to be done on understanding 'non-market failure'. He notes that the seeking of equity can be used to justify both market and non-market interventions into society and goes onto list nine politically useful definitions of equity:

1. Equality of opportunity (i.e. access).
2. Equality of outcome.
3. Equality of a perfect outcome.
4. A categorical imperative to govern the behaviour of others as a general maxim.
5. Horizontal equity (treating equally situated people equally).
6. Vertical equity (treating unequally situated people appropriately unequally).
7. Marxian equity (from each according to ability, to each according to need).
8. Old Testament — an eye for an eye.
9. New Testament — turn the other cheek (Wolf, 1993, p. 82).

The Kangan philosophy demonstrated Wolf's first definition: 'Universal access' they stated, 'is a matter of equity' (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education, 1974, p. 85). Some 20 years later, a national policy shift mobilised Wolf's sixth definition — vertical equity, treating unequally situated people appropriately unequally. The era of self-determination had arrived and it was proposed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders be given 'ownership and control of all VET provisions' and 'encouraged to redefine the concept of VET' (Teasdale & Teasdale, 1996, p. vi).

There had been a widening recognition that approaches based on principles of access had the effect of perpetuating the very inequality and injustice it was trying to overcome (Teasdale & Teasdale, 1996, pp. 16–17). In a major analysis of the impact of the post-Kangan direction of training policy settings upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, *Pathways to where?* predicted that a new rights-based interpretation of equity would be more likely to:

> lead to an increasing emphasis on Indigenous autonomy and self-determination in the management of VET programs; the control of VET for Indigenous Australians will increasingly be in their own hands. VET should become part of a more integrated and inclusive approach to community education that is open to all adults regardless of age or prior schooling. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be encouraged to redefine the concept of vocational education and training. Teaching should incorporate Indigenous wisdom and learning, and be more experientially based (Teasdale & Teasdale, 1996, pp. v-vi).

However, other VET policy imperatives related to national quality standards, market regulation and universal consistency in highly prescribed competency-based qualifications, all served to thwart the proposed move from 'equality of opportunity' to 'vertical equity'. Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islanders were required to work within detailed and complex national policy and programme guidelines and find other ways to build on

https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2016.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press

their own cultural and social wisdom. The observation that 'no longer will it be acceptable for non-Indigenous policy makers, administrators and educators to provide VET programmes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' (Teasdale & Teasdale, 1996, p. v) proved to be wildly inaccurate.

By the close of the 20th century, another iteration of equity was developed, particularly as it would apply to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The *Partners in a Learning Culture: Australia's national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strategy for vocational education and training 2000–2005* (Australian National Training Authority, 2000), was based on Wolf's fourth definition of equity — a categorical imperative to govern the behaviour of others as a general maxim. This type of equity is defined by distinctly western democratic ideals about how society should engage with its members, centred on binding VET to economic considerations. It promotes the need for paid employment based upon:

> a vocational education and training system which renews and shares an Indigenous learning culture with all Australians in a spirit of reconciliation, equity, justice and community economic development and sustainability (p. 7).

Using a national strategy to:

> achieve this vision, through a partnership between Indigenous Australian communities, governments, industry and training/education providers. We are all equal partners in building a learning culture (p. 7).

While reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' perspectives and the desire to build partnerships remained in the policy documents, the related governance and quality arrangements prescribing the operation of a nationally consistent training system rarely supported those aspirations. The introduction of training packages seldom took into account the special needs of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander learners in remote locations in the bureaucratic, single-minded pursuit of nationally consistent competency specification that tightly detailed how a competent person would behave in performing skilled tasks.

It was upon the premise of Wolf's first definition, equitable access, that WBBC was established to enact its mission to 'equip and empower our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be effective in a holistic positive way in their communities' (Wontulp-Bi-Buya College, 2014, p. 2). The founders were convinced that the state TAFE system was unlikely to address either the spiritual goals or use the culturally appropriate pedagogy that would be required to meet students' needs. The current leadership team of the college feel that defining equity as access remains important today, as stated in an interview:

> It comes down to our vision. Our vision is to train our people up. Because we are working in a Christian organisation we go over and above. We're not getting paid for the extra effort, but are driven by our desire to train up through our Christianity and to support our people.

Over the years, despite the multiple shifts in policy emphasis and definitions of equity, 'We haven't steered away from our vision and mission. Regardless of the outcomes we didn't want to steer away from what the college existed for'. The senior administrator describes one means the college uses to respond to policy shifts without compromising its mission: through the co-operation and internalisation of the college's mission by its staff members.

> Each member of staff has built into their work the mission and vision of the college. Without that the changes wouldn't happen. We could be heading in another direction if we didn't have the staff on board. Our leaders and trainers have to work together to enact the mission.

The cost of this commitment has been one of dealing with continuous change: 'we haven't been able to sit still and breathe'.

Equity as a desire to control others, i.e. Wolf's fourth definition, has grown in policy dominance, with the current Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) policy explicitly linking funding to 'getting Indigenous Australians into work' (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014, p. 3). The types of activities that will be supported and the outcomes that are to be extracted from the targeted communities have been, and will continue to be, centrally determined by government. Altman (2014) interprets the IAS as a programme to reduce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and observes that the IAS policy is 'quite explicitly identified as the priorities of government, not the intended beneficiaries of programs' (p. 109). He also attributes to Warren Mundine, 'principal [Aboriginal] advisor', the proposition that 'the aims of all organisations [receiving Indigenous Advancement Strategy grants] will need to be redefined to ensure delivery of outcomes in jobs, education and making communities safer as prioritised by government, or else be defunded' (p. 111).

As its foundational commitment is to social justice the college does not share this reductionist view of the value of public investment in training and its related interpretation of equity as a categorical imperative to govern the behaviour of others. At the heart of this new policy lies the 'notion that one can improve — control — a deviant sub-population by enumeration and classification' (Hacking, 1990, p. 3). The college's leadership agrees with the need for social change and that this can be achieved when individual students obtain and use nationally recognised vocational qualifications. Due to their over-arching vision and continued focus upon equity as access to training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders regardless of one's age, ability, prior education or ability to pay, the college has a much more inclusive view of success: 'the government doesn't see the social change in people that we see'.

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The previously mentioned programmes of market regulation, setting of national standards, consistent competencies and registration of providers in the name of quality are all based upon Wolf's third notion of equity, perfect outcomes. This definition is particularly appealing to designers of training systems as the outcomes can be universally defined, lend themselves to quantification and tend to limit political contestation. These approaches seldom recognise the cultural differences and learning styles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders or the difficulty of undertaking on-the-job training in remote locations with few businesses.

This adds another layer of complexity to the small, minimally resourced organisation's preferred operational mode of employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as leaders and trainers without compromising the college mission to provide nationally recognised training qualifications. Crucially, even in the face of limited resources, WBBC's approach can be described as 'both/and' through a complex integration of public training policy and place-based mission guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. This is facilitated by the college's small and intimate organisational structure.

On the other hand, the prevailing logic in most government training programmes involves a much stronger element of 'either/or'. An RTO is either compliant or not, students are either competent or not, specified numbers of qualifications have been completed in the contract period or not. WBBC's ability to deal with each iteration of equity, while remaining faithful to the original mission and vision set out by the founders, has relied upon continual negotiation and an adaptive capacity built on a long-term view and application of place-based perspectives.

Markets and Non-markets

> Interviewer: 'Do you see the training market as a place to fear'?
> Wontulp-Bi-Buya College principal: 'No'.

Wolf's economic analysis of human capital development explored the interaction between markets and non-markets. Wolf (1993) purported that his theory of non-market failure provides the corrective to the implicit concept of perfectly functioning governments. Both markets and governments demonstrate predictable and serious shortcomings and having to choose between them 'may be simply a choice between the disagreeable and the intolerable' (p. 90). Therefore, combinations of the two should be sought out as offering optimal solutions to the problems being addressed.

While the pivotal Kangan Report established the conditions for what would eventually become the VET sector, 'neither inferior or superior to other streams of education' (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education, 1974, pp. xxiii-xxiv), the reports' authors did not envisage a training market in which providers competed with each other for students. The provision of vocational training was to be undertaken by the large state government-owned and operated TAFE systems; a non-market solution to meet the needs of all individuals engaged in recurrent learning. In the mid-1990s, with the establishment of a joint state-federal statutory organisation, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) (Australian Senate Employment Education and Training References Committee, 1995), decision-making and control of Commonwealth funding was further concentrated. The Australian VET system was revolutionised by two new changes to the system — national competency-based standards for vocational qualifications were introduced and a more open training market was established in which registered private and public training providers competed (Smith, 2003). This change allowed a much broader range of organisations to access public VET funding, including WBBC which until this point had operated independently without government assistance.

WBBC's approach to the training of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians differs from TAFE and most other private providers. Many courses offered by other providers rely on entry testing and modes of delivery which exclude many potential beneficiaries from formal training. Their practises leave students behind in mainstream classrooms, whereas the college's pedagogical approach emphasises personal and social empowerment education starting with where the student is at in life. The principal observes, 'Our students are the real grass roots. Not many RTOs will go that far down to where the people really are, but we are open to them'.

WBBC's senior administrator describes differences between the rather monolithic state provision and more placed-based community training and features that characterise the college's approach:

> We're flexible in a way that [others] are not. We need to be with our people. [Name omitted] benefits students by giving them a certificate, but we extend to more than that. We put a lot of effort into students in terms of well-being, healing and personal development. This holistic way helps the student to make positive changes, because just having the piece of paper will not be of benefit to them. If you have the social well-being intact, that will create employment in communities we serve.

Since 2013, there has been renewed national enthusiam for the continued expansion of choice and market mechanisms in the provision of VET (Birmingham, 2015). This has included creating a contestable market for training content development and competency specification (Department of Education and Training, 2015). The implementation of the IAS explicitly places its faith in the ability of market-driven approaches to achieve desired outcomes with 'the bulk of grant funding' available through 'open competitive grant rounds' (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014, p. 5). This is despite a long-standing recognition that the public pro-

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vision of VET in regional and remote settings is a community service obligation, with public benefits accrued by increased training (Quiggin, 2013). Supplying public funding to both public and private providers continues to be justified on the grounds of intractable market failure (Productivity Commission, 2012) while the marketisation of VET has removed the monopoly of state-owned training organisations and allows other providers, such as WBBC, to access public funds for training. The perversity of using increased marketisation to address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' communities, who are widely acknowledged as having been poorly serviced due to the obdurate existence of market failure, seems to be lost in the policy debates.

The Queensland State Government has also embraced market-driven approaches to publicly fund training provision by 'developing a competitive skills market' where providing choice between public and private providers is the preferred VET purchasing model (Queensland Government, 2013, recommendations 91 and 93). In reflecting upon the differences between the state and federal governments' views of markets and those of the college, significant disparities emerged, according to the college's senior leaders:

> Our marketplace is our people. Indigenous people want to be trained by Indigenous people. We have that first hand opportunity to step into this marketplace because the majority of our staff are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and those that are not have a heart for our people, where the students are from and what we aim for. The more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders find that there's training here that has both appropriate cultural outcomes and the national accredited outcomes, then they will come and enrol with the college. There are not a lot of others providing training like ours and what we offer. We offer a combination of unique services and products that have been taken up all over the country.

The procurement-style tendering processes used by governments to allocate public VET funds envisage (and create) a conceptually different market than that described by the college. The government is the only customer in their marketplace and controls the type of responses through very specific, legalistic contractual arrangements with those supplying the VET-related services. The college's alternative understanding of the training market positions the students as clients who actively chose from a specific range of products (qualifications) and services that are constantly being tailored to meet the needs Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who live in regional and remote communities. WBBC's concept of the market has proven to be very difficult to understand for economically rational governments and their increased centralisation of policy and highly specified funding allocations which promote anticompetitive approaches and hinder the operation of open markets.

As summarised by the Productivity Commission (2012), 'there are a number of rationales for government intervention in the market for VET services, including to overcome market failures relating to the broader community benefits of education and information limitations about quality and benefits of education' (p. 57). Theories of market failure are 'sufficiently elastic' to allow for government interventions to favour particular constituents or target identifiable groups for improvement and can be promulgated by lobbyists, legislators and political leaders (Wolf, 1993, p. 35). Conversely, non-markets such as government programmes or philanthropic interventions can fail too, 'with rewards frequently occurring in the political arena to publicising a problem and then instigating action as an ostensible remedy, non-market activities may be authorised that have quite infeasible objectives' (Wolf, 1993, p. 67). Many previous training initiatives aimed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders stand accused of displaying such infeasibility (Forrest, 2014).

WBBC has been an early participant in a training market that reserves a significant place for provision of training by the large providers in the name of market failure. Some of the shortcomings of this non-market provision is exemplified by unrealistic entry requirements and being less responsive to the needs of the whole student. The college is determined not be fully government funded as it has witnessed too many other registered training providers cease to exist when state funding priorities change. As with any sound business model, the need to diversify sources of income has been a strong priority and assisted the college's survival for over three decades. While it has not been easy and requires ongoing relationship maintenance, WBBC continuously scans the environment for public, private and philanthropic funding that does not compromise its mission. This approach takes the strengths of both market and non-market approaches to provide holistic training in some of the most challenging environments in the nation — another example of the special 'both/and' thinking that guides the planning and day-to-day operations of the college.

Centralisation

Increased centralisation of policy and funding decision-making serves to decrease the influence of both individuals and small regional RTOs.

> Interviewer: 'Does any central agency ever ask for your opinion'?
> Wontulp-Bi-Buya College principal: 'I have never been asked'.

Currently, major VET policy-making and limited funding decision-making is concentrated at the national level while the bulk of funding, delivery and other operational matters reside with the states and territories (Council of Australian Governments, 2008), while moves to increase the power of the Federal Government over

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VET delivery, policy and funding are gaining momentum. In addition to the increased centralisation apparent in the IAS with the collapse of 150 funded programmes from across government to 'five broad programmes' under the control of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2014), the July 2015 meeting of the Commonwealth Organisation of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to scope a proposal to transfer VET to full Commonwealth responsibility:

> The Commonwealth would assume responsibility for the entire VET system, including apprenticeships, which are currently shared. The Commonwealth would be responsible for funding, policy, system design, and regulation. The States and Territories could support specific priorities or local workforce needs, including through TAFEs in their jurisdiction, by providing extra subsidies for some courses, if they wished to do so (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2015, p. 70).

This suggestion is not new. It can be found in the *Commonwealth National Commission of Audit* (1996), again in *The Bradley Review* (2008) and most recently in the Mitchell Institute's, *Financing Tertiary Education in Australia* (2015). In 1992, then Prime Minister Keating, first offered to fully fund TAFE in the *One Nation* economic statement and then threatened to establish a Commonwealth vocational training system if the states did not hand over control of their training institutions (Goozee, 2013, p. 353). The conflict was resolved with the creation of ANTA in 1994 to be jointly controlled by all states, territories and the Commonwealth (Australian National Training Authority, 1995). Although ANTA was unilaterally disbanded by the Commonwealth in 2005, there has been a progressive referral of state and territory VET system functions to national bodies since its demise. Examples include the national development and maintenance of training packages through the Industry Skills Councils (Dalitz & Dibley, 2013), consolidation of quality assurance through the creation of the national VET regulator (Evans, 2010) and the establishment of national policy bodies such as Skills Australia which became the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2012).

The states and territories have their own versions of centralised policy for planning and VET investment decision-making, progressively reducing regionally determined allocative mechanisms. Examples include *Skills for All* in South Australia (Department of Further Education, Employment, Science, and Technology, 2010) and the annual investment plan introduced in Queensland (Department of Education, 2014). Both these approaches rely upon sophisticated workforce and labour market modelling to arrive at detailed industry sector and geographical estimations of demand for training that allow a heavily centralised bureaucracy to rationally allocate public funds. In addition, Queensland produced a separate Indigenous Training Strategy that concentrated programme design and decision-making in the Brisbane-based administration (Department of Education and Training, 2014).

As Bacchi (2009) points out, centralisation of policy and decision-making relies upon understanding the nation as a normalised population that consists of sub-populations some of which may deviate from the norm and require special treatment. Hacking (1990) refers to this as 'the making up of people' (p. 6) where new classes of people are defined for statistical purposes such as training, labour market and workforce development analysis that, in turn, is understood through unemployment rates, student enrolment rates and qualification completion rates. This conversion to rates is important because individuals can be considered less important than proportions of groups in national or state populations (Bacchi, 2009, p. 27). Dealing with populations allows for centralised government choice in the markets they create rather than local or individual decision-making over training provision and relevance. Similarly, other non-market funding providers such as philanthropic foundations tend to allocate monies to improve targeted populations on the basis of highly prescribed centralism (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014; Fisher, 1993). While WBBC's intended client base is from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, its style of training and pedagogical strategies are solidly grounded at the level of the individual student and their personal relationship with specific members of staff rather than numerical sub-populations.

With increased marketisation, beliefs in the private benefits of training have intensified pressure upon individuals to pay more for VET in spite of centralisation keeping choice inside bureaucracies. The introduction of VET FEE-HELP for selected higher level qualifications can place more choice in the hands of individuals but at the cost of taking on significant levels of debt to repay the loans advanced under the scheme. Due to its intimate knowledge of its client base, the college is convinced that many potential students will not be willing to take on debts incurred for training because of their low incomes and are even less likely to pay full fees upfront.

Forcing regional and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to pay potentially uncapped fees for training or taking out income-contingent loans creates another hurdle for students to get over and, according to WBBC administrators, 'that is the last thing we want to do'. One solution that has been successfully used by the college is to obtain other funding to support these students from church funds, donations and philanthropic organisations. Over the years the increased quarantining of funding into highly prescribed, time-limited outcomes, such as those in the federal IAS or Queensland's Indigenous Training Strategy, has imposed a work burden upon the college in their attempt to offer flexible modes of delivery to their students as described by the senior administrator:

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> Block funding is workable, we know how we can meet accountability requirements and meet outcome requirements if given flexibility, but not with quarantined funds. We need flexibility without breaking any rules.

Conclusion

At the height of assimilationist practices, Price (1949) observed that the white settlers in northern Australia:

> have not understood or appreciated aboriginal social and religious life and neither governments, missionaries or education authorities have yet planned and put into operation policies designed to help the aborigines tackle the tremendous task which confronts them (p.146).

It seems little has changed as WBBC has navigated new iterations of equity, more market-based approaches and increased centralisation. It has become increasingly difficult for the college's voice to be heard by those who determine policy and make funding decisions. However, the situation is not all gloom and doom as the opening up of the training market to mission-driven providers such as WBBC has had the positive impact of preserving and helping to maintain cultural knowledge and processes by allowing non-government providers to use public funding to deliver formal training.

The college is very proud of and wishes to protect the intellectual property it has amassed since 1983. The college leadership is continuously balancing competing forces; on the one hand, there is a need for decision-makers and funders to understand how the college works to benefit students and communities in order to make informed investment decisions. But on the other hand, the principal notes that:

> I tread carefully because we don't wish to share our knowledge with those who might use it for their own benefit so that they look good when in actual fact, our own knowledge will be used to make things even more challenging for us. Our experience is that anyone in the bureaucracy, even Indigenous people [in the bureaucracy] don't get what we are on about and how we work, they don't get it. They can empathise, but they are moulded to a bureaucratic way. There seem no proper mechanisms and a lack of communications between those of us working in the field with our people and the bureaucrats and their systems. With ATSIC there was a voice from the ground, even if ATSIC itself was a bit shonky. If you are not in with the people who are already up there, then you are not going to get acknowledged in a sense, still I tread carefully.

The Management Committee and staff are acutely aware that entire distant bureaucracies are continually planning and attempting to implement VET schemes aimed at controlling the behaviour of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the individuals who become students at WBBC. The attributes of adaptive training programmes offered by RTOs like WBBC are discounted as valid knowledge by the national training system and the college finds this deeply frustrating, even when attempts are made to carefully share their hard-earned intellectual property; frequent changes of governments, policy and even more rapid turnover of staff, thwart their efforts. While there have been changes to definitions of equity as a basis for policy, increasing reliance upon market mechanisms and ever more centralisation, it appears that enduring features of successfully providing training to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in regional Australia are local knowledge, experience and cultural understanding. The leadership team describes that, as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-controlled organisation, 'we have our fingers on the pulse, we communicate with students effectively and we keep our costs to a minimum'.

WBBC has embraced the market and the leadership team believes that complying with the law of the land to deliver training is an important mechanism for 'our Indigenous people to be acknowledged and have a place to enter the [mainstream social, political and economic] systems'. The college continues to carefully choose sensitive, appropriate pedagogies and inclusive courses that are relevant to the training needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Driven by its Christian mission, the college's activities are congruent with the pivotal goal of lifelong learning for the individual as identified in the Kangan Report.

When the college's students gain formally recognised skills through education and training, many go onto find meaningful livelihoods. These pursuits include paid employment, community leadership and volunteer work contributing to safe, strong and thriving communities. The college mission and vision are open-ended and provide an argument for greater stability in policy, much longer funding timeframes than currently exist and more flexible methods for recognising and building upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' cultural and religious knowledge. In spite of at least three major attempts to redefine equity, the Kangan conception of access as a measure of equity for individuals regardless of their background or where they live seems as relevant today as it was more than 40 years ago.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge funding from the Northern Research Futures Collaborative Research Network (CRN).

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https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2016.24 Published online by Cambridge University Press