Industry partnerships – a way of achieving quality

What role(s) can industry play in ensuring quality of vocational education and training outcomes?

I think this is the wrong question. High quality vocational education and training outcomes are better jobs. And only industry can deliver these.

The real question is how can VET providers make themselves more relevant to industry? Failure to do this delivers trained unemployed people – which is not the outcome we want. That won’t help our economy to grow and thrive and keep us globally competitive.

If employers felt that the VET sector delivered what they need, they would engage more readily. In the highly competitive commercial world, most employers will only engage if they see a direct return on the time they invest. Few will invest solely on behalf of their industry.

So, where are we now?

- Employers say that schools, vocational institutions and Universities are failing to prepare people for the world of work and not turning out people with the right knowledge and skills
- The providers say that employers are not clearly articulating what they want

For so many years there has been a gulf in communication between providers of education & training and employers.

One way or another we are all failing those in or entering the Australian workforce. Something radical is needed to change this once and for all.

The various layers of the education system need to listen and change the way they do things.

Employers also have to step up and take responsibility for setting out a clear statement of what they need: both the work readiness skills and the technical/vocational skills.

Education providers have to engage more seriously with industry if they are to succeed.

Why would employers want to dine at the TAFE table?

In PwC’s latest global CEO survey, 74% of CEOs said that lack availability of key skills was one of the biggest barriers to their growth. But do they see TAFE as the answer? At the moment I don’t think so.

If employers are to spend time with you, you have to create the business case that shows how this engagement helps them meet their objectives, whether they are local or international growth, consolidation of a market, diversification, fending off competition or new product/service development.

If you want the attention of industry, you need to make yourselves relevant to these:

1. How are your “products” and “services” going to build the skills they need now and in the future? – it needs to be an all-round, consistently professional approach – business to business
2. Engage with businesses to understand their recruitment, their staff development, their growth plans and priorities. Then you can co-design a solution that fits their particular requirements.
3. Build relationships to secure routes to work for your students, through apprenticeships, traineeships, paid internships and work experience

At present the TAFE brand is not synonymous with flexibility and quality and I think that, working together, TAFEs can help to build the reputation of the sector – coming together as one strong voice and vision, with a focus on employer-led programs and qualifications.
If they believe that TAFE can solve their future workforce skills needs and can deliver relevant high quality training in the way they need it and the price they feel is value for money, employers will come running to the table.

**Do TAFE/industry partnerships give a more productive and skilled workforce?**

Yes. There is really not an awful lot more to say on that – it’s a bit of a no brainer.

Partnerships between TAFE and Industry can only serve to improve understanding on both sides, improve the relevance and quality of the offer and make sure that people are being trained for jobs that exist now and in the future.

Too many people are being put on courses that might be popular but the individual doesn’t realize that they are unlikely to get a job at the end, either because there are far too many people with the same qualifications, outstripping the jobs available, or the particular sector is in decline or the skills they have been taught are not what the industry needs now.

This is irresponsible and has got to stop – it’s not fair on the individual and it is a waste of taxpayers’ money.

Government also has to play its part. Federal and state/territory need to work in a more joined up way, whether or not the proposed move to Federal responsibility for VET takes place in the near future.

Governments need to lead on removal of perverse incentives to train people in areas where there is little employment; kick start new initiatives to bring employers and providers together, such as new qualification development; and incentivise and champion Apprenticeships and vocational education.

To summarise, failure to do this will lead to failure in the VET sector. Participation is declining, reputation is falling and money is tight. Demand has to drive supply. Employers drive the jobs. Training needs to align to those jobs. Otherwise, as I said, we end up with a nation of trained unemployed people!