WITH ALL THIS TALK OF TIGERS AND JUNGLES, I THOUGHT I MIGHT INTRODUCE AN ELEPHANT – THE PROBLEM OF MEASURING QUALITY.

A BIT OF BACKGROUND....

BEFORE COMING TO TVET AUSTRALIA I SPENT NEARLY FIVE YEARS AS CEO OF CHIFLEY BUSINESS SCHOOL. CHIFLEY IS A SUCCESSFUL PRIVATE RTO AND HIGHER ED INSTITUTION.

AS RTO AND HIGHER ED PROVIDER BOTH, CHIFLEY CROSSED THE ‘TERTIARY’ BOUNDARY BEFORE BRADLEY, LET ALONE POST– BRADLEY, AND I WILL COME BACK TO MEASURING SUCCESS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BOUNDARY A LITTLE LATER.

WHAT COUNTED AS SUCCESS AT CHIFLEY?
- BEATING TAFE TO MAJOR CORPORATE CONTRACTS, ESPECIALLY WHEN WE CHARGED MORE, CERTAINLY DID.........BUT WHY?
- BECAUSE PROFITABILITY AND SUSTAINED PROFITABILITY IN PARTICULAR WAS ESSENTIAL TO SURVIVAL
- THAT REQUIRED GAINING AND RETAINING PAYING CUSTOMERS
- IN TURN THAT MEANT CONVINCING CUSTOMERS THEY GOT QUALITY WITH CHIFLEY
  o A QUALITY LEARNING EXPERIENCE HIGHLY RELEVANT TO THE CAREER AND ENTERPRISE NEED
  o AND A REAL PRODUCTIVITY OUTCOME FOR THE ENTERPRISE
  o AND A VALUED QUALIFICATION OUTCOME FOR THE INDIVIDUAL
IN THIS ERA OF CONTESTABILITY FOR PUBLIC FUNDING I DON’T NEED TO LABOUR THE POINT THAT SUCCESS IN TAFE WILL INCREASINGLY DEPEND UPON GAINING AND RETAINING PAYING CUSTOMERS – EVEN IF THE CUSTOMER IS GOVERNMENT, WHICH IS NOT ALWAYS WELL-INFORMED.

BUT LIKE YOU, WE AT CHIFLEY WERE ALSO BOUND TO BE CONSCIOUS OF THE NECESSITY OF QUALITY FOR A VERY DIFFERENT REASON:-

- OUR RIGHT TO BE IN BUSINESS AS AN RTO GRANTING NATIONALLY RECOGNISED QUALIFICATIONS (OR AS THEY SAY OUR LICENCE TO OPERATE) DEPENDED UPON OUR PROVING TO REGULATORS THAT WE MET AND SUSTAINED AUSTRALIAN QUALITY TRAINING FRAMEWORK (AQTF) STANDARDS
- TO US, MEETING AQTF WAS AN ESSENTIAL YET MINIMUM REQUIREMENT – IN THIS RESPECT BEING AUDITED AGAINST THE AQTF STANDARD, FOCUSING AS IT SEEMED ON PROCESSES AND BOX TICKING, REPRESENTED SOMETHING OF AN IRRITATION IF NOT AN INSULT
- AFTER ALL, AS OUR AUDITOR OBSERVED, IT WAS CLEAR THAT CHIFLEY HAD A DEEP CULTURE OF QUALITY OF EDUCATION EXPERIENCE AND FOCUS ON BUSINESS OUTCOMES, AND OUR CUSTOMERS MADE THAT CLEAR. EVEN IF WE HAD TO FIX SOME PROCESS NON-COMPLIANCES.

NEVERTHELESS, THE POINT HOLDS, CHIFLEY KNEW THAT SUCCESS IN EDUCATION DEPENDS ON QUALITY.

IF THE QUALITY OF THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE AND ITS OUTCOME WERE NOT MANIFEST TO OUR CUSTOMERS AND REGULATORS AT CHIFLEY, WE WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN IN BUSINESS.

YET MY ROLE AT TVET HAS BROUGHT HOME OF COURSE THAT SUCCESS, LET ALONE QUALITY, ARE NOT SUCH SIMPLE MATTERS TO MEASURE NOR TO SEE RIGHT ACROSS A NATIONAL SYSTEM, LET ALONE ONE AS SUBTLE AND ELUSIVE AS VOCATIONAL EDUCATION.

AND BECAUSE THAT IS SO, IT MAY NOT BE EASY TO ACHIEVE A DEMAND-DRIVEN, COMPETITIVE MARKET FOR VET NATIONALLY, THOUGH VERY WORTHWHILE.

- I ACKNOWLEDGE TOO THAT FOR TAFE PROVIDERS REQUIRED TO COVER THE BROAD RANGE OF COURSES, STUDENT TYPES AND METHODS OF
DELIVERY, THE TASK OF CONSISTENTLY DELIVERING QUALITY IS TOUGHER THAN FOR A SINGLE DISCIPLINE, HIGH LEVEL ENTITY LIKE CHIFLEY

NOW THAT QUALITY IS AT THE HEART OF OUR SECTOR-SOMETHING WHICH ROBIN SHREEVE EMPHASIZED IN HIS PRESENTATION YESTERDAY. YOU WON’T BE SURPRISED THAT ROBIN AND I AGREE WHOLEHEARTEDLY ON THIS. IN PARTICULAR ROBIN IS RIGHT IN SAYING THAT QUALITY AND TRANSPARENCY ARE TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN.

I WOULD ADD THAT WITHOUT FAIRLY CLEAR AND AGREED STANDARDS FOR WHAT CONSTITUTES QUALITY IN VET THERE WON’T BE A SINGLE MARKET FOR VET SO MUCH A NUMBER OF MARKETS, NOT REALLY COMPARABLE TO EACH OTHER.

IF DOUBT CONTINUES, THE CURRENCY OF VET, THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS ISSUED BY VET, WILL DISSIPATE IN VALUE AND OUR STUDENTS AND ENTERPRISE CUSTOMERS WILL STAY AWAY IN DROVES.

BUT THERE ISN’T NECESSARILY A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT A QUALITY LEARNING EXPERIENCE IS – EVEN IF WE CAN ALL POINT TO EXAMPLES OF ABSENCE OF QUALITY.

WHY DO I SAY THAT?

TO TAKE THE DEMAND OF VET SIDE FIRST:

IF YOU WERE TO ASK AN INDIVIDUAL LEARNER FOR EVIDENCE THAT THEIR VET EXPERIENCE IS GOOD, THEY MIGHT SAY:-

- I’M GETTING A QUALIFICATION TO GET ME INTO A JOB I WOULDN’T HAVE GAINED WITHOUT IT, OR
- I’M LEARNING SOMETHING PRACTICAL THAT MAKES SENSE TO ME IN A WAY THAT THE SCHOOL CLASSROOM NEVER DID, OR
- THIS GETS ME BACK INTO EDUCATION SO I CAN GO ONTO HIGHER STUDY

IF YOU WERE TO ASK AN ENTERPRISE WHETHER IT’S VET EXPERIENCE IS GOOD, IT WILL POINT TO IMPACTS ON ITS PRODUCTIVITY AND THEREFORE ITS BOTTOM LINE IN THE NEAR TERM.
OR PERHAPS TO THE FACT THAT THE PROGRAM IS CUSTOMISED AND RELEVANT TO ITS BUSINESS, NOT JUST STRICTLY IN CONFORMITY WITH THE QUALIFICATION RULES OR TRAINING PACKAGES

IF YOU WERE TO ASK A GOVERNMENT FUNDING VET, IT WOULD POINT TO SKILLS FORMATION
- TO MEET SHORT-TERM ECONOMY-WIDE SKILLS GAPS AND TO LONG-TERM SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND COMPETITIVENESS
- OR TO IMPROVED SOCIAL INCLUSION AS THOSE WHO MIGHT OTHERWISE BE LEFT BEHIND GET ANOTHER CHANCE AT A JOB OR FURTHER TRAINING

FROM THE SUPPLY-SIDE:

ASK A PROVIDER, AND THE QUALITY OF EXPERIENCE MIGHT COME DOWN TO TEACHING STAFF, TO THEIR ERUDITION, AND - TOO RARELY PERHAPS – TO THEIR INDUSTRY CONNECTEDNESS OR ANY COMBINATION OF THESE!

ASK AN INDUSTRY SECTOR SKILLS COUNCIL, AND QUALITY WILL BE MORE OR LESS WHAT THE EXTENT THAT COMPETENCIES IT DEEMS ESSENTIAL ARE IMPARTED AND TESTED.

THUS TO THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM, OR RATHER THE ANCIENT INDIAN PROVERB OF THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT...

THREE BLIND MEN ENTER A DARK ROOM IN WHICH AN ELEPHANT IS HOUSED. IN TURN, EACH OF THE MEN Touches A DIFFERENT PART OF THE ELEPHANT IN ORDER TO LEARN WHAT IT IS LIKE.

THE FIRST MAN FEELS THE ELEPHANT’S LEG AND SAYS THE ELEPHANT IS LIKE A PILLAR; THE SECOND MAN FEELS THE ELEPHANT’S TAIL AND SAYS THE
ELEPHANT IS LIKE A ROPE; THE THIRD MAN FEELS THE ELEPHANT’S TRUNK AND SAYS THE ELEPHANT IS LIKE A TREE BRANCH.

THE MEN COMPARE NOTES AND LEARN THAT THEY ARE IN COMPLETE DISAGREEMENT.

WHICH OF THE MEN IS RIGHT?

ALL OF THEM ARE RIGHT. THE REASON EVERYONE IS TELLING IT DIFFERENTLY IS BECAUSE EACH OF THE MEN TOUCHED A DIFFERENT PART OF THE ELEPHANT. THE ELEPHANT ACTUALLY HAS ALL THE FEATURES THE MEN DESCRIBED.

JUST AS THE ELEPHANT IS SPRAWLING, UNGAINLY AND COMPLEX, SO IS VET.

THE PLAYERS IN VET DO GENUINELY EXPERIENCE VET DIFFERENTLY, AND EXPECT MANY DIFFERENT THINGS OF IT. SOMETIMES VEHEMENTLY SO. IF YOU’LL PARDON MY COMPOUNDING THE POLITICALLY INCORRECT METAPHOR— FROM THE BLIND MEN WITH THE ELEPHANT WE OFTEN GET A DIALOGUE OF THE DEAF!

IT IS NOT THAT ANY OF THE PLAYERS ARE WRONG, JUST PARTIAL. THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT, IT IS NOT THAT SUCCESSFUL VET IS SO EASY TO CAPTURE IN A SIMPLE FORMULA.

INDEED, THE LEARNING IN VET IS MUCH MORE DIFFICULT TO DELIVER, DEFINE, ASSESS AND PROVE THAN AT THE HIGHER ED SIDE OF THE TERTIARY SPECTRUM.

TO GIVE ONE EXAMPLE OF THIS POINT ONLY, AT CHIFLEY IT WAS FAR EASIER TO RENDER THEORY AND KNOWLEDGE INTO A FORM WHICH COULD BE IMPARTED AND TESTED BY DISTANCE MEANS - WHAT IS LEARNED CAN BE CODIFIED AND MANIPULATED IN WRITTEN FORM, AND CAN BE READILY TESTED IN THE SAME WAY – IT IS ACTUALLY CONGRUENT AND ONE DIMENSIONAL.

WHEN IT CAME TO VOCATIONAL LEARNING, HOWEVER, OUR PAYING CLIENTS AND THE ADULT STUDENTS IN OUR PROGRAMS, RIGHTLY EXPECTED SOMETHING WHICH WAS APPLIED, REAL FOR THE WORKPLACE – AND EXPERIENCED, NOT “TAUGHT”.
- The assessment was accordingly, also more subtle.

When we attempted to render something of the rigour of VET assessment of practice into higher ed form, it turned out to be harder work for the participants, and more slippery to explain.
- And actually harder to sell because more costly than pure higher ed
- Nevertheless, the effort was worthwhile, for both productivity and individual development reasons

Thus what constitutes good VET is not only contested by the players in VET, but vocational learning is more recondite, more elusive, than purely knowledge-based forms.

Now none of this means that the effort in establishing what quality is, is futile. On the contrary, it is probably even more necessary than defining quality in higher ed.
- The damaging experience of shonky providers springing up in the space left by lack of clarity about VET quality, and the poor opinion of some qualifications expressed by some industries and enterprises are evidence enough

But it is certainly not a one-dimensional task.

But what would really help would be for all players to recognise that the elephant is complicated, has many parts, and not claim that quality is one thing, theirs only.

And it is not a task which is done once and for all. As skills needs change, and as delivery methods and the pattern of institutions and purchasing models change, so must the task of defining quality standards be revisited.

It is work that the National Quality Council, and as from next year the National Standards Council, to continue to work at as they go about these tasks the players could help by making an effort to see all of VET – the whole elephant – in its complexity, rather than insist that what constitutes quality for the system is only the part they know, and control, themselves.