Learner voice in VET & ACE: What do stakeholders say?

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Abstract

Involving learner voice and learner input in the promotion of students' own learning has the potential to empower learners and transform their learning experience. A greater emphasis on genuine engagement of students could also potentially transform Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Adult Community Education (ACE) systems, and, in turn, workplaces and communities. This paper presents initial findings from research conducted in a range of VET and ACE organisations in three Australian states and the Northern Territory with a view to identifying the mechanisms and systems used to capture learner voice. The paper also draws upon recent research in the UK and Europe that has provided critical insights into the benefits to learners' experiences and successes that result from taking learner voice seriously in the Further Education (FE) setting. The paper concludes that learner voice is not being seriously considered in VET in Australia, and that authentic approaches to capturing and responding to learner voice might lead to better outcomes for students.

Introduction

The 2012 AVETRA Conference theme is 'The value and voice of VET research for individuals, industry, community and the nation'. Our paper is somewhat reflexive in relation to this theme by reporting the extent to which the voices of learners are actually sought or considered in VET in Australia. The paper is based on early findings from interviews and consultations with a range of stakeholders (teachers, trainers, managers, funding bodies), involved in the organisation and delivery of VET and ACE within Australia. We asked them particularly about Learner Voice regulatory frameworks and provider accountability for acting on feedback from learners, particularly disadvantaged learners. The data are taken from a wider research project that includes similar interviews in Europe, and a critical analysis of the current obligations, processes and mechanisms for gathering and acting on feedback from learners, particularly disadvantaged learners in VET and ACE. The wider project also involved a critical review of the relevant Australian and international literature that has advocated ways of optimising the VET and ACE experience for disadvantaged learners.

Literature review

For Potter (2011, p.175) there are four different ways of conceptualising learners, and therefore learner voice, in adult education. Each assumes an increasing level of learner agency. Firstly, learners are regarded simply as a *data source*, assessed against normative targets. Secondly, learners may be *active respondents* to questions, with teachers able to listen to and analyse their responses if and when they have the freedom to do so. Thirdly, learners may be treated as *co-researchers* with increased involvement in the learning and teaching decisions made by teachers. In the fourth and highest level, learners are themselves *researchers.*

Sellar and Gale (2011) identify a general and relatively recent merging of 'voice' with 'identity' and 'representation'. They see the concept of voice emerging in the latter half of the 20th Century in connection with struggles for equality (McLeod, 2011) and claims for political recognition of difference. They cite Bragg (2007, p.344), who identifies the argument for student voice as 'part of a larger emancipatory project, [that hopefully can] be transformative not just of individuals, but of the oppressive hierarchies within educational institutions and even within society.' Sellar and Gale (2011, p.116) advocate 'a conception of student equity that focuses on *capacities* - in relation to mobility, aspiration and voice – rather than barriers to *access.'* They further argue (p.116) that:

> strengthening capacities to cultivate networks (mobility), shape futures (aspirations) and narrate experiences (voice) increases people's ability to access, benefit from and transform economic goods and social institutions.

Sellar and Gale (pp.127-129) also identify five Learner Voice principles:

1. Voice requires resources – practical and symbolic – if it is to be valued and recognized by others.
2. Voice involves an ongoing exchange and narratives with others.
3. Voice speaks for our embodied histories.
4. Our lives are not just composed of one narrative.
5. Voice is denied when social relations are organized in ways that privilege some voices over others.

Rudd, Colligan and Naik (2006, pp.i-ii), in a comprehensive handbook about *Learner Voice,* identify four main questions to help people in 'schools or colleges' in the UK to think about how learner voice activities might be developed. They suggest that the first main question that should be posed is: 'Is anything already happening … to promote learner voice?' 'If not what might be done? and 'Are learners being listened to?' Secondly, if there is an imperative to remove barriers, it is important to establish 'Who is being heard?' and 'Does the institutional culture and ethos support the development of learner voice?' Thirdly, they ask, 'Are there clear ways in which learners are involved in decision making processes?' and 'What tools or methods, if any, are being used to listen to learners' voices?' Finally, if there is an imperative for

taking learner voice forward in an institution, it is important to determine 'Which area(s) and issue(s) might be good for developing and embedding learner voice?'

Rudd, Colligan and Naik (2006, p.11) conclude that learner voice can occur on a number of levels as summarised in Table 1. We return later to Rudd et al.'s useful typology in framing the conclusions in our paper.

Table 1 Learner Voice Ladder of participation
(After Rudd, Colligan & Naik, 2006, p.11)

Types of participation	Types of involvement	Levels of engagement
Manipulation	Learners directed and not informed; Learners 'Rubberstamp' staff decisions	Non-participation
Decoration	Learners indirectly involved in decisions, not aware of rights or involvement options	
Informing	Learners merely informed of actions & changes, but views not actively sought	
Consultation	Learners fully informed, encouraged to express opinions, but with little or no impact	Tokenism
Placation	Learners consulted & informed & listened to, but no guarantee changes made are wanted	
Partnership	Learners consulted & informed. Outcomes result of negotiations between staff & learners	
Delegated power	Staff inform agendas for action, but learners responsible for initiatives & programs that result	Learner empowerment
Learner control	Learners initiate agendas, responsible for management of issues & change. Power delegated to learners; active in designing education.	

Method

Interviews and consultations were conducted with a range of stakeholders in several Australian states and the Northern Territory. The interviews about Learner Voice regulatory frameworks focused on provider accountability for acting on feedback from learners, particularly from disadvantaged learners. The main open ended questions were: 'How do you (managers, teachers, trainers, curriculum designers, policy makers, student representatives, employers) collect information from enrolled students and graduates about their experiences or attitudes to learning, and when?', 'How do you analyse, summarize and feedback that evidence to learners and other stakeholders (teachers, trainers, managers, funding bodies)?' and 'What are your understandings about the regulatory framework for collecting information about student experience of teaching and learning?'

Given the focus of the wider research on disadvantaged learners in VET, other questions included: 'What account do you take of the diversity of student experience for students who may be disadvantaged in any way in the learning context (e.g. by disability, ethnicity, language, literacy, location?' Questions about theoretical views of learner voice were included: 'What do you understand by learner voice and learner feedback?' and 'Which aspects of both do you regard as being: 1. most

effective, and 2., most in need of improvement (in Australia, this state/territory, this provider, for particular student groups)?' Finally, we asked: 'What mechanisms do you use to hear from and give feedback to learners who leave before they finish their course?' and 'What do you do to identify potential learners who for whatever reason do not enrol?' The interviews were fully transcribed.

Interviewees were very diverse. They included Disability Services Officers and representatives, Equity Services Coordinators, Indigenous VET Managers, Student Liaison Officers, Directors of VET Programs, VET students, teachers, researchers and trainers. They also included Government VET Policy, Strategy and Program Officers, Government VET Contract and Performance Managers, Private Provider and Community Centre Managers, VET and ACE Directors and Managers, Apprenticeship Coordinators, Industry representatives, University Academics and Postgraduate researchers as well as people with research and reporting roles at NCVER (National Centre for Vocational Education Research). A limitation to this research is that the interviewees did not include VET learners.

Results

The results and the analysis that follows are based on common themes emerging from our interview questions under a series of thematic headings.

How information in VET and ACE is analysed, summarised and fed back to learners

Information collected from students on attitudes to learning is extremely variable in Australia. At one extreme, in a very small number of learning organisations, a number of techniques are used which are extensive, strategic, systematic and learner-focussed. These include ILPs (Individual Learning Plans). More commonly, surveys of student attitudes to teaching and learning are more likely to be occasional, ad hoc and driven only or mainly by minimum statutory and regulatory requirements.

In some learning contexts with experienced and fully trained teachers and trainers, there is an expectation that, at the classroom, workshop or workplace learning level, teachers and trainers should, as part of normal professional practice, use a range of techniques, both formal and informal, to gauge the appropriateness to learners of the teaching and the program. Surveys are used to varying extents in almost all learning and teaching contexts in VET and ACE to collect data on commencing students. All VET institutions with external, state or national funding are required to collected data as part of external regulatory and statutory requirements. This data is subject to auditing to demonstrate that students enrolled, attended, were assessed and completed.

NCVER attempts to collect what one interviewee called 'the cold hard facts' for government funded VET programs including apprenticeships. NCVER uses apparently robust and comparable standard data elements and processes that include

identifying whether students belong to any designated equity groups. NCVER routinely collects commencing and completion data and undertakes a number of other surveys that sometimes include items included to generate information on student intentions and outcomes. In general, however, there are some exceptions, student attitudes to teaching and learning in VET are seldom systematically explored. Few institutions systematically collect data on student perceptions of teaching and learning, graduate outcomes or graduate perceptions of VET teaching or programs other than occasionally via brief and often superficial surveys. The mandatory NCVER Graduate Outcomes Survey includes some questions on student perceptions of their learning experiences. However, this data is collected after students complete, which is too late to be of use. It is aggregated and analysed in a form that is unable to be fed back to, and formally used by, the source institutions, unless NCVER have responded to individual requests for institute specific data. Overall, there is a widespread understanding among those interviewed that he voice of learners in VET is seldom properly heard in Australia. Student engagement may or may not be working at a lecturer/teacher/trainer level, but from a system perspective, there is general agreement from industry training boards, VET teachers and institution managers, student representatives, policy makers and researchers that 'we are not doing that well'.

While there is comprehensive evidence that 'we are not doing that well' collecting information from enrolled students and graduates, even the limited amount of data that *are* gathered (other than by NCVER) are seldom used strategically at any level. There is evidence that what is collected is seldom systematically analysed or summarized, and is very rarely fed back to learners or even to teachers and trainers. The NCVER data, in terms of its analysis, summary and feedback, tends to be directed to industry and is policy and provider focussed rather than student or teacher focussed.

Regulatory frameworks in place for collecting information about student experience of teaching and learning

This interview question about regulatory frameworks was seen as particularly relevant to, and was widely discussed by, State and Territory VET managers responsible for VET contracting and policy. Regulatory frameworks applying to government-funded VET in Australia stipulate that all Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), as one government policy manager put it:

> … seek feedback from their clients, which includes employers and students, about the services they offer. And they need to use that feedback to either improve or make changes depending on what the learner is actually feeding back.

While this understanding is widely shared in each Australian State and Territory, there is a similarly shared and widespread perception that:

> …the extent to which the RTOs actually do [seek feedback] effectively might be questionable sometimes. … I mean some RTOs comply, other RTOs don't see benefit in feedback and informing continuous improvement.

There was considerable frankness on the part of interviewees who criticised the weakness of the current regulatory frameworks and the minimal use, even by industry training bodies, of the data already collected as stipulated within this framework. One industry training representative expressed the view that there is:

> … nothing in the regulatory framework that requires us to collect information. We get a lot of feedback from students but it's not made use of in any shape or form, to my knowledge. … No one analyses it. No one reports on it. It sits in those files never to be seen again.

Another industry training board representative stated that:

> There are no pathways to seek learner voice at all through the Board. The Board is what we call 'market intelligence' and is about the industry, it is not about students, so it's the employer's perspective of the work readiness of the staff. … In terms of closing that loop … back to the training, organisations, the quality accreditation bodies within the system, we don't do that.

Account taken for students who may be disadvantaged in the learning context

Questions about the extent to which learners might be disadvantaged in the learning context by limited opportunities for learner voice elicited the most diverse responses, framed largely around the interviewee's role and previous experience of student diversity. Representatives and advocates of disability organisations, for example, focussed particularly on the difficulties of people with disabilities in responding to a standard, written survey. These respondents also discussed difficulties with alternative, often qualitative, learner feedback mechanisms because, they said, it was difficult to tell who was actually responding. Was it, for example, the learner, the teacher, the parent or the carer? There were also discussions about the often-related difficulties posed by feedback from learners with limited cognitive, prose, written, computer and conversational literacies.

Representatives of learners from culturally and linguistically diverse groups tended to focus, aside from the issue of language, on the different cultural expectations of diverse students and the power relations embedded in different learner feedback mechanisms. Migrants, refugees, and Indigenous Australians, for example, were seen as likely to be suspicious of surveys and other feedback mechanisms, fearing the consequences of speaking honestly. Some interesting and important insights also came from some younger interviewees, who tended to shine the spotlight less on deficit models of traditional literacies and disability and more on new and different preferred literacies. For example, a 'Generation Y' Aboriginal person reflected on the different attitudes of many 'Gen Y' people, including her, to written surveys sent to the home. She explained that:

> [If] I have to take the effort to write it out and then go and find a post box to send it to, I haven't done it. If it was on line [as a blog, on Facebook, on a TAFE website] … absolutely, I would. For Gen Y, it's more inviting than having a piece of you.

During the Northern Territory interviews particularly strong views were expressed about the way Indigenous Australian voices in training and learning are seldom sought, heard, considered or acted on despite copious quantitative evidence that

VET programs are generally not working in many parts of remote Australia, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders comprise a significant proportion of the population (37% in the case of the Northern Territory: NT). There was universal agreement among those interviewed that use of the Learner Voice mechanism in the NT, and in other remote learning and training contexts, was very poor and that standard mechanisms for eliciting student feedback do not work in these locations. There is a wide range of reasons for this failure, including language and cultural difference. One industry interviewee claimed, 'You wouldn't hear [anything] from [Indigenous students] at all.'

Discussion

In general there was a poor understanding amongst interviewees of either learner voice or, particularly, learner feedback, either theoretically or practically other than at a classroom, workshop or workplace level. There was a widespread perception that, in the 'competitive training market', learner voice is rarely sought or heard other than 'by their feet'; that is, when people stop coming to programs. As one VET academic put this view, there is little thought or consideration 'to really, genuinely give voice. … It's a low order priority. I don't think much is done at all.'

Learner voice and feedback in VET and ACE, on the evidence of a substantial number of Australian interviews, appears to be particularly poorly implemented at institutional, course, or faculty level. Students are rarely consulted or included on Committees or Boards, and, when they are, it is typically only one representative with little effective voice or mechanisms to hear, consult with, or feed back to the student body. Learner voice, though weak, was regarded by most interviewees as being most effective at the classroom and workshop level, and to be more active and better developed within ACE provider contexts than in VET. While some disability organisations are relatively highly organized and networked to advocate *for* learner voice on a number of levels, including nationally, the extent to which learner voice is actually expressed by people with a disability is much less clear. On the basis of the evidence, it seems fair to conclude that students in general, including disadvantaged students and those with disabilities, are rarely consulted or heard.

There is almost no evidence that the voices of the high proportion of people who have left VET courses without completing is sought or heard at all. There is also evidence that learner voice is seldom heard by industry training bodies. A large amount of quantitative data is collected by survey at the commencement and completion of courses mainly for national, state and institutional regulatory purposes. These data, that might help inform learner voice, are seldom analysed and very rarely returned in a timely way to the teachers or learners. If the data are eventually returned, it is seldom in a form that is useful or effective to improve either teaching strategies or course development, or to feed back to the students who supplied it.

An industry interviewee in the Northern Territory emphatically stated:

There is no learner voice, especially in remote communities, No one could give a rats. The only learner voice that you might get is something from the RTO, and they are just as likely to say, 'I had a bad experience in the remote community and we weren't able to complete', because everything in remote communities is centred around there being enough trainees to make it economic for a trainer to go and train. … And once you get below that level you stop training. … Once you have lost someone you have lost them. … No one is interested in why.

It would appear useful, given the relatively high proportion of students who leave programs before they complete, to know what mechanisms are used to hear and give feedback to learners who leave before they finish their courses. With minor exceptions, the overwhelming response given to questions about the voice of those who leave without completing was: 'Nothing', 'Almost nothing' or 'I have no idea'. And yet all parties interviewed recognized that hearing the voice of this group of students is, as one interviewee put it, 'getting to the heart of the matter to those that might matter the most'. A point frequently made was that heeding the voices of students might provide clues about why so many students fail to complete their courses, why they disengage from learning, and about the barriers they face due to intervening life and work circumstances.

One ACE provider representative said that, despite the best efforts of teachers to track students who leave before they finish their course, 'You ring people up who withdraw to find out the reason they disengage [but] they won't answer phone calls or SMS or emails. … It is very intensive work.' One VET manager summed up the typical responses to this question by saying, 'We have done it in some isolated cases but there is no system-wide approach to [following up learners who have left before they finish their courses].' In contrast, some higher education providers, concerned about high levels of non-completion and attrition, and with a rich body of research evidence into the first year experience in higher education, have set up mentoring programs to detect and support students in difficulty before they leave. A coordinator of one such program said, '[It allows me to] hear that it's going pear shaped for them and that they want to leave'. The point is that, having heard that message, the coordinator can then try to address the student's situation before they leave. This rarely seems to happen in VET.

In some contexts individual learning plans can provide a mechanism for teachers to work with students as individuals with different and diverse learning and other needs. In the case of some apprenticeships and traineeships, there is sometimes a formal process of interviewing students before they leave a course. In one instance, a former VET manager found home visits particularly useful. This manager claimed, 'It gets very revealing going to a home or what counts as home; that tells you an awful lot about why the student is not attending.' In another instance, potential non-completers of an Adult Migrant English Program were contacted by phone after three absences, since non-attendance led to suspension of their Centrelink (federal income support) payments.

NCVER has undertaken several surveys that have addressed the phenomenon of non-completion of some VET sub-groups, primarily to inform research and policy

rather than as a form of learner feedback. In 2004, NCVER conducted an Indigenous outcome survey using Indigenous interviewers with appropriate Indigenous cultural awareness. This survey was able to elicit some useful insights into students' reasons for non-completion. In addition, NCVER have undertaken two apprentice and trainee destination surveys with purposeful selection of respondents who had and had not completed their courses.

One of the main issues in this area of non-completion, a VET academic noted, appears to be the perception that students may leave before completing their course for reasons other than difficulties they have experienced with the learning:

> [The reasons for leaving] are associated with the difficulties of being a student, [poverty], living costs, transport, poor community resources to engage with learning, not being able to get accommodation and living stressed-up lives. The TAFE and VET sectors have traditionally seen themselves in the position of a second chance education, so you are going to get many people on the margins of very inequitable economic situations, so they find it very hard to live and that prevents them from continuing.

In one instance where a non-completion survey had been undertaken, a TAFE provider manager noted that the survey provided evidence that

> 95 per cent of the time [the reason for non-completion] was for personal reasons. Husband had got a job interstate, they just found out they were pregnant, they got a new job, they were moving house, whatever, the [reasons were] domestic

This manager blamed outdated customer management and administration systems in that State. The state systems, he suggested,

> Are just so out of date. The investments are so great. The lead in times are so great and by the time you get to technology it is already out of date. The private RTOs are the ones who have a distinct advantage over us because we just can't respond to chasing technology [like a private sector organisation can]. As a public provider we don't have the systems. We don't have the technology that would allow us to [track non-completers] without a massive investment in a manual survey.

Although there is a general lack of evidence throughout the VET system about people who leave before completing, there is even less evidence about, or effort to identify, who is *not* participating at all in VET programs. One industry manager said, 'I don't think at the moment that anyone is asking questions of people who don't participate. I think it's extremely important to ask.' An NCVER informant noted, 'From the administrative collection [of data] we are only looking at those who are participating so we don't know very much about the people who don't enrol'

The perceived lack of research to identify people who are not accessing and purchasing VET services was regarded as a huge failing of the VET system by many interviewees. One ACE manager noted:

> It's just a common sense approach rather than asking people who [already] have lots of access to education how much they value the education. I would be much more interested in looking at parts of Australia and particular cohorts who have really limited access and talk to them about whether there are barriers to their participation or whether the research doesn't suit them or the offerings don't suit their particular needs.

Conclusion

Our research so far leads us to make the following, tentative conclusions. Learner voice and feedback depend, for students in a VET context, on what are defined as the *purposes* of vocational education and training. Learner voice also depends on the extent to which the learner is recognized as an active participant in the teaching and learning process. It is also affected by the context in which learning takes place, including the national, cultural, geographic, policy, regulatory and institutional environments. Particularly in the case of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, whether learner voice is heard also depends on the capability of diverse learners to actively respond when consulted.

We also conclude, consistent with Potter's (2011) conceptualisation of learners, that the nature and quality of learner voice depends on the rationales and mechanisms for valuing voice and feedback, who seeks learner voice, who provides the feedback, and the mechanisms used to seek it. Above all, learner voice in VET is seen to be associated with presuppositions about how students are located within a VET context. For example, at the two extremes of dependency, are they participants with agency or are they dependent, fee-paying customers with no say at all in their own education and training?

In the student participation hierarchy of Rudd, Colligan and Naik (2006), summarised above in Table 1, learners in VET in Australia, beyond the classroom at least, would be placed mainly within the 'non-participation' level of engagement and rarely at even the 'tokenism' level. Their participation type might best be characterised in their typology as 'decoration' and 'manipulation'. Learner voice has presumably become more important recently, but more difficult to hear and respond to as many national governments move towards client and customer models of provision, which can dis-empower students. We also anticipate that the advantages for learners of the education and training system taking their voices seriously may not be the same as the advantages anticipated by government and providers. But this is a topic for another paper.

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