

Foreword

This book represents a balancing act in drawing together the widely scattered elements of the history of vocational education and training in the Northern Territory—somewhat reminiscent of one of those circus performers with a series of plates spinning on the top of sticks. The first plate balances the temptation to offer a general critique of all government actions as opposed to the limitations of this specific research effort and the evidence associated with vocational training. It seems plausible that one might find that the large health and education agencies with thousands of public employees and large amounts of capital infrastructure might respond to ministerial direction quite differently from that discussed here. On the other hand, sport, recreation and land development might be more similar. Alternatively, there is an important, principled separation between the minister and the police and law courts that might suggest different explanations of Cabinet actions.

Plate two in our analogy offsets presenting an accurate, accessible story against the mind-numbing suite of acronyms and systematic complexity for which the sector has become infamous. The third plate poises a theoretical explanation of government ministers behaving as wealthy philanthropists against the desire to create something more than a pure chronology of events. Finally, plate four seeks parallels between the relative roles of government agencies/public institutions/private concerns and the ambitions of those who are elected to public office.

There is also an attempt to describe the tone and atmosphere surrounding many of the major events contributing to the story of vocational education and training since the early 1970s. These have been gathered from interviews with many of the key participants, verbal and written reports tabled in the ubiquitous meetings held to give direction to policy and practice, handwritten notations in the margins of archival materials and my personal participation in some of the major activities.

While every attempt has been made to carefully attribute as many references as possible, there are crucial contextual matters described in this book that do not exist on the public written record. Nevertheless, they help to explain ministerial behaviour and cannot be ignored for the sake of accuracy—possibly plate five spinning away!

Finally, this book is the latest in a series of journal articles and conference presentations that build upon the findings of research I conducted as part of my Doctor of Philosophy studies during 2010–13 into how the Australian vocational education and training system works. In the Northern Territory, there is unprecedented access to the political process and to the ministers of government, senior public servants and industry leaders, allowing for novel explanations of their behaviour to be researched. Of course, while recording the history of vocational education and training itself in a single volume helps to tell the Territory's story, the counter-balanced purpose is to stimulate debate and further explore *how* this has all come about in order to create the potential for better policy-making in the future.

It might seem odd for an account of the training system to have virtually no reference to students or teachers. However strange, that is the way the scheme has been conceived and constructed—students are to be processed and assessed against competency standards that have been designed to be more or less teacher proof. That is yet another story.

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