

## SEASON 2 EPISODE 8 TRANSCRIPT

TALKING TEACHING WITH MAXINE McKEW, PETER NOONAN AND JOHN POLESEL

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- 0:00     **Maxine McKew**            **I'm Maxine McKew and this is Talking Teaching**
- music -*
- 0:10     xx                            You've got the problem is to have the say in North Queensland today. He wants a billion dollars to go towards more people getting into TAFE, more people doing apprenticeships.
- 0:19     xx                            TAFE's as good as Uni. Vocational education's as good as uni and we want to really lift I think the status
- 0:25     xx                            I think we need to make it easier for young people to get a loan if they choose to go into vocational education and training. There has been a lot of focus in the past on university education, and I think we need to have an equal focus on their education because there is going to be a skill shortage
- music -*
- 0:49     **Maxine McKew**            **Hi there, good to have your company again. It seems that almost every other day we hear reports about a skills crisis - our national capacity to direct and train a sufficient number of young people with the mix of skills required for a changing workplace. Now the demand-driven system of recent years has seen rising university participation but at the expense of students taking on vocational training with VET numbers across the state showing a steady and worrying decline. The recent history of dodgy VET providers hasn't helped, but the sector looks to be facing a much more complex set of problems. It's certainly concentrating policy minds with a range of enquiries underway and with a business community looking for resolution. Key to that, as you'll hear from Talking Teaching's guests on this podcast, is a much more streamlined transition between school and work as well as a funding model that removes the dated demarcation between universities and training institutions. To consider the state of the VET sector, I've been joined by Professor Jon Polesel from the Centre for Vocational and Educational Policy at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education and**

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**Peter Noonan, Professor of Tertiary Education Policy at Victoria University. Welcome to Talking Teaching. Now I know you have both spent a long time involved with and analysing the VET sector, and as you know we're hearing yet again a lot of politic rhetoric around the importance of VET, from the business sector we're hearing about the urgency of developing practical skills. Yet I have to say it's hard to escape the conclusion that for all this talk, VET still looks like orphan child of the post secondary sector. I mean is that unfair Peter?**

2:37 Peter Noonan Look, I think in terms of general perceptions that's probably right Maxine, but the point I would make for the people who are involved in it and directly engaged and learning in it and benefiting from it and involved in apprenticeships and things like that, I don't think that would be their perception at all. So I think it is very hard to change perceptions. I think what we need is a lot more people with direct engagement and experience in the VET sector.

3:02 **Maxine McKew** **When you look across the states though, and when we look at what we're facing in terms of the needs for the economy, how fit for purpose though is the sector?**

3:12 Peter Noonan Oh look I think the major problem is that there's been significant disinvestment in VET in the last decade, and anyone who looks at the work put out by the Mitchell Institute will see we've charted the alarming decline in public investment in VET, particularly of state governments withdrawing funding and sliding participation. And I would also say that I think the VET product if you like, the training packages, do need a significant refresh and upgrade while maintaining the workforce facing and practical skills orientation that they provide.

3:47 **Maxine McKew** **John, what would be your view as you look across the states, what judgement do you make about the landscape?**

3:52 John Polesel I think Peter's right. I think there's been a disinvestment, and I think it's been worsened by the fact that VET sits across a number of sectors. It sits across the schooling sector as well as

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the adult sector providers both state and private, and so it's been easy for responsibility to slip away. I think the other factor, the other sector that kind of fits into this whole picture is the higher education sector, which of course with the places that are made available to students has actually taken students away from vocational sector.

- 4:25     **Maxine McKew**            **In fact what are the numbers?**
- 4:27     John Polesel                I don't know, but I mean if we look at the Victorian tracking data for school leavers over the last fifteen years, we've seen what used to be about 30% of Year 12 completers going into TAFE fifteen years ago, drop down to now probably around seven or 8%.
- 4:45     **Maxine McKew**            **That's a big shift isn't it?**
- 4:46     John Polesel                That's a big shift. There's another group who go directly into apprenticeships and traineeships, but certainly that direct feed from Year 12 into adult sector VET has dropped away considerably over recent years, and that's partly because of the funding allocated to universities from demand funding.
- 5:03     **Maxine McKew**            **Peter, to come back to you then – looking ahead, 2030 I gather there's going to be something like half a million more fifteen to twenty-four year olds than today, what are then the projections around enrolment growth in VET?**
- 5:16     Peter Noonan                So the projections that we've done at Mitchell are really alarming because State Government funding is declining and Commonwealth Government funding is pretty well static. The other anomaly that we need to take into account in terms of John's comments is that I don't think it's just the funding allocated to the sectors, most of the students face upfront fees, where as in universities they can get a HECS loan. Now that didn't matter an awful lot when the fees in TAFE were relatively low, but fees now commonly would be two, three and sometimes four thousand dollars and more, and we had the fiasco, the debacle of Fed Fee-Help, which just allowed a lot of crooks into the sector purporting to be vocational providers. But if you've

got a situation where a young person's got a choice between doing a degree at university or doing a VET course, a TAFE course and taking a HECS loan for one and they've got to pay two or three thousand, or their parents do, upfront for the other, their choices are fairly stark. But as I've said, the enrolment projections that we've done at Mitchell are pretty alarming. We've just modelled what would happen if the two year trend in enrolments continued and they would fall away very sharply. I'll just make one more comment though I think. Because school leaving age has gone up, there's also a lot more students now doing VET in schools who would have actually gone from school into VET full-time, and I think that really then throws relief on the importance of high quality, purposeful VET in schools... that is the number of people transitioning directly, particularly early school leavers who would have otherwise gone into VET in the past, has also been impacted by increasing school retention rates.

- 6:59      **Maxine McKew**      **And John this has been an area of concern for you as well hasn't it?**
- 7:02      John Polesel      Yeah, I think there have been problems in the delivery of vocational programmes delivered to secondary students for quite a while now. I think this partly relates to some lack of clarity as to what the purpose of those programmes are. And if I could sort of present it in very simple terms, I think they were introduced partly for an engagement retention purpose to keep kids at school, to keep them engaged, to keep them happy, to keep them there until the end of Year 12, and the other purpose of course is to create pathways into work. Now sometimes those two aims are seen as competing. Different sectors view them differently – industry obviously values the transition to work aim, school teachers value the engagement aim. I think both of those aims are actually very important, and I think probably both of them need to be valued and I don't think we've quite found a way for both of those aims to be valued yet.
- 7:55      **Maxine McKew**      **If you're a fifteen year old, whether Victoria or New South Wales, not particularly academic, and you're looking at your options in VET, how confident can you be that in choosing**

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**that pathway you're likely to be materially advantaged through your life?**

- 8:13      John Polesel      Well at the moment I would say not very confident, and I think this relates partly to the fact that our school systems are having some trouble fitting VET programmes into the structure of the senior secondary certificate. So whether it's the HSC in New South Wales or the VCE in Victoria, fitting a vocational programme that's coherent, that has good outcomes, that actually provides some labour market advantages is still quite difficult to do, and that's presenting a challenge to systems but it's also presenting a challenge to kids who are trying to find a way through the selection of their subjects. They're often being put under pressure to do subjects which will give them an ATAR, even though that ATAR may not be in their long-term interest, it may be that they would be better off focusing on a more vocationally-oriented programme that leads them into an apprenticeship or a trainee post school.
- 9:05      **Maxine McKew**      **So these school certificates, and they're different across the states, have they hit their use by date?**
- 9:11      John Polesel      I would say we probably need to think very carefully about the purpose of our school certificates. I mean traditionally it was very simple – a school certificate, a senior school certificate was about getting into university, you created a pathway, you had examinations which were accepted by universities for the purpose of entry into particular courses. I think with the number of kids now staying on until the end of secondary school having risen to close to nine in ten of the cohort, we're looking at a much broader purpose for the senior certificates. They need to create a pathway for some kids into university, I think they still need to help universities select students into particular courses, but I think they also need to help students get jobs, they need to help them transition into the VET sector, into apprenticeships, into traineeships, and I think that broadening of purpose is something they're still coming to terms with.
- 10:06      **Maxine McKew**      **Peter, from an equity point of view this is pretty ordinary isn't it what we've been serving up to what are a lot of you**

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**know marginalised working class kids, and when one considers the number of state governments that have been Labor Governments over the decades, they've really been short-changed aren't they?**

10:22 Peter Noonan

It's a travesty Maxine. If we looked in detail at the resources per student in terms of the principles around the Gonski Report on needs-based funding and so on, and then particularly if we extrapolate that into the tertiary sector, the reality is that the most disadvantaged kids, the kids from working class backgrounds are the kids who most need a high quality accessible VET system, are the ones who are most disadvantaged. They're the ones who pay upfront fees, they have less spent on them. VET has been used as a petri dish for experimentation by some pretty silly free market experiments not wreaked on the university sector at all. Now personally I don't have a problem with choice and diversity in the VET sector, I think it's one of its benefits, but it does have to be framed around the question of accessibility, quality and purpose.

11:08 **Maxine McKew**

**Have we well and truly walked back from the excesses of that?**

11:11 Peter Noonan

Look I'm not sure Maxine. I think the problem is that often you get an over-correction or an over-reaction. So instead of actually thinking about a long time, sustainable, transparent you know well run funding system, and I would include in that good industry providers, good high quality private and community-based providers. I'm not one who just favours a complete TAFE monopoly, I'm a very strong supporter of TAFE as being the backbone or the centre of the system, but one of the strengths of VET is its diversity. The rules should be clear, the funding should be consistent, young people particularly shouldn't be paying upfront fees, and the Government's got to be able to stand behind the quality of the providers it funds and basically say that you know if we fund them then we can guarantee that if people go to them, they will get a good experience and a good outcome. And no, I'm not totally confident that that's still the case.

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- 12:04     **Maxine McKew**     **John, can I come back to you on the question of course content and quality because I know you've looked at this in various European countries and elsewhere. What would something much more comprehensive look like?**
- 12:17     John Polesel     I think one of the differences between Australia and a lot of the European systems is that in the European systems, a lot of the VET is actually focused on senior secondary aged students, so we're talking about sixteen to nineteen year olds. When we think of VET we're think of VET in terms of adult sector provision, of course that does include early school leavers who might be younger. I think if we're going to provide better VET to that sixteen to nineteen group, I think we do need to look at better linkages with the labour market, I think we need to look at changing school culture. I think Peter was absolutely right saying it's not just a funding issue, I think there are cultural problems in schools where teachers still see themselves as the guardians of the academic curriculum and that's obviously something that will benefit middle class students more and often leaves working class kids behind. I think that schooling culture has to change so that the mission of school is seen more broadly, and that's going to involve partly forming much stronger linkages with employers, which means employers need to also do more in their terms of providing training places, providing opportunities for apprenticeships and traineeships, providing better structured workplace learning so that students are not learning VET in a narrow school-based/course-based environment only but actually learning it in the workplace.
- 13:36     **Maxine McKew**     **Does there to be more breadth in the curriculum because I think you've made the points there are no mandated subjects.**
- 13:42     John Polesel     Again this brings us back to the purposes of the senior secondary certificates and the way in which we conceptualise them. I think we need to give much clearer messages to students so that they know what the purpose of their senior secondary studies are, and that might involve having a more coherent approach, not just giving them complete free choice in terms of the subjects that they choose, but encouraging them I

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think to pick from a suite of subjects which actually have a purpose in terms of creating pathways into particular sectors or into particular occupational areas.

14:15 **Maxine McKew**

**Peter, what do you think of that?**

14:15 Peter Noonan

I agree with John. I think we need to look at the diversity of participation and engagement in VET in schools. The reality is that of course there are plenty of students, including one of my own daughters who is a high ATAR student who also did VET sport and recreation because it fitted her career goals and ambitions and she loved the area. She had a very good careers teacher who actually persuaded her to drop an academic subject to do that.

14:42 **Maxine McKew**

**Is it rare?**

14:43 Peter Noonan

I think very rare yes, but it wasn't going to be her main occupation or her main area of study but was an important thing that she did to support an experience in a gap year that she really wanted to do. And a lot of students do VET subjects to help with their part-time employment or to build skills in the areas that are really critical. That's one group of students. I think the other group of students are the group that John and I are talking about who need deeper, not necessarily broader, but deeper specialisations, much earlier access to workplaces. The other comment I'd make is I think we need to think about vocational in its broader sense. Of course a very large amount of provision at universities is vocational in nature as well, and we should be thinking about vocational learning in its broader sense regardless of where it's delivered. So everything that we say is important for VET as a sector – workplace engagement, employer support, deep learning, engaged learning – you could say exactly the same thing about the vocational and professional areas in universities as well. So in some ways the country needs to think about vocational and professional learning as a continuum and as a whole thing, not just think about it purely in sectoral terms.

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- 15:52     **Maxine McKew**     **Well it's interesting you say that because I'm just looking here and, to go back in history a bit, you will of course both remember the 2008 Bradley Review which drew attention, and I'm quoting here, to the fact that there were two distinct sectors, but what was needed was a continuum of tertiary skills funded by a single level of government and one that was nationally regulated. I guess you know we can cry over spilled milk, but we do have to acknowledge that was one of the great missed opportunities wasn't it?**
- 16:18     Peter Noonan     Well as you know Maxine, I was on the Bradley Review and that was one of our central recommendations. Yes there was a missed opportunity, and as John has said, largely a defender of the demand-driven high rent system, I think it was about a system and one that was centrally administered and so on, but it's absolutely true, as we said in the Bradley Review, we explicitly warned if you introduced demand-driven funding in higher ed and you don't do something about funding on the other sector, we said exactly serious imbalances will develop. So you don't like to be a Cassandra, but there was a really major missed opportunity at that time and we're paying the legacy for it now because the sector is immeasurably worse off than it was a decade ago when the Bradley Review made that recommendation.
- 17:01     **Maxine McKew**     **John, where do you see the policy flaws?**
- 17:03     John Polesel     Yeah I think Peter's right, and I would probably add to that that some degree of specialisation might need to be considered as well in the higher ed sector. I think we have a whole lot of universities that are trying to do everything with no real differentiation and it doesn't make for a very efficient model. I think allowing some institutions to specialise, particularly where they have particular strengths, in the way that we used to have in Australia and the way that we still do in a lot of international systems, the old institutes of technology, and giving those particular institutions much stronger linkages with employers and with industry, I think would go some way to creating better quality programmes.

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- 17:45     **Maxine McKew**                     **Peter, are you hopeful we can reconceptualise, redesign the sector?**
- 17:51     Peter Polesel                             I think there's a number of critical steps that have got to be taken and I'm involved in some of them so I need to make some of my comments with care. So I'm chairing a review of the Australian qualifications framework, and it has been really encouraging that submissions and consultations have been unanimous in their view to varying extents that we do need to think about tertiary education as a much more coherent sector. In the review we are seeing that senior secondary, as John has said, should be repurposed and described in its broader functions, but we should be thinking about senior secondary and the early years of tertiary in the same way. So now think about the middle years in schooling as a phase of schooling in young people's lives rather than driving a sharp distinction between senior secondary and tertiary, the sharp distinction being based on a very strong assessment process at one point in time rather than a formative assessment process to help people progress into pathways into tertiary education. So I'm hoping that the recommendation that we'll be making around senior secondary in the AQF review can help underpin that change.
- 18:57     **Maxine McKew**                     **John, you've been a strong advocate from within the Academy around redesign. Do you think we will get to the point where VET is seen as something more than a second class option?**
- 19:07     John Polesel                             I think so. We're doing some work at the moment for the New South Wales Government here at Melbourne University, and we did some work recently for the Commonwealth on the senior certificates. I think basically what's coming through is a very strong message that we need to consider the whole cohort, not just those who've had that very secure and very simple pathway from secondary school to university. I think one of the problems with redesigning VET and reconceptualising VET is that there are a lot of different players involved and that presents a real challenge. We have eight separate secondary school systems, we have the Catholic and the independent schools obviously involved as well, we have the VET sector, we have the higher

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education sector, and of course we have employers and industry, and I think all of those players have to come to the table in order to affect real change.

20:00     **Maxine McKew**            **Well just a final point in terms of some of those key players. Peter, is it time for the TAFEs and the other providers to actually think of themselves as providing quite a distinctive, important product as opposed to wanting to be kind of add ons to the university sector?**

20:16     Peter Noonan                That's my view. I think it's fine for TAFE to be involved in degree provision where it matters. I've not been comfortable with the ambitions of some TAFEs to say that they would vacate the space that was vacated, using John's word, by the former colleges of advanced education. The reality is that over 40% of the workforce still has no post school qualification. We have endemic problems with adult literacy. We have huge problems with disengagement amongst young people that have left school early and older people – women returning to work, refugees, a huge population of people who need access to a high quality, flexible, vocationally-oriented sector, and we shouldn't be focusing all our attention in squabbling over the fifteen or 20% who might be making a choice between higher education and upper level TAFE in my view. In many ways, if you go back to the document that was the foundation of the TAFE sector, the Kangan Report, which has this very strong emphasis on recurrent education in adult learning and accessibility, we could actually do worse than go back and reread it and say well what does a contemporary vision of that look like now, particularly in the context of population growth and population aging?

- music -

21:3       **Maxine McKew**            **That's it for this time. Talking Teaching is a production of the University of Melbourne and comes from the Hallworth Recording Studios. Our sound engineer is Gavin Nebauer who has also composed our theme music. Bye for now.**

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