

New directions in European vocational
education and training policy and practice:
Lessons for Australia

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About the research



New directions in European vocational education and training policy and practice: Lessons for Australia

Roger Harris, Michele Simons and Katie Maher, Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work, University of South Australia

While Australia can be justifiably proud of its vocational education and training (VET) system, it is always worth considering what is going on internationally. Europe, in particular, has been modernising its education and training systems to make them more competitive and to help create additional and better jobs. This has involved reform across several areas, including competitiveness, social cohesion and the structure of qualifications frameworks. Many of these issues are very familiar to us.

This work has been informed by people reflecting on policy developments during a period of substantial change. Many commented on the impact and pace of reform, recognising that, while it would be nice to 'slow things down', there is a strong sense of reform having made positive impacts.

Key messages

- Developing common standards for quality and for qualifications frameworks is an important issue.
- Changes in the labour market are impacting on education. One tension lies in the challenge of balancing educational aims and labour market needs.
- The number of learners moving between VET and higher education in either direction is still relatively small. One of the significant challenges for Australia is to ensure seamless pathways between the sectors and to build a system of educational choice.
- Australia could pay more attention to the validation of learning through experience, where, in addition to the outcome, an emphasis is placed on the learner's ability to engage in the learning process. This would inform debate over the meaning of competence.
- The qualifications, professional development and wellbeing of VET teachers are central issues for European policy-makers, but have not been addressed in any substantial way in Australia. In addition, the centrality of teachers and trainers to reform in Europe is in sharp contrast to the experience of VET teachers and trainers in Australia.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

Contents

Executive summary	7
Introduction	9
Research design	10
Limitations	12
VET reform in the European Union	13
The background: Influences on VET reform	13
Some key issues at the broad level	16
Under-researched areas	18
Directions in VET reform in Europe	20
Relationships between higher education and VET	21
Validation of learning: Non-formal, informal and experiential learning	23
Access, inclusiveness and learner engagement	25
Development of VET teachers	28
Adult and continuing education	31
Retention and guidance services	33
Role of social partners	35
Key competencies for lifelong learning	36
Higher-level apprenticeships	37
Selected European views on policy directions in VET	40
Advantages	40
Disadvantages	41
Improving the quality of VET	43
Conclusions	44
References	46
Appendix 1	53

Tables

1	Sources in recent Australian VET literature that include European countries	9
2	Countries in which the 30 informants were located	11
3	Most important contributions to improvement in the quality of VET in Europe	43
4	Summary of key themes in the European literature	54
5	Summary of most frequent themes from the survey of European informants	55

Executive summary

Context

The Lisbon European Council in 2000 declared that, by 2010, Europe was to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society in the world. A key plank in that agenda was the promotion of employability and social inclusion through investment in citizens' knowledge and competence at all stages of their lives. Education and training were singled out as 'a forceful policy lever' and member states were called on to 'modernise' their education and training systems.

Vocational education and training (VET) was to play a pivotal role in this Lisbon-inspired endeavour to keep Europe competitive, at the same time as improving social cohesion. It was seen as a key to the future. The importance of VET to the Lisbon goals subsequently became enshrined in the Copenhagen Declaration of 2002, when education ministers of 31 European countries, European social partners and the European Commission agreed on working towards enhanced cooperation in European vocational education and training.

Scope

The study was based on an analysis of relevant, available literature and a survey of a small number of selected informants on European VET. There is an enormous array of sources available on European developments, and so the review had to be restricted mainly to the European Union level and to sources in English. A number of academic papers published in journals were also consulted.

A limited number of questions were emailed to 30 informants in 18 European countries. The participation of one or other of the researchers in four international forums during 2007 enabled the compilation of the list of informants. Twenty-six of these contacts responded (87% response rate).

Key issues at a broad level

Several key issues dominate thinking and writing in the European Union. Five are briefly highlighted in this report, since they are in many ways reflective of similar concerns in Australia and, furthermore, they help to set in context the themes discussed later. These are:

- ✧ impact and pace of reform
- ✧ competitiveness and social cohesion
- ✧ capacity of VET to meet all its policy objectives
- ✧ assumptions inherent in qualification frameworks
- ✧ VET systems: whether they are converging or diverging.

Key themes

The themes gleaned from our informants were relatively consistent with those from the literature. Moreover, there was a degree of commonality across the countries, which is perhaps not unexpected, given the level of activity at European Union level. The nine most common themes identified in both the informants' responses and from the literature for further analysis are given below. Each is discussed in the report, with examples from various countries that may be of interest to Australian VET:

- ✧ higher education and VET interrelationships
- ✧ validation of non-formal and informal learning
- ✧ access, inclusiveness and learner engagement
- ✧ development of VET teachers
- ✧ adult and continuing education
- ✧ retention and guidance services
- ✧ employer engagement and the role of 'social partners'
- ✧ key competencies for lifelong learning
- ✧ higher-level apprenticeships.

Conclusions

In the views of the informants, the new directions in the European Union were attempting to address a variety of problems and issues and were being driven by a mix of economic, social and political drivers. There is indeed a close connection between the progress of reform in each country and its political, economic and social development. Those countries with a longer history of reform, such as Germany, France and those in the United Kingdom and Scandinavia, were very evidently in the vanguard of European Union initiatives and were leaders in attempts to advance its goals and meet its targets. The diversity within the European Union in these respects is remarkable and remains a key issue, if not a concern, in achieving the goals and targets of these policy directions within the European Union as a whole. Wherever, possible, the report has highlighted what in particular is of relevance to Australian VET and discusses the implications.

A striking feature of recent VET policy direction, both in the European Union and in Australia, is the scope of issues that governments are addressing and the role they envisage VET playing in these far-reaching agendas. While the task expected of VET may well be overly ambitious in such complex national and supranational situations, there is no doubt that VET continues to be perceived as making significant contributions to social and economic goals, addressing issues associated with migration and citizenship, and informing policies concerned with youth, ageing populations and reforms in schools.

Many of the factors driving these policy formulations are common (for example, globalisation, increasing competition and growth of the knowledge economy). While the European Union countries and Australia have different structures in place for the various sectors of education, there is convergence around the imperative to 'modernise' VET systems and a significant amount of common thinking in relation to many issues. This report illustrates a number of those issues and examples worthy of closer consideration by VET policy-makers and practitioners in Australia.

Introduction

This project is a small-scale study exploring new directions in vocational education and training (VET) policy and practice in Europe, with implications for Australian VET. With the rapid development of the European Union (EU) and in light of the significant positioning of VET in the policy agendas of both its individual members and supranationally, it is timely to explore developments occurring and being mooted in that region (just as European observers are closely monitoring Australian initiatives).

There has been little recent Australian literature on new directions in European VET. Some studies have taken ‘big picture’ views of Australian VET in the world scene, such as globalisation and its impact on Australian VET (Cully 2006; Hall et al. 2000; Hobart 1999) and internationalisation of Australian VET (Smith & Smith 1999). Other studies have more directly embraced individual countries in Europe, most commonly with a specific content focus. Table 1 below summarises these studies.

Table 1 Sources in recent Australian VET literature that include European countries

Year	Authors	Geographical focus (Europe and Australia only)	Content focus
2006	Misko	Germany, UK, Australia	Provision of VET
2004	Curtain	Finland	Innovation
2004	McKenna & Fitzpatrick	Ireland, UK, Australia	Adult literacy in VET
2004	Kearns	OECD countries in Europe	Knowledge development
2003	Harris & Deissinger	Germany, Australia	Apprenticeship
2003	Blom & Meyers	Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Scotland, Sweden, Netherlands	Quality indicators
2002	Keating, Medrich, Volkoff & Perry	France, Germany, UK	Contextual variables on VET systems
2002	Burke & Reuling	Germany	Implementation of lifelong learning and VET
2000	Kearns & Papadopoulos	UK, Sweden, Netherlands, Germany	Learning and training culture
2002	Lindell & Abrahamsson	Sweden	Lifelong learning and VET
2001	Curtain	Europe	Public funding for post-compulsory education

Some of these studies are too ‘old’ now to extract ‘new’ directions in policy and practice and do not necessarily focus on the subject of this project, although they can offer valuable contextual background on the respective countries.

Arguably, the most relevant Australian source is Kearns’ (2004) *VET in the 21st century global knowledge economy: An overview of international developments in vocational education and training*. This paper was prepared as a think-piece contribution to the ANTA (former Australian National Training Authority) High Level Review of Training Packages, and was structured around four key themes and nine policy issues. It paid attention to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in Europe and North America, focusing particularly on Britain,

Ireland and Germany (p.3). Kearns showed that, while there was considerable commonality at that time in the main issues being addressed, strategies differed considerably between the countries. He concluded that ‘an overview of international trends offers insights into a wider range of policy options and ideas that may be relevant to Australian needs’ (p.4) and that:

[t]his overview of international developments in vocational education and training has shown a scene of substantial policy activity and shifts as countries adapt to the conditions and imperatives of the global knowledge society and economy (p.71).

He argues for ‘a re-conceptualisation and re-positioning of VET in Australian society’ (p.75) and calls for ‘a creative period of development in VET, like the Kangan era, marked by vision, leadership, goodwill, and an ongoing dialogue’ (p.74).

The work of Kearns is used as a launching pad for this project. The purpose of the study was to analyse new directions (policies, initiatives, practices) in VET in various European countries and across the European Union as a whole, and to draw implications for Australian VET. More specifically, the three research questions for this study were as follows:

- 1 What new policy directions in VET are evident in Europe? What initiatives/practices in VET have been implemented in recent years? What problems/issues are they attempting to address?
- 2 In what ways are they related to the particular political/economic/social contexts in which they are embedded?
- 3 How do they relate to the current directions for VET in Australia, and what lessons can be learnt?

Research design

Comparative analysis can be illuminating. For instance, it can serve as a stimulant for informing our own sense of place, identity and space in comparative perspective. It can also be a valuable tool for policy-based decision-making: it can be used to determine the worth of a policy or initiative in terms of its efficiency, effectiveness or relevance, and it can be used to gather information for making decisions about the value associated with major policy reforms (Freeland 2000, p.6). It is of particular interest in VET because of:

... the considerable interest on the part of policy-makers in international developments, the highly dynamic nature of VET, and the close links between VET, economic strength and the social issues associated with employment. (Keating et al. 2002, p.xi)

At the same time comparative analysis can also present pitfalls. For example, there is the tendency to see the grass as greener, and international comparisons can be open to distortion (Keating et al. 2002, p.3). While rapidly changing global contexts can be partly to blame, such pitfalls arise also because approaches and methods have not always received adequate attention (Bray, Adamson & Mason 2007; Phillips 2006). However, the focus of this study is not critical analysis, except cursorily, of such approaches and methods. Nor is this study about cross-national comparisons. Rather, it concentrates on highlighting new directions, and then drawing implications for Australia. There is some cognizance of local context, but only to the extent necessary to comprehend the new direction, policy or initiative and its relationship to its national environment. In this sense, the project is more of a *descriptive* study (to ‘describe critical aspects of educational systems practices and outcomes’) than an *explanatory* study (to ‘examine relationships between variables and look for causal explanations’) (Freeland 2000, p.6).

The project is primarily based upon synthesis-based desk research complemented by perspectives from European professional contacts. Content analysis of relevant, available literature generated the foundation information for the study, and then, to minimise the risk of distortion, key themes were

verified using a survey of a small number of selected informants on European VET. Further detail can be found in appendix 1.

Six questions were developed for these informants. The concern was to ask as few questions as possible in order to maximise the likelihood of a response from busy professionals. The questions were as follows:

- 1 What do you consider to be the five most significant new policy directions and/or initiatives in VET in your country (or the European Union as a whole)?
- 2 What problems/issues are these policy directions/initiatives attempting to address?
- 3 How are they related to the particular political/economic/social contexts in which they are embedded?
- 4 What do you see as the main advantages of these policy directions/initiatives in VET?
- 5 What do you see as the main disadvantages of these policy directions/initiatives in VET?
- 6 What do you think will contribute most to the improvement of the quality of VET provision over the next five years?

These questions were emailed to 30 informants in 18 European countries (see table 2). The participation by one or other of the researchers in four international forums between February and September 2007 (see appendix 1) enabled the compilation of the list of informants. Twenty-six of these contacts responded (87% response rate), of whom 17 answered the specified questions. These 17 professionals came from 13 countries, seven were female and ten male, and their workplaces included universities (n=12), a research and consultancy firm (n=1), an industry consulting firm (n=1), a national vocational training institute (n=1), an institute of technology (n=1) and a European Union organisation (n=1).

Table 2 Countries in which the 30 informants were located

Country in which informant was located	Responded – questions answered	Other response*	No response
Belgium		2	
Denmark	1	2	
England	2	1	3
France	1		
Germany	3		
Greece	1	1	
Ireland	1		
Latvia		1	
Lithuania	1		
Malta			1
Norway	1		
Poland	1		
Portugal		1	
Scotland	1		
Slovenia	1		
Sweden	1		
Switzerland	2		
Turkey		1	
Total	17	9	4

Note: * The 'Other response' category included those who either: (a) said they would answer the questions, but their answers were never received, (b) did not consider themselves VET key figures, as they were more in the higher education or adult education sectors, (c) forwarded the questions to another person who did not respond, or (d) said that they would have liked to have contributed but their position was such that they could not politically do so.

Limitations

There are a number of matters to consider in interpreting the findings in this report, predominantly relating to the two main methods. First, concerning the literature, there is an enormous array of sources available on European developments, and, to keep the project manageable, the review had to be restricted mainly to the supranational level. It therefore reflects European Union perspectives and underplays national differences. It may also err on the positive side in its reporting, although, wherever possible, other views from the academic literature have been included to compensate. The review was also based only on sources in the English language. Criteria for delimiting the number of themes from this literature are stated in the appendix.

Second, the number of informants was small, and so their views should not be interpreted as representative of wider populations in their respective countries. In categorising their views, it is important to acknowledge that (a) many responses overlapped across themes, (b) our clustering of their brief responses may not hold the same interpretation as each informant intended, and (c) the majority of responses clearly related to national developments and some to developments in the European Union, while in other cases, it was difficult to judge whether they were national or supranational. Nevertheless, the themes gleaned from the survey data were relatively consistent with those from the literature; moreover, there was a degree of commonality in responses across the countries, perhaps not unexpected, given the level of activity at European Union level.

VET reform in the European Union

The background: Influences on VET reform

The VET systems in European countries 'are basically responses to challenges that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries' (Nilsson 2007, p.150). Realisation that European economies were lagging behind that of the United States during the 1990s gave rise to the formulation of the Lisbon goals in 2000 (Nilsson 2007, p.153). In addition, other events such as Perestroika, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dismantling of the Warsaw Pact ushered in substantial restructuring across Europe (Calleja 2008, p.159).

The European Union's role in education and training and hence in vocational education and training officially stems from the Treaty establishing the European Community, signed in Maastricht in 1992. The role was defined in Article 149 of the treaty, in terms of contributing to 'the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between member states and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the member states for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their culture and linguistic diversity.' Further, Article 150 specified that: 'the Community shall implement a vocational training policy which shall support and supplement the action of the Member States, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content and organisation of vocational training' (European Parliament 2000).

However, cooperation between education, training and employment systems had existed in the European Community since 1976.

In 1976 education ministers decided to set up an information network as the basis for better understanding of educational policies and structures in the then nine-nation European Community. Eurydice, the information network on education in Europe, was subsequently formally launched in 1980. The Eurydice network helps compare ideas and examples of good practice on the basis of solid fact-finding and first-hand experience. The network has improved the formulation of evidence-based policy-making in education. Its approach has developed in many ways, from academic networks, study visits and partnerships of numerous kinds, to the European Union's policy-making role today in such central issues as defining quality indicators and the future objectives of education and training systems.

After education was added to the EC Treaty in 1992, cooperation among the Member States and the EU institutions gathered pace culminating in the formulation of the 'Education and Training 2010 Work Programme' in 2002.

This over-arching policy cooperation and collaboration framework aims to make the EU's education and training systems a world reference by the end of the decade. It is the policy response to the Lisbon Strategy in the field of education and training, and follows the realisation that collaboration on education and training policy is essential if the EU is to become a world-leading knowledge-based economy. (European Parliament 2000)

The ferment in recent reform in Europe has been most clearly given voice through the pronouncement at the Lisbon European Council (2000) that Europe was to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society in the world by 2010. A key plank in that agenda was the promotion of employability and social inclusion through investment in citizens' knowledge and competence at all stages of their lives. Lisbon singled out education and training as 'a forceful policy lever' and member states accordingly were called to 'modernise their education and training

systems' (Lipinska, Schmid & Tessaring 2007, p.7). 'Human resources' were seen to be 'the European Union's main asset' (Cedefop 2006, p.4).

In this Lisbon-inspired endeavour for Europe to remain competitive at the same time as improving social cohesion, VET was to play a pivotal role, as it forms 'clearly an interface of education, innovation and employment as well as economic and social policies' (Lipinska, Schmid & Tessaring 2007, p.7)—it is perceived as 'a key to the future' (p.21).

The importance of VET to the Lisbon goals became enshrined in the *Copenhagen Declaration* of November 2002, when education ministers of 31 European countries, European social partners and the European Commission agreed on working towards enhanced cooperation in European vocational education and training. What became known as The Copenhagen Process on Enhanced European Cooperation in VET was launched as a European strategy to improve the overall performance, quality and attractiveness of VET in Europe. Since 2002, 'the process has significantly contributed to raising the visibility and profile of VET in Europe' (Council of the European Union, Education, Youth and Culture Council 2006, p.4). It has four main aspects: a political process (emphasising the importance of VET to political decision-makers); a process to develop common tools (common European frameworks and tools to enhance transparency and quality of competences and qualifications, and facilitating mobility of learners and workers); a process that fosters mutual learning (supports European cooperation through allowing countries to consider their policies in the light of the experiences of other countries); and a process that takes stakeholders on board (strengthens involvement of different stakeholders and enables their contribution to common goals).

Progress in implementing the Copenhagen Declaration was reviewed in the *Maastricht Communiqué* of December 2004. It reaffirmed VET's key role in labour market and social integration. For the first time, national priorities were agreed: reform of training systems to meet better the needs of those at risk of social exclusion; a modernisation of education and training to attract more students and respond to new workplace requirements. Priorities and strategies were again reviewed in the *Helsinki Communiqué* of December 2006, which reinforced these priorities with specific emphasis on the quality and attractiveness of VET and good governance. It concluded that the process should be strengthened.

The most recent review since the Copenhagen Declaration was in December 2008—the *Bordeaux Communiqué*. The Copenhagen Process was judged 'a success' (European Commission 2008c, p.1) and the focus to 2010 was decreed to be on consolidating the strategy and implementing the principles and tools that had been developed since 2002. These were deemed to be still relevant but in need of 'renewed impetus' (European Commission 2008a, p.7). The communiqué was proclaimed to be a 'new milestone' (European Commission 2008b, p.1) and a 'major step' (Europa 2008, p.1) in European cooperation on VET. It proposed four main priority areas for future action:

- ✧ implementing the tools and schemes for promoting cooperation in the field of VET at national and European levels
- ✧ heightening the quality and attractiveness of VET systems
- ✧ improving the links between VET and the labour market
- ✧ strengthening European cooperation arrangements.

The 'new objective' in this communiqué was strengthening the links between VET and the labour market, thus reflecting an even stronger tilting of the balance towards economic rather than social cohesion goals (discussed later). The European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth (Jan Figel) declared:

We want European vocational education and training to be a world reference. High-quality VET is crucial for the long-term sustainability of our economy and society. By adopting the Bordeaux Communiqué, we are another step closer to a European area for

vocational education and training, which will help the mobility of trainees, as well as improve the performance, quality and attractiveness of European VET. (Europa 2008, p.1)

The key tools referred to in the Bordeaux Communiqué for transparency and recognition of knowledge, skills and competence, as well as for systemic quality, were described as ‘the most significant political contribution of the Copenhagen process’ (European Commission 2008a, p.2). These included: the common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning, Europass, European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the European Credit System for VET (ECVET), and the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQARF). Formal adoption of the latter two is anticipated in early 2009. The European Credit System for VET aims to support and promote transnational mobility and access to lifelong and borderless learning in VET through facilitating accumulation and transfer of learning outcomes attained by individuals. The European Quality Assurance Reference Framework aims to support member states in promoting and monitoring quality improvement in VET at different levels, providing a common foundation for further development of quality principles, reference criteria and indicators.

The emphasis in knowledge, skills and competence has therefore clearly moved to learning outcomes. This is reflected in the recent publication by Cedefop of two major reports entitled *The shift to learning outcomes: conceptual, political and practical developments in Europe* (2008a) and *The shift to learning outcomes: policies and practices in Europe* (2009a). The first analysed the influence of this learning approach in 32 European countries, as a help to policy-makers, researchers, social partners and practitioners. The second aimed to develop three main lines of research: conceptual clarification; learning outcomes as an aspect of policy reform; and learning outcomes as impacting on practical reform for institutions and learners (Cedefop 2009a, pp.12–13). The reports illustrate that countries still have a long way to go in implementing a learning outcomes approach at all levels (Cedefop 2009a, p.2), and that they especially have a limited impact on assessment regimes (Cedefop 2008a, p.33–4). However, the positives of such a shift are seen as opportunities to (a) tailor education and training to individual needs, (b) improve links to the labour market, and (c) improve the way non-formally and informally acquired learning outcomes are recognised (Cedefop 2008a, p.1). The argument of these reports is that adopting learning outcomes is important in the success of European education and training systems, and that it involves a culture shift which cannot be achieved top down (Cedefop 2008a, p.42).

All of these communiqué reports have been evaluating progress within the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme, a program that is being developed and progressively implemented to achieve the Lisbon goal and make Europe’s education and training system a world reference for quality by 2010. The next ministerial meeting to review implementation of the Copenhagen process and its strategic direction beyond 2010 will be in Bruges, Belgium in 2010.

Apart from these political agendas, VET is influenced also by the socioeconomic factors in the member states. Four interrelated socioeconomic challenges are: ‘globalisation, and the emergence of newly industrialised and highly competitive countries; demography, in the form of Europe’s ageing population and migration flows; rapid change in the nature of the labour market; and the ICT revolution’ (European Commission 2006h, p.2). Cedefop reports that, although European countries differ markedly, several score highly on skill-related competitiveness indicators alongside Australia, Canada, Japan and the United States. Of the working-age population in the 27 member states of the European Union, 47% have upper secondary and post-secondary qualifications, mostly acquired in VET. However, Europe scores lower on academic qualifications and considerably higher on low skills compared with Canada, Japan, Russia and the United States. For instance, in 2006, 30% of the working-age population, or 24% of the employed, did not have the qualification levels to cope with the needs of the labour market, perceived as a major challenge for the future (Lipinska, Schmid & Tessaring 2007, p.9). The up-skilling of Europeans is seen as a key challenge, given the high share of low-skilled people from an international perspective (Lipinska, Schmid & Tessaring 2007, p.25).

Some key issues at the broad level

A number of key issues continue to dominate thinking and writing in the European Union. Here, five are briefly highlighted as they are in many ways reflective of similar concerns in Australia and they help to set in context the directions and themes discussed later in this report. These issues are: impact and pace of reform, competitiveness and social cohesion, the capacity of VET to meet all its policy objectives, assumptions inherent in qualification frameworks and whether VET systems are converging or diverging. In addition, some of the major ‘under-researched’ issues are presented.

Impact and pace of reform

There is continuing debate about the impact of VET reform initiatives and the pace of progress. In 2003, the key message of the report, *Learning for employment* (Bainbridge et al. 2003, p.3), was that achievement of the Lisbon goal was a real possibility but that it required a greater urgency to the education and training reforms in member states. Three years later Ertl (2006) argued that there was a new wave of European Union initiatives in education and training as a result of the discourse on economic competitiveness, with a strong emphasis on educational indicators, benchmarks and quality controls. He believed that the slow progress on the Lisbon goals suggests that the impact of European Union programs and projects for educational provisions has remained limited. And most recently, Armstrong et al. (2008, p.62) also claimed that many of the key objectives remained unfulfilled at both European and national levels, and with the European Union expanding, this will only continue to create difficult challenges for VET policy and development.

A recent scorecard, ‘Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training’ (European Commission 2008d), is the fourth in a series of annual reports in this area. Of the five benchmarks for education and training (adopted in May 2003) to be achieved by the European Union as a whole by 2010, three are of particular relevance to VET, and on these, progress is variable (p.15):

- ✧ reduce the share of early school leavers (18–24 years) to 10%: this benchmark seems out of reach, as in 2006 the figure was still 15.3% (was 17.3% in 2000)
- ✧ ensure that a minimum of 85% of 20 to 24-year-olds have completed at least upper secondary education: this benchmark appears realistic, with the figure in 2006 at 79.1% (was 77.3% in 2000)
- ✧ ensure that at least 12.5% of adults (25–64 years) participate in lifelong learning: this benchmark also has a long way to go, with the proportion in 2006 at 9.9% (was 7.1% in 2000).

The report indicates that:

a number of EU Member States are already achieving world-best performances in specific areas, whereas others face serious challenges. It shows that there is real added value in exchanging information on best policy practice at European level ... (p.11).

More qualitatively, European countries consider they have progressed well in the following six areas: national qualifications frameworks, validation of non-formal and informal learning, quality assurance, integrating learning with working, improving access to VET, and guidance and counselling.

Competitiveness and social cohesion

Another interesting debate is about the fit between competitiveness and social cohesion. The Helsinki Communiqué, for example, states that ‘VET has a dual role in contributing to competitiveness and in enhancing social cohesion ... In short, VET should be equitable and efficient’ (Council of the European Union, Education, Youth and Culture Council 2006, p.3). Again, the Bordeaux Communiqué declares that VET ‘should take into account the objectives of social cohesion, equity and active citizenship’, while also it should ‘promote competitiveness and

innovation' (European Commission 2008a, p.5). Yet such an assumption that social equity and economic efficiency are complementary goals within a market context has been questioned by Taylor et al. (cited in Taylor 2002, p.67), who suggest that without concerted efforts by governments, equity is likely to emerge as 'poor partner' in the policy process. They furnish as evidence the interests of employers in selecting the 'best candidates' and the tendency of private schools to 'colonize' vocational education to produce their own educational elite—these patterns, in practice, are similar in Australia and in Alberta in Canada (Taylor 2002, p.67). Within the European Union, Edwards and Boreham (2003) critically review the notion of a 'learning society', for some time the policy driver at both Commission and national levels, and note this same tension between competitiveness and social cohesion. The first embeds market principles, economic relevance and individualism, where self-reliance and economic competitiveness are the goals, and this both reflects and contributes to processes of social differentiation (p.417). Efforts to promote choice and consumer power, where individuals are empowered and institutions must respond flexibly to needs (notions of vouchers and learning accounts tried in some European Union countries are expressions of this), are 'fraught with contradictions' because it tends to be those with the necessary cultural and other capital who benefit from such developments. Thus, they argue, these trends 'both result from and in a fragmentation of social relations where "society" is reconfigured as the contractual and consumer relations of individuals, thus contributing to the exclusion that is meant to be addressed through strategies for a learning society' (p.417).

Some researchers have similarly raised the question of whether VET systems that strongly promote linkages with labour market needs are actually encouraging inequity. This line of questioning has emerged in particular with countries like Switzerland and Germany, where there is a powerful belief that VET must be company-based in order to be fully functional for the labour market and where full-time school-based VET struggles to be perceived as an acceptable alternative. It is young men who tend to enrol in company-based apprenticeships, whereas school-based programs tend to be more appropriately suited to integrate those students with a migration background and young women (Hupta, Sacchi & Stalder 2006, p.15). Meyer (2006) thus concludes that the Swiss VET system may have 'a substantial equity problem' in that the chance for smooth transition from lower to upper secondary education and training is seriously hindered, especially for 'less well resourced candidates' (p.9).

Capacity of VET to meet all its policy objectives

A third key issue is the capacity of VET to be able to meet all the policy objectives it is meant to achieve. In question here are both the number of policy objectives and whether some of them are mutually exclusive. For example, raising VET's status to attract students who would otherwise select general secondary education may well run counter to VET being used as a vehicle for incorporating the weakest proportion of youth into the education system and the labour market. Is it possible to improve parity of esteem and at the same time make the system all-inclusive? Cort and Rolls (2008, p.40) suggest that this may require a strong positioning of VET, a position that historically VET generally has not enjoyed, with perhaps the exception being the dual-system countries. What is more, demand for VET programs appears to be stagnating, if not falling, which Nilsson (2007, p.156) claims is not so much a challenge to particular types of VET systems as to 'the very concept of initial vocational education and training' (p.160).

Difficulties with qualification frameworks

A fourth issue concerns qualification frameworks. One of the central planks of European Union reform is to make VET an inclusive and transparent system for providing all types of learners with opportunities for lifelong learning. One policy mechanism in this respect is the qualification framework. The European Qualification Framework and the European Credit Transfer System for Vocational Education are being developed as European scaffolding to which the various national systems can be linked in order to make national qualifications more transparent and comparable. These developments were seen to be tools for 'modernising' the VET system and bridging the

different subsystems of VET to harmonise with common European Union standards. They would help to tackle transition and permeability problems in the VET systems and facilitate more young people gaining formal vocational qualifications, thereby reducing barriers to accessing to lifelong learning, validation and recognition. Overall, they would help to improve coherence and consistency in the qualifications systems by linking different subsystems more closely to each other. However, the heterogeneity of the VET systems has proved a hindrance to mobility within the European Union, as well as in a broader sense to the international mobility of learners (in VET or higher education) and to employees. There are problems inherent in the lack of coherence in types of VET awards and restricted mobility within the emerging common European Union labour market. A joint policy strategy to which the European Union aims, for instance, with the Open Method of Coordination, needs a ‘common language’, and the benchmarking of education systems calls for a general reference framework. On the one hand, Calleja (2008) believes that the European Qualifications Framework is ‘an instrument of employability ... a benchmark ... guiding learners towards lifelong learning, career progression and sustained quality of life’ (p.159). Yet Young (2003) contends there are problematic assumptions inherent to the notion of qualification frameworks. For instance, is it possible to describe *all* qualifications in terms of a *single* set of criteria, for all qualifications to be ranked in a *single hierarchy* and to develop a *single set of levels*? The European Qualifications Framework, and how to align national frameworks to it, continues, in Schmid’s (2006, pp.2–3) judgement, to be ‘controversially debated in some countries’, even though it has become a driving force at national level.

Convergence or divergence in VET reform

Another intriguing question in the European Union, with its many different countries striving to reform their VET systems at the same time as maintaining a ‘weather eye’ on supranational developments and policies to ‘develop, modernise and improve VET in Europe’ (Schmid 2006, p.2), is whether the VET systems in these countries are converging or diverging. On one hand, it might be anticipated that, with the goal of forming a European region and with the activity of the European Union, national systems would be borrowing from each other and gradually moving towards some notion of a European best practice. On the other hand, as Lindell (2004, p.271) has proclaimed, the ‘policymaking of VET is not a simple, linear process, but ... a complex, messy situation where different ideological beliefs, motives and commitments clash against each other.’

Nilsson (2007), in studying apprenticeships and inclusion of VET in upper secondary education, concludes that there is some evidence of convergence, at least at policy level, between high-income countries (p.159). He does acknowledge, however, the problems in analysing this issue, such as difficulties in calculating differences in educational systems, the continually changing nature of their VET systems, and the camouflaging of complexity within each system through use of databases. He concludes by signalling ‘another trend in convergence’ (p.160) among almost all member states, namely, that recruitment to VET programs is falling or at best stagnating (European Commission 2006d).

A significant issue is the adequacy of data collected on European VET. Schmid (2006) claims that information that Cedefop receives from the various countries tends to be ‘either fairly general or too technical’ (p.3), and that only a few countries set quantitative or qualitative targets and have a clear view on indicators for success which would help them to evaluate effectiveness of their policies. Consequently, as in Australia, there are increasing calls for more and better statistical data on VET and more evaluation and research to devise well-targeted policies.

Under-researched areas

Beginning from the assertion that there will remain ‘important and urgent items of unfinished business’ in European and national VET policy and implementation in 2010, the fourth report on VET research in Europe (Armstrong et al. 2008) has provided an insightful look into VET research

issues beyond 2010—issues they claim remain under-researched. These include meeting the learning needs of older workers and diverse migrant communities.

The Armstrong et al. report also singles out five new issues on which VET research should focus. The key issue raised is how to address uncertainty and change in the globalised economy in the move towards a knowledge-based society. Contending that uncertainty will outweigh certainty in planning and institution-building at European and national levels and for individuals making choices, they argue that this will ‘mark a significant shift of emphasis and paradigm for European VET research’ (p.62). The five areas (pp.62–4) are as follows:

- ✧ analysis of the role of VET in achieving the key European goals of environmental sustainability
- ✧ VET governance at the European level—‘joined-up’ policy is key to successful innovation, but remains under-researched, and projects at European Union level (for example, European Qualifications Framework) will need robust impact evaluation
- ✧ understanding the new relationships between VET and employment that are emerging, how individuals make choices about their careers and new forms of collective activity
- ✧ the need to improve the capabilities of and pathways open to learners
- ✧ the conceptualisation of competences—a concept that should not be taken for granted or assumed to be unproblematic; whether it is possible to use a single, holistic and homogeneous methodology to recognise all kinds of competences.

Directions in VET reform in Europe

The themes gleaned from the European key informants were relatively consistent with those from the European literature. Moreover, there was a degree of commonality across the countries, perhaps not unexpected given the level of activity at European Union level. The nine themes selected from both the informants' responses and from the literature for further analysis below are as follows:

- ✧ higher education and VET interrelationships
- ✧ validation of learning: non-formal, informal and experiential learning
- ✧ access, inclusiveness and learner engagement
- ✧ development of VET teachers
- ✧ adult and continuing education
- ✧ retention and guidance services
- ✧ employer engagement and the role of 'social partners'
- ✧ key competencies for lifelong learning
- ✧ higher-level apprenticeships.

More detail about determining the themes and issues by country is provided in appendix 1.

What were claimed by the informants to be the problems/issues that these policy directions are attempting to address? In general, the reasons provided for these directions and initiatives were a mix of economic, social and political drivers, as follows:

- ✧ *Economic*: competitiveness; improving the quality of the VET system; skill and labour shortages; unemployment; opening-up of labour movement across national borders and promoting mobility; dealing with migration and the displacement of local workers
- ✧ *Social*: ageing societies; strengthening social cohesion; improving accessibility to VET; unemployability and social inequity; bulge in the population of young people in the last decade and the need to create VET and higher education places for education and training; facilitating pathways for learners; increasing social inclusion; engaging the disengaged; high drop-out rates among ethnic communities; and social integration
- ✧ *Political*: movement towards 'Europeanisation'; strong European Union agenda for lifelong learning; 'harmonisation' and standardisation of VET in the European Union; neoliberal ideology favouring individual choice; promote the status of VET; improve quality in VET; dominant discourse of knowledge society demanding that everyone completes an education and more; strengthening roles of employer and employee organisations in VET; a common 'education and training area' in Europe.

More specifically, the sections below attempt to synthesise informants' opinions of the problems and issues related to the most frequent themes derived from their responses and from the literature. In addition, lessons for Australian VET are drawn wherever appropriate.

Relationships between higher education and VET

Addressing relationships between higher education and VET is most commonly framed to promote lifelong learning as both an economic and social imperative in the European Union. In this respect, the relationships and pathways between the two sectors of education seek to:

- ✧ enhance mobility between various sectors of education (general education, VET and higher education) both within and across member states
- ✧ promote progression from initial and continuing training, education and higher education, with the overall goal of supporting attainment of higher-level qualifications
- ✧ promote parity of esteem between VET and general education and in particular with higher education.

A European Qualifications Framework is perceived as the key piece of architecture to achieve these goals. This framework is being shaped by the processes of the Bologna reforms and the Bruges-Copenhagen Process. This initiative seeks to bring together vocational education and training and higher education into a meta-framework that would eventually subsume the Bologna higher education framework. Adam (2007) claims the framework has an important role to play in the arrangement of lifelong learning across Europe, with recognition of prior learning (RPL) being a significant component. This work is supported by other projects in such areas as quality assurance (ENQA-ENQAVET), transparency of qualifications (EUROPASS) and credit transfer (ECTS-ECVET).

Central to attaining these pathways is developing the quality of VET systems in member states (Loney & Green 2005) while also strengthening collaboration between higher education and industry and enhancing access by non-traditional learners to university programs (European Commission 2006g). In other words, reforms are required in both the higher education and VET systems if the goals of strengthened pathways are to be achieved.

While many countries in Europe have worked to diversify their post-secondary sector offering non-university VET programs, these have not translated into increased progression into higher education (Lipinska, Schmid & Tessaring 2007). For these authors, the attractiveness of VET is seen as the key to enhancing progression. Qualification frameworks, credit transfer and recognition of prior learning are being promoted as the mechanisms most likely to enhance this progression. In part, these initiatives are also directed at keeping vocational education attractive for all young people. Until now the apprenticeship system has been very popular but the danger is that it is losing its attractiveness, especially for the more talented learners, so the creation of an access to tertiary education may assist in the attraction of talented young people, and more generally avoid 'dead-end-qualifications'.

Under the influence of the Bologna revolution, the higher education sector is undergoing significant changes to its structure, approach, content and conduct (Adam 2007). The link between higher education qualifications and employment outcomes is being made more explicit. In doing this, 'relationships between traditional higher education institutions, non-traditional providers (in-house company universities etc.) and business and industry are being re-examined' (Adam 2007, p.4). In addition, higher education providers are being encouraged to reform their curricula to integrate strategies such as work placements, blended learning, company in-house training and learning through work schemes. Transparent and rigorous processes to recognise prior learning and staff development to enhance the take-up of these initiatives are also being promoted (Adam 2007).

Strategies to widen access in higher education have included:

- ✧ changing entry requirements to higher education to include recognition of experience as well as capacity to complete the program
- ✧ establishing systems for recognising non-formal and informal learning

- ❖ offering programs of professional development, modularised curricula and excellence tracks for specific groups of learners
- ❖ adopting flexible pedagogies, including the use of information communication technologies (ICTs) and blended learning approaches
- ❖ increasing entry and exit points
- ❖ including elements of vocational education and training in higher education.

(Cedefop 2004)

Quality assurance is a key concern in developing pathways from VET to higher education and improving the quality of education and training. The conclusions of the May 2006 Graz Conference on Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training noted:

Quality assurance is also an essential instrument to connect Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE)—and to support the development of a common European Qualifications Framework (EQF)—linking the Bologna and Copenhagen Process. (Presidency of the European Union 2006b, p.1)

Balfe et al. in their 2006 study on quality in education and training ‘identified important interfaces in the field of quality assurance between VET and HE’. This study and the 2006 Graz conference were an opening for further cooperation and developments between higher education and VET in Europe. The common principles for quality assurance were presented as a basis for future collaborative actions:

Quality assurance is necessary to safeguard accountability and policies and procedures should cover all levels of education and training. QA should be an integral part of the internal management of education and training institutions and include context, input, process and output dimensions, while giving emphasis to outputs and learning outcomes. QA should also include regular evaluation of institutions or programmes by external monitoring bodies or agencies with external monitoring bodies also subjected to regular review. (Presidency of the European Union 2006b, pp.1–2)

In seeking to foster relationships between VET and higher education, the conclusions from the 2006 Conference on Quality Assurance in Higher Education noted that the two sectors ‘do not need to do the same work in the same way ... Both have unique strengths and can make different contributions as partners’ (Presidency of the European Union 2006b).

These policy initiatives suggest a convergence of purposes for both the VET and higher education sectors and the development of a new set of relationships to formalise recognition of learning that takes place outside formal education institutions. Many of these policy initiatives resonate with trends in adult, vocational and higher education in Australia. The Bradley Review of Higher Education has flagged the need for a new relationship between VET and higher education. A recent emphasis on promoting recognition of prior learning and an emphasis on the attainment of higher-level qualifications have also featured in policy initiatives. Access to higher education via alternative pathways (that is, recognition of work experience through validation processes) may be an under-explored area worthy of further attention. The impact of the Bologna reforms on higher education and the concomitant effects for the VET sector are important for Australia in a globalising economy, where the competition for skilled labour is increasing. The competitiveness of Australian graduates from both the higher education and VET sectors may warrant further investigation.

Like the European Union, aspirations to promote lifelong learning and the attainment of higher-level qualifications across the Australian workforce have produced a qualification framework and qualifications which have made some contribution towards the achievement of these goals. Indeed, Australia has been one of the pioneers in establishing such a framework, and many European countries are now reflecting on the Australian experience, given European Union moves towards setting up the European Qualifications Framework and the imperative for member states to develop their own which in some way will resonate with the overarching European version. One of

the significant challenges for Australia, however, is to continue to promote and action seamless pathways between the sectors and to build a system of educational choice, because the proportions of learners actually moving in both directions between VET and higher education are still relatively small, despite the length of time that the qualifications framework has been in place.

Strengthening collaboration between higher education and vocational education and broadening opportunities for 'non-traditional' pathways into higher education are important considerations for Australian policy-makers as the next steps in furthering this policy goal. The European Union experience, however, suggests that diversifying learning pathways at the post-secondary level will not necessarily lead to increased participation in higher-level study at universities unless the issue of the attractiveness of VET as a pathway through to university is addressed alongside curriculum reform in higher education.

Validation of learning: Non-formal, informal and experiential learning

Informal learning is most often associated with circumstances where learning is coterminous with other activities, for example, work. Learning is a by-product rather than an intended outcome of activity. On the other hand, non-formal learning is embedded in activities that may be planned and entered into with the purpose of learning taking place, but which usually do not lead to certification.

The issue of validation of both these forms of learning lies at the heart of goals to develop 'knowledge societies' and to make lifelong learning a reality (European Association for the Education of Adults 2006; Lipinska, Schmid & Tessaring 2007, p.74). Validation can assist in the reduction of the number of people without any qualification, motivate people to re-enter the formal learning process, make learning more attractive for all and it fits well with stated lifelong learning policy agendas. Indeed, the development of the European Qualifications Framework was conceived as a mechanism to promote validation of 'informally acquired competences' (Council of the European Union, Education, Youth and Culture Council 2004, p.4). The shift towards a focus on outputs and competencies in vocational education systems in European Union member states reinforces these policy aspirations.

The process of validation enables outcomes from both non-formal and informal learning to 'be made visible' and hence enables value to be given to the full range of competences and qualifications held by an individual (European Association for the Education of Adults 2004a, p.3.1). This process can be formative (used as basis for planning further learning) or summative (result in the awarding of recognised qualifications) in its orientation. The process of validation is also important because it can assist learners to develop self-confidence and awareness of their skills and capabilities and can aid the development of self-evaluation skills (European Association for the Education of Adults 2006, p.41).

While there is general agreement on the importance of this issue, there are a diverse range of policies and practices in place across European Union countries which touch 'social and institutional values ... challenge professional roles, functions, expertise and responsibilities' (European Association for the Education of Adults 2006, p.43). A 2003 mapping exercise suggested that European Union member states were in various stages of implementing processes for the validation of non-formal and informal learning, ranging from countries where experimentation was beginning, through to countries that already have permanent and national systems in place. Current approaches are hampered by inadequate awareness, funding, support, guidance and training, as well as legal obstacles in some countries (European Association for the Education of Adults 2006, pp.41–3).

Current efforts directed at improving validation of informal and non-formal learning include:

- ✧ developing cost-effective methodologies that can be used across multiple levels of education
- ✧ increasing the quality and credibility of qualifications and standards used in the validation process
- ✧ improving guidance on the validation process.

(Directorate General for Education and Culture 2006, p.13)

Colardyn and Bjornavold (2004, p.76) point to the important role that a diverse range of social partners can play in the validation of informal and non-formal learning:

In many Member States, the stakeholders represent educational, social and economic groups: large parts of society have a role in implementing the national policies on validation of non-formal and informal learning. This certainly contributes positively to the consensus building on these issues.

These arrangements raise issues for the allocation of overall responsibility for the coordination of the validation process and the mechanisms for bringing together these diverse groups. Ways to assess learning that do not threaten to professionalise the learning or undermine the activities of the non-formal agencies are also an important outcome (European Association for the Education of Adults 2006, p.42).

To this end, a number of different techniques have been used to validate non-formal and informal learning. These normally take one of three approaches:

- ✧ qualitative and content-oriented investigations
- ✧ biographical, descriptive investigations
- ✧ quantitatively based investigations (Leney & Green 2005, p.272).

Approaches include the use of portfolios, which contain both evidence of the learning and reflection on the learning that has been gained by experience; undertaking existing assessments for a course without attending the course (that is, a challenge test); and the design of personal development plans which take into account an individual's prior learning and oral assessment in an interview (Adam 2007, p.10). Issues lie not so much with the array of methods available to support the validation process; rather, the challenge is to find ways of ensuring that existing tools are validly and extensively implemented (Adam 2007, p. 1). The focus of such validation needs greater clarity. For example, France has a well-developed system of accrediting non-formal and informal learning; however, this system places 'greater emphasis on the learner's ability to engage in problem solving and critical thinking than establishing equivalence with outcomes of academic programmes' (Adam 2007, p.10).

An interesting paper on validation of prior experiential learning in France by Pouget and Osborne (2004) draws attention to Feutrie's (1998) four dimensions of competence in trying to clarify processes of assessing, accrediting and certifying competence within the *Validation des Acquis Professionnels* (VAP), now the *Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience* (VAE, validation of learning acquired through experience) through the law of 2002. The four dimensions involve:

- ✧ assessing results and performance (implying quantitative criteria against which performance may be measured)
- ✧ analysing how individuals see themselves in their posts—a stocktaking of an individual's aptitudes and behaviours against a profile of capabilities or 'attitudes' expected in such a post
- ✧ assessing the way in which individuals obtain the expected results, taking account of process and inputs (cognitive and affective)—unlike the outcomes models of England, Scotland and Australia
- ✧ assessing the potential of an individual.

They conclude that the French approach, in contrast to those in Anglo-Saxon countries, may be less behaviourist and less mechanistic. Feutrie states the basic principle of the French approach:

The VAP approach is based on a process of deduction to identify the competences and knowledge already gained and required for the exemption sought, starting from the candidate's own description of his or her experience ... We are in a rationale of presumption, not of proof. (Feutrie cited in Pouget & Osborne 2004, p.59)

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Australia suffers from many of the problems identified in the European Union member states—particularly its under-use. Despite the availability of a range of 'good practice guides' in both jurisdictions, issues remain with the development of a broad and comprehensive system that engages all partners (industry and training providers as well as community-based learning organisations) in real and meaningful ways. There also appears to be an over-emphasis on the summative function of recognition of prior learning (giving credit to accelerate attainment of an educational qualification). Arguably, the extent to which this also serves the purpose of widening participation and motivating and promoting lifelong learning still needs to be tested in Australia as in the European Union (Leney & Green 2005, p.272). The role of teachers and trainers in the uptake of validation processes is also crucial. The Cedefop report, *Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning for VET teachers and trainers in the EU Member States* (2007a), emphasised the important role that policy-makers can play in promoting 'wider stakeholder confidence in the principles and procedures leading to recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning'. Such promotion can be supported and facilitated by VET teachers and trainers themselves using these processes as a valid, alternative pathway to obtain their own teaching qualifications and to undertake programs of continuing professional development.

Recognition of prior learning is not a new process. Within the European Union context what is new is the challenge of recognising learning from other states and nations as well as different sectors of education and the many parties that have the potential to play a role in validating learning. As in Australia, commitment to the ideal of recognising prior learning is strong; what is often challenging is dealing with the practicalities of those processes associated with inadequate awareness, funding and guidance. European Union experience in examining the validity and credibility of various methods for recognising learning from informal and non-formal settings and exchanging this information is noteworthy. The European Union Commission's inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning offers an example of such an initiative, which also aims to promote the confidence of stakeholders (for example, industry).

Another interesting initiative is Validpass—a portfolio of tools that corresponds to the Europass portfolio of tools for facilitating and promoting mobility. It can be tailored to different groups of people and is recommended to be used in conjunction with a guidance process. It promotes the use of various different types of 'supplements' to capture and analyse learning from a range of diverse settings; for example, key learning events in work situations, voluntary settings, and non-formal and informal settings.

Most fundamentally perhaps, Australian VET could learn from reflection on the practices of France in its approach to the validation of learning through experience. Such reflection may re-open and inform useful debates over the meaning of competence, how it can most effectively be assessed, and the ways in which competency-based training has been implemented.

Access, inclusiveness and learner engagement

The Maastricht Communiqué (2004) re-emphasised the challenge of inclusion and access as key priorities for VET. The Helsinki Communiqué noted that 'VET has a dual role in contributing to competitiveness and in enhancing social cohesion' (Council of the European Union, Education, Youth and Culture Council 2006, p.3). Further, it asserted that these twin policy goals can be

achieved by a focus on excellence (attracting those with high potential); they also meet the needs of those most at risk of educational disadvantage and exclusion from the labour market.

More recently, there has been some criticism of the over-emphasis on economic imperatives driving the education and training policies agenda in the European Union (Ertl 2006). Employment is viewed as the solution to poverty, and in the United Kingdom, for example, VET has been significantly restructured. Research by Knell, Oakley and O'Leary (2007) and the Leitch Review (2006) suggest that all this reform has not led to inclusion and greater access for disadvantaged learners. Rather a 'trickle down' effect is occurring, placing greatest investment in those already accessing education while most of those without qualifications remain unlikely to receive training (Knell, Oakley & O'Leary 2007). Knell, Oakley and O'Leary suggest that goals related to enhancing economic competitiveness need to be disentangled from social goals, and the latter addressed through the pursuit of policies which may not improve economic competitiveness but will deliver desired social outcomes such as enhanced social mobility and environmental sustainability (Knell, Oakley & O'Leary 2007, p.12).

The twin goals of creating social cohesion and achieving the economic outcomes associated with increasing employment and skill levels and productivity mean that the needs of particular groups of learners are brought into sharper focus. These groups include those with low basic skills levels, migrants with language difficulties, older workers, early school leavers, those returning to the labour market, people with disabilities, those in prison, and women in areas of low female employment (Leney & Green 2005). All these groups share two characteristics—a lack of basic skills and the need to overcome particular barriers to accessing the training system (Leney & Green 2005, p.266).

The needs of older workers are increasingly becoming an urgent policy priority. Here it is suggested that the focus should be on skills renewal strategies that enable workers to participate in learning that maintains and improves the employability of older workers.

Many are at a disadvantage in terms of previous educational attainment and continuing training opportunities ... A 'deficit approach', focusing on the skills older workers lack, predominates, rather than one that values their strengths and contribution to workplace know-how. (Lipinksa, Schmid & Tessaring 2007, p.98)

Good practice has been identified as including 'continuing training strategies', which keep older workers connected to organisations through the use of age-sensitive and appropriate human resource strategies and work-related and work-based learning which supports internal mobility (Lipinksa, Schmid & Tessaring 2007, p.98). These approaches are seen as more effective than strategies that promote learning and labour mobility after an employment relationship has been disrupted by redundancy (European Commission 2006b, p.xvi). In the Netherlands, for example, collective agreements enshrine the right of older workers to time off for training where this is linked to career development (European Commission 2006b, p.118). Case studies have found that quality learning for older workers to sustain employability adopts learning strategies which are adapted to the needs of older workers as well as being well integrated into the learning strategies and actions of enterprises. Features of learning programs included 'modular design, certification of skills and competencies acquired in the workplace, individual training plans for older workers and intergenerational knowledge transfer through mixed teams and mentoring' (European Commission 2006b, p.xv).

Where employment relationships have been broken, the quality of learning made available to older workers has been found to be critical (European Commission 2006b, p.xv). In Hungary, programs which aim to assist older workers are very comprehensive and are often longer as repeated training and closer contact with mentors are needed to promote success. Strategies include 'multiple contacts, motivation through personal conversations, interviews, club activities and provision of information at conferences' (European Commission 2006b, p.121). In Finland, tailored approaches which include guidance, counselling and the use of technology to create personalised and flexible learning programs have been trialled in the AiHE project (European Commission 2006b, p.122).

Many European countries have significant numbers of migrants, many of whom occupy low-skill jobs or who are unemployed. Younger migrant learners often lack the necessary basic skills for work and learning and ‘the gap between immigrant and in-country residents persists across generations ... Competence in the language of the host country, besides parents’ educational background and socioeconomic situation, has a strong influence on their learning outcomes’ (Lipinska, Schmid & Tessaring 2007, p.100). In these cases, advocacy and support for language development has been found to be a significant factor in enhancing outcomes for these groups of learners (OECD 2006). Other strategies that have been implemented feature greater cooperation between providers of VET and organisations providing support and guidance; encouraging employers with migrant backgrounds to train apprentices; and additional support to allow access to mentoring. The use of recognition frameworks has ‘increasingly important applications for refugees and displaced persons who cannot produce certified evidence of their skills and competencies’ (Adam 2007, p.4). Future initiatives are also examining the potential for combining occupational content and language training as a means of promoting bilingual workers.

Issues concerned with enhancing inclusion and access to VET have also been identified as topics in need of further urgent research. In their Cedefop report, Armstrong et al. (2008, p.63) note that over the next decade, new VET research is needed to:

- ✧ ask seriously what skills older people will need to develop and how work organization can accommodate their needs
- ✧ identify how to meet the changing needs of migrants—not least distinguishing between first-, second- and third-generation migrants and between different ethnic/social groups. Factors such as age, gender and nationality need far greater attention
- ✧ analyse social inequalities between diverse groups of young people across Europe that are related to the opportunity costs of education and to the economic capacity needed to support changes in economic activity during full-time education
- ✧ find ways to promote education and training for women entering and re-entering the labour market, and establishing gender equality.

These researchers are concerned about what they perceive as the growing gap between ‘expert and novice learners, where the former are “self-directed and goal-oriented” and the latter characterised as “having low self-image, poor learning strategies and little reflective ability”’ (Armstrong et al. 2008, p.64). A 2007 Commission report on progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training promotes the notion of ‘flexicurity’ which:

... can help people to manage employment transitions more successfully in times of accelerating economic change. By upgrading their skills, and protecting people rather than particular jobs, it helps people to move into better paid, more satisfying jobs, or even start their own businesses ... Adequate social protection should be promoted and the fight against poverty reinforced. (European Commission 2007e, p.9)

Lipinska, Schmid and Tessaring (2007) challenge the notion that targeting specific groups through tailored programs may actually reinforce exclusion. Rather, there is an argument for ‘tailoring VET by skills’, that is, modifying mainstream VET, rather than ‘targeting’ it by social characteristics:

Competence-based approaches combined with individualised guidance, recognition of non-formal and informal learning and tailored training plans are vital to the policy mix; as are work-based learning, support in finding placements and assistance in welfare issues. Relevant ministries or departments (e.g. education, employment and social affairs, health, finance and economy), social partners and other stakeholders need to cooperate to devise policy packages. (Lipinska, Schmid & Tessaring 2007, pp.99–104)

In many respects, the social agenda for VET in Australia is only beginning to emerge as governments wrestle with some of the intractable problems that are related to those segments of the population who are alienated and excluded from mainstream education and training systems.

The call to 'fix the system' coupled with a genuine personalised approach to the delivery of education and training would appear to be significant features of these emergent policy directions.

Issues associated with the place of VET as a mechanism for ameliorating social exclusion are central to the policy agenda in Australia and, as in the United Kingdom, Australian efforts have been directed towards significantly restructuring VET to address this agenda. In Australia, the needs of a number of different groups of learners are being tackled (for example, older workers, Indigenous learners, early school leavers).

The needs of older workers are particularly pressing, and European Union approaches which attempt to tackle the needs of this group of workers in a preventive manner, rather than addressing needs after they have disengaged from the labour market (usually involuntarily), are of particular note. For example, in the Netherlands, the needs of older workers are specifically incorporated in collective agreements, including the right to days off for training. The construction industry provides access to training vouchers for older workers for use only after a career interview has taken place to determine the appropriate types of training which would enhance employees' connection with the labour market. In Finland, the AiHE project aims to engage older workers and uses strategies that include increased guidance and counselling in combination with ITCs to create individualised and flexible study programs. The use of vouchers (Belgium) and individualised learning accounts (Wales) are also being trialled. The learning needs of migrants are being addressed using strategies such as incentives to encourage them to become multilingual by combining occupational content and language education. More nuanced approaches to vocational education and training which make distinctions between the needs of first-, second- and third-generation migrants, between different social/ ethnic groups and taking into account factors such as age, gender and nationality have been singled out for attention.

Development of VET teachers

The VET workforce in European Union countries is described as consisting of two groups of workers—teachers and trainers. While there is considerable information available on teachers who are employed by VET providers or governments, less is known about VET trainers. Their work is less regulated and often 'added to' the regular work tasks of employees. While some countries do have regulations covering trainers' work, there is little emphasis placed on the development of pedagogic skills for these roles (Lipinska, Schmid & Tessaring 2007, p.85).

Like their Australian counterparts, European VET teachers' work has undergone considerable change. Teachers' roles have been expanding and the link between the quality of VET and the quality of teachers and trainers firmly established (Cedefop 2004). VET teachers' and trainers' work is more clearly focused on 'learning facilitation and innovation' rather than on simple instruction (Tessaring & Wannan 2004, p.8). They also play a critical role as change agents and shaping policy and implementing reforms (Lipinska, Schmid & Tessaring 2007) and, in particular, are described as being 'at the heart of learning-outcomes led reform' (Cedefop 2008a, p.39). Rather than being seen as messengers, VET teachers and trainers are now viewed as co-writers or change agents. As such, they are important actors in economic and social development: only if teachers and trainers are up to this professional challenge can modern education and training respond adequately to the needs of societies (Dunbar 2005, p.7). This increased emphasis on the broader (and changed) functions of VET teachers is seen as critical to altering perceptions about the prestige and attractiveness of the occupation and contributing to strategies to sustain the skill base of the profession.

A strong focus on learning outcomes means that the work of VET teachers and trainers is increasingly being subject to examination and there is a growing interest in raising entry requirements and establishing standards to guide their work. In some countries, decentralisation and changed governance arrangements for VET are resulting in great autonomy for VET teachers and trainers with concomitant changes in work roles (for example, designing curricula and the development of teaching content and methods). Quality provision and client-centred approaches to

the delivery of VET are now seen as essential hallmarks of VET practice (Grootings & Nielsen 2005a). All these changes have implications for the skills required by VET teachers and trainers and the maintenance and improvement of their competence over time.

Like Australia, looming VET teacher shortages are a pressing issue in some European Union countries. These trends highlight the problems in recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers and trainers. These issues seem greatest in countries where VET is not highly regarded and there are significant differences in pay and reward schemes available in the private sector or industry (Lipinska, Schmid & Tessaring 2007). Making the VET teaching profession more attractive requires attention to the mix of conditions (salaries, staff–student ratios, teaching hours, overall working time and responsibilities) that shape teachers' work to ensure a viable workforce within the budgetary constraints in which VET systems must operate. Policies which promote teacher mobility are also needed (Lipinska, Schmid & Tessaring 2007, p.87), alongside those which seek to provide support for teachers' work through better training for middle managers and non-teaching staff and provide greater attention to teachers' professional wellbeing (Cort, Härkönen & Volmari 2004, p.7).

The key contribution of VET teachers and trainers to the policy goal of enhancing quality is 'widely acknowledged within Europe' (Cedefop 2009b, p.1). At a policy level, teachers and trainers have featured in all of the European Community Declarations: from Copenhagen, where their competence development was one of the main priority areas for adoption, to Helsinki, where highly qualified teachers and trainers were seen as a means to 'improve the attractiveness and quality of VET, through to Bordeaux, where enhancing the attractiveness and status of VET teaching was viewed as a priority in promoting the excellence and quality of VET systems. Raising the status of teachers and trainers, upgrading their competences and qualifications, and keeping initial and continuous training up to date have been and continue to be 'major issues of concern' (Cedefop 2009b, p.1). The emphasis is on their possessing updated specialist knowledge of their subject area as well as renewed pedagogical skills, and on support throughout their careers to upgrade their knowledge and skills. To this end, Cedefop is hosting a European Union conference, 'Teachers and trainers at the heart of innovation and VET reforms' in late February 2009.

The centrality of VET teachers and trainers in reform movements occurring in Europe would seem to be in rather sharp contrast to the experience of VET teachers and trainers in Australia over the past 18 years, where not only have they been largely excluded from reform processes but the levels of teacher preparation and the extent of professional development have been progressively undermined. While the Bordeaux communiqué speaks of mutual trust that can be promoted by quality assurance mechanisms that rely on tailored and up-to-date initial and continuing training for teachers and trainers (European Commission 2008a, p.6), the situation in Australia is in need of considerable bridge-building in this respect. A key factor in these developments has been the continuing conceptualisation of VET teaching as occupational rather than professional. This trend has also been noted as a major restraint in England to any government commitment to improving teaching quality in further education (Thompson & Robinson 2008, p.171).

In many countries, new recruitment and professional development pathways have been introduced for teachers and trainers and requirements for continuing education and training for VET teachers strengthened (Tessaring & Wannan 2004). There has been an emphasis on greater engagement with workplaces and a better integration of subject matter and pedagogy in VET. Professional development is seen as key to enhancing the esteem and attractiveness of the teaching profession (Leney 2004). Despite this, in most countries initial and continuing professional development for VET teachers is voluntary but a range of measures has been introduced. These include:

... training rights and duties (Spain, Italy) sometimes linked to career advancement and/or financial incentives (Bulgaria, Estonia, Poland, Romania, Sweden), competence standards (Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland), credit systems (Estonia, Hungary and Romania), or reference frameworks for initial training and professional development (Italy and Portugal). In some countries, where VET providers must be accredited,

professional development for staff is one of the criteria that apply (Ireland, Italy). Other countries are drawing up registers of qualified teachers and/or trainers (Bulgaria, Greece). These somewhat patchy policies are often aligned to complex, diverse and widely distributed funding systems. (Lipinksa, Schmid & Tessaring 2007, pp.89–90)

In England, a number of constraints have been identified as hampering efforts to improve VET teacher quality. These include an over-reliance on employers to implement quality measures, under-funding of key initiatives, lack of support from employers for trainee teachers, poor integration of professional development with human resource development policies within institutions and prescriptive curricula for teacher development (Thompson & Robinson 2008). Further, it has been noted that current reforms may act to undermine VET teachers from acquiring full professional qualifications; what is at issue here is the view that VET teaching is an occupation rather than a profession.

Tensions between aspirations to professionalisation, employer concerns over its effect on labour supply, and the persistence of ‘last choice’ attitudes to further education from students and parents (Richardson 2007) highlight some of the contradictions inherent in New Labour’s approach to developing the newly discovered territory of further education (Thompson & Robinson 2008, p.171).

Other commentators have pointed to the risk of ‘academisation’ of VET teachers and the potential barriers this could pose for future recruitment of qualified staff (Lipinska, Schmid & Tessaring 2007, p. 90). On the other hand, improving the professionalism of VET teachers, particularly through mechanisms to promote continuous learning and development, are consistently emphasised in policy documents and research (for example, Cort, Härkönen & Volmari 2004; Loney & Green 2005). The role of work experience in industry during initial training and ‘return to industry’ schemes are also being promoted as key strategies for enhancing the effectiveness of VET teachers. Conversely, the quality of in-company training has also been raised and mechanisms which ‘encourage mutual learning between them and VET teachers’ are being promoted (Lipinksa, Schmid & Tessaring 2007, p.92).

The PROFF study identified teacher wellbeing as ‘an unjustly neglected important topic, in a period when national VET systems are struggling to recruit new VET teachers and keep their existing staff’ (Cort, Härkönen & Volmari 2004, p.6). Coolahan (2002) described the pivotal importance of teacher well-being in quality education:

It is only intelligent, highly skilled, imaginative, caring and well educated teachers who will be able to respond satisfactorily to the demands placed on education in developed societies. If society’s concern is to improve quality in education and to foster creative, enterprising, innovative, self-reliant young people, with the capacity and motivation to go on as lifelong learners, then this will not happen until the teachers are themselves challenging, innovative and lifelong learners. The future wellbeing of the teaching profession is of pivotal importance.

(Coolahan 2002 cited in Cort, Härkönen & Volmari 2004, pp.25–6)

European Union states are concerned to alter perceptions of the prestige and status of VET teachers because of the pivotal role they can play in enhancing the attractiveness and quality of vocational education and training. In December 2006, Schmid (2006) was most surprised that, of the Maastricht (2004) themes, the one that not progressing as well was teacher and trainer development, despite the fact that quality assurance was high on the agenda and ‘teachers and trainers are the most important change agents’ (p.3). She asked: ‘How can VET be of high quality if those who make learning happen remain a “forgotten army”?’ (p.3). European Union initiatives since then have been largely concerned with emphasising excellence, examining the relationships between the related occupations of VET trainers in enterprises and VET teachers, promoting the broad range of functions performed by VET teachers, and establishing standards to guide VET teachers’ work. Particular attention has been paid to the recruitment of teachers and the creation of

professional development pathways which integrate requirements for ongoing professional development and greater engagement in workplaces.

In Australia, questions relating to the attractiveness of VET teaching and its status as a profession are increasingly being raised as the pressure to find ways to sustain the skill base in the VET sector grows. The notion of some compulsion around continuing professional development has not been addressed in any substantial manner and the vexed issue of managing return-to-industry schemes for institution-based VET teachers remains unresolved. The distinction between workplace-based trainers and teachers in VET institutions has become increasingly blurred in Australia with the implementation of the Training and Assessment Training Package, although recent amendments to this package perhaps signal the beginning of attempts to differentiate these roles. The tension between ‘academisation’ and increasing the professionalism of VET teachers and trainers continues to be clearly reflected in debates about qualifications, working conditions and rates of remuneration. Interestingly, amid these debates, the issue of VET teacher wellbeing has not been addressed in any substantial way in Australia.

Many of the European Union initiatives (for example, those undertaken within the Leonardo da Vinci program) are of interest to Australian VET because they are centrally focused on raising the profile of VET teaching as a profession and enhancing the professionalism of VET teachers, rather than blurring the boundaries between the various groups in the workforce who might contribute to VET in a wide range of contexts. What such blurring leads to in practice is a denial of the distinct and different roles played by various players. These players range across many instructional strata: from the casual helpers of learning in workplaces, whose core function is not training, through part-time and full-time trainers in industry, whose core function is training, usually for a particular enterprise or industry, to the full-time teacher in educational institutions, both public and private, as well as those ‘hybrid’ trainers who increasingly cross boundaries between both the worlds of work and education. Such role-blurring can also, in practice, lead to confusion over what standards are to be applied to these different functions and what qualifications are expected of each of them—what tends to eventuate is frustration over both the perceived ever-increasing and demanding expectations on those whose roles are not primarily training and the perceived de-skilling of those whose roles are primarily educational.

Adult and continuing education

In many European countries, the prime concern is still very much on ‘front-end’, initial training, and opportunities for adult continuing education are rare. Often there is no real system of adult education, and lifelong learning is realised only by individual and mostly on-the-job training initiatives. Yet the focus in European VET reform is increasingly on lifelong learning strategies—reducing the barriers to accessing lifelong learning, validation and recognition. Concomitant issues reinforcing the need for such a focus are ageing populations, basic skill gaps and social exclusion. Reform of the adult continuing VET system is thus perceived as part of the policy mix.

Along with schooling, VET and higher education, adult education is viewed as the ‘fourth pillar’ that will assist European Union member states to realise the goal of lifelong learning (European Association for the Education of Adults 2006, p.64). Two issues in particular are raised as warranting consideration in the current European Union context, where the development of the adult education sector assumes high priority as a counter-balance to the ‘front-end’ approach to VET concentrating on the young. These are:

- ✧ the relationship between adult education and VET
- ✧ a particular focus on adults and their learning within the VET sector.

The first issue requires acknowledgement of the role that adult education can play in ensuring that adults have access to the high-quality basic education that is required as the essential foundation to promoting lifelong learning and facilitating access to education and training systems (European

Commission 2001, p.11). Relationships between the sectors also require attention to the validation of informal and non-formal learning that might occur in adult education settings which lie outside VET and which can be used as the building blocks for VET and access to further learning.

The second issue focuses on the growing number of adults who are accessing VET and the changes that are required to meet the diverse needs of this particular group of learners. Moreover, the importance of adults as learners is underscored by the increasing age of populations and the need to encourage learning in older cohorts of adults as a way of combating poverty and social exclusion (European Commission 2001, p.11).

It is recognised that the inclusion of adults in VET may present some challenges for VET, including the need to find ways to take proper account of their prior experience, the wide range of skills and attitudes that might be present (which can be quite different from younger people) and the need to sometimes deal with significant resistance to learning (Cort, Härkönen & Volmari 2004, p. 13). These issues are becoming a familiar feature of VET practice in Australia as increasing numbers of mature learners are entering VET in response to strategies designed to promote the up-skilling of the existing workforce and combat skill shortages. Arguably, they may not present as significant a challenge as might be expected, since VET in Australia has had a long tradition of being embedded in adult education and in fact, uses its adult focus as a key point of difference when comparing its pedagogical approaches to those found in the schooling sector. What is often more the issue in the Australian context is the sheer diversity of the VET student body and the requirement that VET teachers and trainers address the needs of young people and older adults simultaneously in the same learning setting. In this context, it is more often the case that issues related to dealing with younger learners—particularly those associated with behaviour management—present the greater challenges for VET teachers and trainers.

There is an emphasis in European Union documents on the ‘second chance’ notion attached to adult education, particularly in relation to offering early school leavers opportunities to gain qualifications and the role that adult education plays in building active citizenship at a time when democracies are perceived to be in decline (European Commission 2008d; Canoy et al. 2006). Attention is also focused on the staff who work in adult education and the need for the identification of specialised professional development which does not inflict ‘insensitive standardisation’ on the field (European Association for the Education of Adults 2006, p.2). The notion of embracing and enhancing the flexibility which gives the adult education sector its edge in terms of meeting the needs of adult learners is also extended to finding:

... measurements and monitoring systems that enable the planning of adult learning’s development, transparent decision-making and quality assessment in an inclusive way.

(European Association for the Education of Adults 2006, p.65)

The general objective of the European Commission Action Plan adopted in 2007 has as its overarching goal the development of a coherent adult education sector which has as its hallmarks the development of systems that bring ‘high quality learning and guidance closer to the learner’, bring learning out into communities where learners are to be found and develop flexible systems of assessment and recognition of learning, widening access to higher education and encouraging individuals to invest in their learning (European Commission 2007a, pp.6–7).

Amid these developments, unresolved tensions remain. As in Australia, there continue to be questions raised about the most appropriate balance between adult education which is liberal and broad in its focus and the more functionalist or vocational orientation. While its importance as a sector is not disputed, it does not attract the attention and status afforded other sectors of education and continues to suffer from under-investment by governments (European Association for the Education of Adults 2006). The persistent problem of unequal participation across different socioeconomic groups is still prevalent, with those most needing to participate in adult education being the least likely to do so. The Grundtvig component of the Lifelong Learning Project is one example of a policy response providing practical support for the implementation of learning opportunities that genuinely address the needs of all adult learners.

Retention and guidance services

Guidance is defined as:

... a range of activities that enables citizens of any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which these capacities and competences are learned and/or used.

(Council of the European Union 2004c, p.3)

In European Union policy terms, guidance is viewed as a 'key priority' (Council of the European Union, Education, Youth and Culture Council 2002, p.2) and central to making lifelong learning a reality. In a context where governments are seeking to build increasingly flexible and changing learning systems, guidance becomes essential if learners are to be able to navigate these systems and act as discerning consumers.

In this context, guidance serves to build individual confidence and empowerment and to raise awareness of new career, learning and work opportunities. It promotes employability and adaptability by assisting people to make career decisions both on entering the labour market and on moving within it. Guidance aids the effectiveness of education and training provision and labour market instruments by promoting a better match for individual and labour market needs, providing greater insights into learners' needs and by reducing non-completion rates. The contributions of guidance, counselling and information to achieving the Lisbon goals have been widely acknowledged in documents from the Commission and member states and highlighted in Council Resolutions and Declarations of Ministers and in objectives and actions of recent European Union funding initiatives. Findings of the OECD, Cedefop, the European Training Foundation and the World Bank on policies for career guidance for Europe have confirmed the key role of guidance in VET (see, for example, Sultana 2004).

Counselling and guidance are seen as components of Europe becoming an 'area of lifelong learning' (European Commission 2001). In order to achieve this goal, partnerships between local authorities, school, universities and other learning providers are promoted, along with the importance of working in communities to actively promote the (individual, social and economic) benefits of learning.

A sequence of policy developments, including the European Commission's strategy paper on lifelong learning (2001); the *European report on quality indicators of lifelong learning* (Directorate-General for Education and Culture 2002a); the establishment of a Lifelong Guidance Expert Group in 2002; and the development of a draft resolution strengthening policies, systems and practices in the field of guidance throughout life (Council of the European Union 2004c) have provided the scaffolding for the development of guidance and counselling. Collectively, these works have resulted in governments concluding that guidance is essentially a mechanism for supporting public policy in two key ways:

- ✧ It promotes lifelong learning goals by ensuring an adequate knowledge and skills base to meet the challenges of high-ability societies in economic globalisation.
- ✧ It can help address a whole range of labour market issues, improve labour market outcomes and efficiency and support economic development goals.

(Sultana 2004, p.9)

Guidance becomes a key component of policies addressing issues such as dealing with labour market shortages—particularly through the mismatch between labour supply and demand—reducing unemployment and dealing with the effects of the adjustments required in the labour market as a result of changed economic conditions.

Work across European Union member states reflects different stages of development in realising the goal for guidance in promoting lifelong learning. This work has included: paying attention to

systemic issues to enhance the maturity and reach of services; efforts to strengthen the quality of guidance services and strategies to build individuals' personal capacities to learn and manage their skills via curriculum development; and implementation of approaches to teaching which promote self-directed learning (see Sultana 2004).

A focus on the enhancement of the knowledge and skills of personnel engaged in the delivery of guidance services is also evident in policy strategies in European Union states. Professional associations and research centres have been established and networks of professionals fostered to promote leadership and support for professionals engaged in this work. An example is 'Euroguidance', a network of resource centres linking careers guidance systems in Europe.

As in Australia, a range of workers with a broad spectrum of roles and having various qualifications and competences are engaged in providing such guidance. Guidance workers in the employment and education sectors tend to have many roles and responsibilities with no clear professional boundaries.

In many countries, guidance staff belong to a truncated profession, only partially exhibiting those features normally associated with fully developed professions. They tend to lack a sense of identity as an occupational group, are poorly organised, and do not enjoy any particular status in the public eye. (Sultana 2004, p.11)

One of the challenges facing policy-makers is achieving a balance between providing services to targeted groups of individuals—particularly those who are unemployed—and the development of a universal approach which emphasises access to guidance to all people across the life cycle.

In the context where VET is seen as a key player in promoting lifelong learning, the provision of guidance services by VET providers becomes essential. The sector can particularly contribute by providing and promoting guidance services in tandem with strategies such as validating non-formal and formal learning (Cedefop 2007a, p.25).

Like Australia the provision of high-quality guidance services is hampered by fragmented approaches across sectors, in terms of both a common understanding of the aims and outcomes for services and tensions between universalist versus targeted approaches to service provision. There are question marks about whether current approaches to guidance provision are well suited to the demands of a knowledge-based economy (Tessaring & Wannan 2004). Other emerging issues include the provision of guidance services in workplaces, expanding the use of ICTs in service delivery, linkages between guidance and human resource development, use of guidance to enhance completion rates for education and training (increasing efficiency), and guidance services which particularly address the need for a mobile workforce.

One of the major themes permeating much of the recent policy work in the European Union, running parallel with the promotion of lifelong learning, is the need for an increasing focus on individualised and personalised learning as a way of engaging learners of all ages across the life cycle. Underpinning these policy goals is the assumption of an engaged consumer of VET who has the confidence, self-knowledge and wider understanding of careers and the workforce to be able to make choices and follow through with actions to achieve identified, desired outcomes and ultimately obtain a secure connection with the workforce. This goal highlights the importance of career development services which can provide guidance, counselling, information and education to individuals as they navigate their way from school into the workforce and/or the other educational sectors.

This policy goal is no less pressing in Australia, particularly in the light of the desire to widen participation in education, increase retention, especially in secondary education and in apprenticeships, and build an educational system founded on choice. The tension in Australia, as in the European Union member states, is to find the optimum balance in provision between 'remedial' services, which target particular groups of learners with special needs, and 'universal' services, which emphasise guidance across the life cycle as well as at particular transition points. While some

European Union countries have targeted the development of stand-alone centres to provide these services (for example, Bulgaria), others (for example, Sweden and Flanders) are looking to web-based solutions to provide access to information and the use of career guidance tools.

Role of social partners

The term ‘social partners’ refers to employers’ organisations and trade unions. For example, the social partner organisations involved in the Work Programme of the European Social Partners 2006–08 were the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the Union of Industrial and Employers’ Confederations of Europe (UNICE) and the European Centre of Enterprises with Public Participation and of Enterprises of General Economic Interest (CEEP). In the European Union context, VET relies on the engagement of all stakeholders, including the social partners, sectoral organisations and VET providers at European and national levels. This engagement ensures that market labour needs can be effectively met and that the attractiveness and flexibility of VET can be enhanced (Leney & Green 2005, p.264). An important role for the social partners is as ‘generators of innovation’ (Leney & Green 2005, p.274), in that many responsibilities are devolved to local or sectoral levels. The European Commission also emphasises the significance of social partnerships:

Enhancing the relevance of VET to the labour market, and improving relations with employers and the social partners, is an important factor for most countries trying to tackle the issues of quality and attractiveness. Improvements in the structure of VET, access to apprenticeships and the reform of VET standards are crucial in this context. Forecasting skills and qualifications needs remains a key challenge, requiring more stakeholder involvement, a sectoral approach and the improvement of data collection.

(European Commission 2006g, C79/6)

The framework of action was adopted as part of the Lisbon strategy by the European social partners in March 2002 to support actions for the lifelong development of competencies and qualifications. Further work plans have included negotiating a voluntary framework on harassment and violence, building dialogue with the social partners in new member states, examining how employers and trade union resources can provide technical support to new member states and continuing to monitor implementation of the European Growth and Job Strategy (UNICE/UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC 2006). The Helsinki Communiqué in 2006 took up the challenges associated with demographic change, globalisation and technological innovation. In addition to tasks such as policy and program development, the social partners, along with other stakeholders (such as ministries, agencies, councils, education and training providers, non-government organisations), were identified as key players in efforts to promote the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Colardyn & Bjornavold 2004, p.76). The continued strengthening of the engagement of the social partners and industry sectors has occupied the attention of all European countries (Tessaring & Wannan 2004, p.60). The Nordic countries have been acknowledged to have a ‘pronounced social partnership approach’ and the ‘core countries’ including Germany and France a ‘well developed social partnership’, whereas the United Kingdom has less developed social partnerships (Tessaring & Wannan 2004, p.3). Furthermore, Directors-General for Vocational Education and Training have signalled that they would continue to rely on a social partnership approach over the next decade (Leney & Green 2005, p.262). The most recent framework (the Bordeaux Communiqué for the period 2008–10) has again reinforced the critical involvement of social partners in ‘the new strategic direction’ of gearing VET policies to labour market needs in order to contribute to greater employability and employment security, to anticipate and manage transitions in the labour market and to boost business competitiveness (European Commission 2008a, pp.5, 11).

There is wide recognition in Europe, arguably not so strongly acknowledged in Australia, that social dialogue, which lies at the heart of social partnerships, extends beyond industrial relations processes and is connected to wider political process (Winterton 2006). Winterton’s study found that

European social partners play a formal role in developing vocational training policy and are involved in its implementation. While state regulatory frameworks can impact on their involvement, social partners are also engaged in developing curricula and qualifications. Social partners play a significant role in promoting lifelong learning and work-based learning. For example, unions play an active role, with members providing guidance and support to co-workers in their learning.

Social partners manage sectoral training funds, sometimes in collaboration with governments. These funds are used to improve the quality and quantity of training supply (public and private). Sector training funds are increasingly becoming ‘sector centres of knowledge and expertise in labour market and training issues’ (Cedefop 2008c, p.1), and play a crucial part in promoting investment in human capital. They fulfil many roles, including as consumers, investors, negotiators and promoters of learning, as well as developing, validating and recognising vocational competence and qualifications at all levels (Cedefop 2008c, p.1). For instance, the chambers of commerce in Germany have a key function in the examination of apprentices and the establishment and maintenance of occupational standards.

The engagement of stakeholders in determining strategies for the VET sector and involvement in the development of training packages is relatively widespread in Australia. However, one would judge that the social-partnership approach is not as pronounced as in European countries and that we could not echo, as Winterton (2006, p.65) did for Europe, that social dialogue is ‘one of the pillars of the ... social model’. The recently expanded role for Australia’s industry skills councils and their state equivalent boards may in this respect be a useful step in this direction. Extending these relationships to engage the social partners and other stakeholders in processes to promote recognition of prior learning would seem to be a logical extension of existing relationships.

Key competencies for lifelong learning

European Union member states have paid particular attention to the notion of key competencies as a foundation for lifelong learning. Lifelong learning refers both to a process (that is, engagement in learning across the life cycle) as well as to the development of a disposition towards learning which enables citizens to take advantage of learning opportunities available to them and to achieve success in these endeavours. The development of key competencies is seen as particularly pressing for workers who are at the margins of the workforce, usually as a consequence of their poor skills.

The European Association for the Education of Adults (2006) noted that developing key competencies to meet current demands is a burdensome task for most European countries. The Commission’s Concrete Objectives Work Programme’s working group on basic skills and key competencies concluded that:

The key issue in the field of adult education is that all adults, particularly the less advantaged, should be enabled to develop and maintain key competencies throughout their lives ... Successful initiatives are characterised inter alia by thorough analysis, research into new methodologies, a cohesive infrastructure, provision of work-based training, making the needs of the learner a priority, and providing incentives to learners.

(European Association for the Education of Adults 2003, pp.43–4)

The European Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, adopted by the European Union and the European Parliament in late 2006, sets out a list of eight competences which are considered ‘necessary to enable all adults to learn and maintain and update their competences’ (European Commission 2005, p. 1). These are:

- ✧ communication in the mother tongue
- ✧ communication in foreign languages
- ✧ mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology
- ✧ digital competence

- ✧ learning to learn
- ✧ social and civic competences
- ✧ sense of initiative and entrepreneurship
- ✧ cultural awareness and expression.

(European Commission 2006b, p.L394/13)

Säävälä (2008, p. 4) contends that these key competences overlap and are underpinned by critical thinking, creativity, the taking of initiative, making decisions, problem-solving, risk assessment and the management of feelings.

More recently, further elaborating notions of key competencies have occurred. At a 2008 conference on key competencies, Tomalin (2008) proposed that culture is ‘a core competency in the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue’ (p.1). He identified core international management skills as: acceptance of difference, curiosity, tolerance of ambiguity, flexibility, empathy, and adaptation of language and the areas where cultural differences occur’ (Tomalin 2008, p.3). The European Association for the Education of Adults (2004b) proposes a need for a new curriculum around key competencies, stating that traditionally the curriculum consisted of the three elements of ‘knowledge’, ‘skills’ and ‘attitudes’ and tended to ‘value knowledge above skills, and skills above attitudes’. It goes on to say that:

Experience of life suggests different priorities: positive attitudes are key to a rewarding life and job, skills are also more important than knowledge. These priorities should be asserted in the development of new curriculum, which would raise the value of social capital, civil society and the role of non-formal learning.

(European Association for the Education of Adults 2004b, p.2).

These developments in the European Union states underscore the continuing debates in many countries over the nature, function and development of key competencies. The development of the capacity to engage in and have positive dispositions towards lifelong learning as the key rationale for the naming of key competencies, rather than the narrower focus on employability skills, offers a different perspective from which to consider these debates.

Higher-level apprenticeships

Developing and revitalising apprenticeships has become an important component within policy shifts across a number of European Union member states. These developments are particularly aimed at expanding the participation in apprenticeships to a much wider audience, including unemployed adults and students in higher education (Lipinska, Schmid & Tessaring 2007).

This development is based on the notion that workplaces are prime sites for learning and several countries are seeking to develop alternative models of apprenticeship, including internships, the use of work-based learning in higher education, and incentives for companies to provide placements (Lipinska, Schmid & Tessaring 2007).

As in Australia, the European Union states are also interested in broadening the reach of apprenticeships beyond those who might be marginalised from the workforce. Luxembourg (like Germany and Austria), for example, is looking to offer apprenticeships across a wide range of sectors, including knowledge-intensive industries such as information technology. Apprenticeships are open to people of various ages and include those who have completed higher education. Apprenticeships are also increasingly being used by adult learners. Work-based learning in higher education (in the form of internships or periods of work placement dispersed between periods of study on campus) is being used in higher education to forge new partnerships with industry and promote the development of higher-level skills.

Learning partnerships between VET institutions and companies are increasingly being seen as the best way to achieve VET outcomes. These partnerships are ‘innovative ways of linking companies and open the possibility of developing regional innovation centres including vocational schools and higher education’ (Loney & Green 2005, p. 271).

‘Dual systems’ where school-based and work-based learning occur alongside each other (as in Austria, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland and Norway) have been successful in facilitating pathways into the labour market (Quintini, Martin & Martin 2007, p.120). In these cases, apprenticeships are a component of the formal education system. These structures mirror recent Australian developments in the form of the Australian Technical Colleges.

The Netherlands is instructive for its recent developments in implementing policies which allow ‘climbing the vocational education column’; this policy direction promotes ‘vertical vocational learning careers’, where crossing boundaries between secondary, vocational and higher education is encouraged (Onstenk & Blokhuis 2007, p.497). Dutch policy has also moved to the certification of companies that offer work placements. National bodies offer examinations, monitor and promote the quality of learning and supervise companies offering apprenticeships. Initiatives which aim to improve the connection between learning at school and the workplace by organising learning around work tasks formulated by companies have also been promoted (Onstenk & Blokhuis 2007, p.497).

There have also been changes to German policy, which has given parity to school-based VET and apprenticeships in terms of allowing school students access to exams organised by chambers of commerce. These changes also allow students to complete some of their training abroad and permit the recognition of completion of preparatory courses towards training outcomes. These multiple pathways, however, have caused some concern in relation to their impact on the dual system (Cedefop 2006, p.17).

Recent policy directions in Germany have sought to increase the quality of learning in apprenticeships while looking at reducing costs—an important outcome at a time when companies are no longer providing apprenticeships. Grollman and Rauner (2007) argue that ‘an intensified integration of apprenticeship training into productive work practices’ will increase quality while decreasing the costs (both direct and indirect) to companies (Grollman & Rauner 2007, p.431). Criteria to achieve high-quality learning in apprenticeships include:

- ✧ Learning in productive work processes is a core characteristic of on-the-job learning.
- ✧ Productive work needs to follow a well-considered sequential logic which increasingly challenges the competence of apprentices.
- ✧ Learning and work are based on a high degree of autonomy and self-responsibility.
- ✧ Learning is embedded into the business process.

(Grollman & Rauner 2007, p.431)

In Denmark recent changes to apprenticeships allow young people who wish to leave school to complete the ‘basic’ part of their apprenticeship (the first year) totally on the job. The competences to be attained during this period are set out in an individualised learning plan, which is signed off by the student, the college and the enterprise. During the basic course, the college and the enterprise are responsible for supporting the student and ensuring that competence is attained prior to the student accessing the main course. The apprenticeship pathway is concluded with exactly the same examinations and tests as trainees who have taken the school or company pathway (Cort & Rolls 2008, pp.37–8).

Challenges in apprenticeship training identified by the Ministry of Education in Finland include:

- ✧ facilitating greater linkages with working life (increasing competitiveness and promoting innovation)
- ✧ increasing training periods abroad

- ✧ increasing the portability of training undertaken abroad
- ✧ maintaining transparency of VET qualifications in concrete terms
- ✧ developing quality management
- ✧ leveraging benefits from Leonardo da Vinci and European Union structural fund projects.
(Tammilehto 2005)

The research of Fuller and Unwin (2007) raises the very important issue of employer commitment to apprenticeships:

... effective apprenticeships are strongly associated with a sustained organisational commitment to apprenticeship. This stems from an identifiable business case to recruit and train young people and a concern with their personal (long term) as well as job specific (short term) development. This approach is manifest through the development of programmes which ensure that apprentices participate in a wide range of co-ordinated and progressive work and learning opportunities. (Fuller & Unwin 2007, p.447)

These policy directions suggest that apprenticeships are increasingly being viewed as a means of driving innovation and competitiveness, not merely as skills-development processes or mechanisms to promote entry into the labour market. The quest for apprenticeships at higher levels underscores this development. In this context, issues related to transferability across borders, transparency of qualifications and the overall quality of the apprenticeship process continue to be emphasised.

Selected European views on policy directions in VET

Advantages

The European informants perceived many benefits in the current policy directions and initiatives in Europe. Economically, these reforms were seen as likely to increase the quality of the workforce and better meet the needs of the labour market. Socially, they would contribute to the harmonisation of society. Politically, these initiatives, as they are taken up by all member states and further developed and implemented at regional and sector levels, would contribute to developing a common education and training area (and therefore following on from the implementation of a common labour market) and to the building of Europe through the promotion of mobility.

By far the most common benefits, however, were articulated in terms of educational advantages. The roll-out of the full framework for qualifications with clearly defined levels of learning was already demonstrating its usefulness in clarifying the roles of different providers and awarding bodies, while the use of standards-based qualifications was judged to be more flexible than time-served models and more appropriate to mobile working populations. It was thought that the current initiatives would lead to better coordination (for example, between VET curricula and competences needed at work) and more coherent and consistent national policies for lifelong learning. They would also contribute to greater transparency in the labour market and provide more helpful information for employers, as well as more information for those planning their life strategies in education and learning, either formal or informal, and lifelong learning in all forms. There would be an enhanced focus on the needs of individuals and sectors, creating conditions for better access, progression and transfer of knowledge, skills and competences between different subsystems and European Union countries.

Particular mention was made of the great potential of RP(E)L (recognition of prior [experiential] learning) in enabling greater mobility of workers and more democratisation of the process of qualifications achievement. An advantage was the inclusion of VET in the formation of national and European qualification frameworks, which would promote and increase possibilities for different (vocational) education pathways and the avoidance of ‘dead-end qualifications’. It was considered that these new directions would lead to the development of more open and flexible systems, an increase of quality in and attractiveness of VET, and lead to broader involvement of stakeholders in VET. They would help to maintain VET as a public topic, creating new opportunities, making VET more attractive to different groups (disadvantaged learners, talented learners, employers and so on), and promote greater inclusiveness of VET and increased participation in it. This was important because there was an urgent need to find alternatives to standard academic curricula in schools, and also to engage disaffected young people and older workers returning to employment.

Finally, the reforms to VET held out the hope that they would form the basis for: the modernisation and internationalisation of VET; rethinking the borders between different subsystems and also between VET and higher education; and linking informal competences to formal VET. In Germany, for example, the ten guidelines refer to all subsystems of VET and have the potential to make the VET system more flexible and permeable. The ten guidelines are:

- 1 Encouraging completion of school education—improving training maturity

- 2 Optimizing training preparation for the disadvantaged—reorganizing funding structures
- 3 Optimizing transfers—securing paths to company training
- 4 Strengthening the occupation principle—making vocational education and training more flexible
- 5 Broadening the training basis—making effective use of training
- 6 Enhancing transfer opportunities—securing the employability of vocational skills
- 7 ‘Second chance’ education—promoting qualifications for young adults
- 8 Greater openness towards Europe—improving mobility and recognition
- 9 Strengthening dual training by European comparison—securing potential on the international education market
- 10 Providing a basis for future-oriented vocational training policy—strengthening cooperation between industry, science and politics.

(BMBF 2007, p.10)

There is certainly a need to introduce more flexibility and individualisation in the dual system, with reforms leading to greater opportunities for movement between the dual system, vocational full-time schools, the school sector and higher education; more opportunities for disadvantaged learners; and less rigidity and predetermined pathways.

Disadvantages

In any reform, there are perceived limitations and potential drawbacks, in addition to perceived advantages and benefits. The European informants cited many potential downsides and tensions in the current policy directions and initiatives in Europe.

From the overarching European Union perspective, the rhythm of the policy initiatives is perceived as too ambitious, with too many in too short a timeframe. The view was that, now that a healthy level of commitment from the stakeholders had been achieved, reforms needed to be consolidated before introducing new priorities. An informant from England reinforced this viewpoint, claiming that there have been too many initiatives in further education and VET in that country over the past ten to 15 years, and none has been consolidated before being hit with the next wave of reform. This has resulted in low morale in the system. Other perceived concerns at the European Union level are: the danger in introducing a false division of labour between policy and implementation levels; the implementation of European Union initiatives was top down; and there is currently too little evaluation and evidence-based policy, for example, there is a need for research activities to accompany the benchmarks set for VET.

One tension in VET lies in the challenge to balance the educational aims and labour market needs; the danger, articulated by one Swiss informant, is that the pendulum swings too far to the labour market side and economic considerations, especially in the wake of the policy of competitiveness. Others also drew attention to the reform agenda being driven by economic considerations and not wider social issues or distinct educational imperatives (Scotland), with the potential consequence of more divided societies with clearer class barriers (Sweden).

A second tension lies in achieving balance between structure and flexibility. One German informant did not consider that the moves towards greater flexibility and individualisation were going far enough, since the vocational principle is still predominant and traditional structures are preventing wider reforms and changes; the Danish informant on the other hand expressed a concern that moves towards modularisation can readily lead to fragmentation, which erodes the value of VET from the perspectives of both employers and young people. The Slovenian informant also referred to the danger of ‘fragmentation’.

A third tension is the risk that the blurring of the distinction between VET and general education may contribute to a lowering in the status of both types of provision—thereby doing neither of them any favour in the labour market context—as this leads to confusion and the lowering in value of some types of qualification. There is a need to develop and maintain distinct viable routes for people with different aptitudes, while also making the entire system more permeable; however, this was recognised as a delicate balancing act to perform.

A related concern was the perceived absence of a clear idea/concept/meaning of VET. For example, in England new diplomas being developed were seen to be more academic than vocational, with schools ill-equipped in terms of their staff and resources to offer them—a situation described by an English informant as ‘a disaster sure to happen’.

Other more national concerns surfaced over the nature and pace of VET reform. In Switzerland, the reform initiatives were seen to be strengthening federal authorities; in Germany, the fear was that in the case of the national qualifications framework the dual system might lose its weight and importance; and in France, the suspicion was that the recent promotion of VET by internship may lead to the system being a victim of its success because there will not be enough places for all applicants.

Another specific concern in France was with the effects of the 2004 Law of Social Modernization. According to the French informant, there are already some worrying indicators. In 2005, which was the first year in which these reforms were properly implemented, companies’ rates of financial participation dropped, both at large firms and at those with only ten to 19 employees, where their minimum legal contribution to continuing vocational training decreased from 1.6 to 1.05%. In parallel with companies’ rates of financial participation, the mean duration of training per trainee has been decreasing steadily since 1974. Employees tend to be lukewarm about continuing VET because of their ‘active role’, whereby they have to participate in training in their free time, whereas previously it was organised in their working time.

The main disadvantage with Norway’s major reform, Reform 94, has been a downgrading of workshops in vocational fields and an expansion of general subjects, with an increase in classroom teaching/learning at the expense of workshop learning in the first two years of VET in school. The number of hours spent in workshops—in the bakery and car mechanics shop where the hands-on learning takes place—decreased and academic classroom work expanded. All theory is to be taken during the first two years in school before entering apprenticeship. Apprenticeship schools have been abolished, and all routes to craft certificates by direct entry into an apprenticeship after compulsory school were closed. These changes have created serious attrition in vocational education, with a drop-out rate of 39% for girls and 46% for boys. More girls than boys complete the upper secondary school within the allotted time period. These differences are found both in the academic and the vocational fields. In the academic field, 86% of girls and 80% of boys complete the program requirements within a five-year time period; corresponding numbers in the vocational field are 61% of girls and 54% of boys. Thus, the two main problems in VET have been, firstly, the reduction of vocational fields and workplace learning in the first year of studies, with a lengthening of the period of school attendance to two years before a student is permitted to learn a vocation, and secondly, the lack of apprenticeship places.

Underpinning these overarching reforms in the European Union are particular financial concerns and policy issues in some countries. The Lithuanian informant claimed there were insufficient financial resources for VET development in that country, while the French informant highlighted the lack of harmonisation in the accreditation of prior experience system, with no instrumentation and no money given to implement it. In Poland, the main problem was articulated as a lack of policy coordination: ‘there is no policy, at least not declared, from the ministry of education’, while lifelong education and VET outside secondary education are the responsibility of the ministry of labour, and so effective coordination between the two ministries is missing.

Improving the quality of VET

The European informants also provided their ideas on what would contribute most to the improvement of the quality of VET over the next five years. Their responses are summarised in table 3.

Table 3 Most important contributions to improvement in the quality of VET in Europe

<p>Standards</p> <p>Developing common standards for quality (ENQA-VET) and for VET (qualifications standards, vocational standards) (Greece); monitoring of awarding standards by the National Qualifications Authority will inevitably lead to more standardisation and more quality (Ireland); development of occupational standards, and VET outcomes-based curriculum (Lithuania); common curricular standards and common assessment procedures and guidelines (Germany); development of EQF and ECVET which will underpin most of the developments (England); analysing work contents and tasks needed at different workplaces, defining competences and generic skills, and then, on the basis of that, building a good system of examining and validating qualifications, which may influence VET school programs and bring closer VET school and work and job market (Poland).</p>
<p>Recognition of prior learning</p> <p>RPL has potential if states support it and make it accessible to all citizens (Ireland); accreditation of prior learning could be a source of improvement, if means and tools are given to harmonise the system and procedures of accreditation (France); the new comprehensive model of validation of qualifications acquired either at school or during informal or formal training on the job and also validation of professional experience (Poland).</p>
<p>Teacher training</p> <p>Good teacher training and legislation which gives much space for innovations (Sweden); teacher training and better competences for responding to individual learning needs (Slovenia); development of VET teachers' professional qualification (Lithuania).</p>
<p>Economic factors</p> <p>A continued strong economy (Sweden); the current high supply of training places in businesses—as long as it remains high! (Denmark); changes in the labour market and the drop-out problem from vocational education have put new questions on the educational agenda and might lead to improvement of VET (Norway); there is new policy direction opening up for going into 'limited apprenticeship programs' in working life after the ten years of compulsory schooling (Norway).</p>
<p>Sectoral relationships</p> <p>Cooperation between industry and the education sector (Germany); better cooperation between VET providers and companies (Slovenia); linking VET with higher education (Lithuania); the distinction between VET and higher education is becoming blurred in unitary frameworks of qualifications, not a bad thing indeed from the perspective of the democratisation of knowledge (Ireland).</p>
<p>Programmatic factors</p> <p>Vocational programs that combine practical and theoretical training, but both parts must really be integrated and not only co-existing (Germany); implementation of career education in general education system and career planning in VET (Lithuania); finding a coherent school-based vocational curriculum (Scotland); further developing transparency of VET between the member states (Greece).</p>
<p>Vocational knowledge</p> <p>More emerging knowledge in the field of vocational education than ever before. New technology generally and computer technology specifically are challenging the traditional divisions of knowledge and new important questions are being posed (Norway).</p>

Clearly there continues to be an optimistic view of the future for VET provision over the next five years. While some of these responses are qualified, generally the European informants believe that VET will be improved by the new policies and initiatives being implemented in their countries and in the European Union more generally. Standards were perceived to be very important factors, closely followed by economic factors, teacher training and programmatic factors. Sectoral relationships, recognition of prior learning and the advances in vocational knowledge were also seen to play their part in improving VET.

Conclusions

Recent developments in Europe, fostered by the series of Europe-wide declarations (for example, Prague 2001, Copenhagen 2002, Maastricht 2004, Helsinki 2006, Bordeaux 2008) that have occurred since Bologna (1999) and the Lisbon European Council (2000), have called on European Union members to modernise their education and training systems, to make Europe more competitive and to help create more and better jobs. In particular, two supranational initiatives of significance are the European Qualifications Framework and the ongoing Bologna process. These are stimulating tremendous debate and ferment within European Union member states. Other important initiatives aimed at developing a common European area of VET include the European Credit system for VET (ECVET), with the intention of making it easier for people to transfer and accumulate learning outcomes, Europass (developing a single European Community framework for the transparency of qualifications and competencies) and the Common Quality Assurance Framework. Still other issues and initiatives were gleaned from analysis of Cedefop's Agora series, of European Union reports and of academic research journals. We also sought information from respondents closely connected with European VET who occupied positions that have given them a wide and informed understanding of recent initiatives (see appendix 1).

In all of the intense activity and debate in European VET, Winterton (2006) has asked whether we are witnessing 'the emergence of a European model'; Ertl (2006) has wondered why, despite 'the new wave of EU initiatives', progress has remained slow and the impact 'limited'; and Ertl and Phillips (2006) have emphasised 'the tensions between standardization and tradition' in European Union education and training policy.

The first question of this research into European initiatives and their implications for Australia focused on new policy directions in Europe. The report has singled out nine themes of significance: relationships between higher education and VET; validation of learning; non-formal, informal and experiential learning; access, inclusiveness and learner engagement; development of VET teachers; adult and continuing education; retention and guidance services; role of social partners; key competencies for lifelong learning; and higher-level apprenticeships. The European informants considered that these policy directions were attempting to address a variety of problems and issues and they were being driven by a mix of economic, social and political drivers.

The second question, on how these policy directions related to the contexts in which they are embedded, is difficult to unravel within the scope of this project. The European Union now includes 27 countries, each with its unique history and contemporary environment, and with a different date of entry into the Union. This project necessarily had to concentrate more at the (supranational) level of the European Union rather than on individual countries. What can be concluded is that there is indeed a close connection between the progress of reform in each country and its political, economic and social development. Those countries with a longer history of reform, such as Germany, France and those in the United Kingdom and Scandinavia, were very evidently in the vanguard of European Union initiatives and were leaders in attempts to advance its goals and meet its targets. The diversity within the European Union in these respects is remarkable and remains a key issue, if not concern, in the achievement of the goals and targets of these new policy directions in the European Union as a whole. This diversity is confirmed in country self-reports contained in the periodic European Union analyses of progress (not discussed in this report), and is clearly illustrated in the European informants' views on the advantages and

disadvantages of the policy directions, and on what would be likely to lead to improved VET in their countries.

The third research question concerned the relationship of these European policy directions to Australian VET and the lessons that can be learned. Wherever possible, the report has highlighted areas of particular relevance and has discussed the implications for Australian VET. By their very selection for inclusion in this report, these policy directions are considered significant for the Australian context and are areas we might consider relevant to the further enhancement of Australian VET.

One of the most striking features of recent VET policy directions both in the European Union member states and in Australia is the scope of issues that these governments are addressing and the role they envisage VET playing in these far-reaching agendas. While the task expected of VET may well be overly ambitious in such complex national and supranational situations, there is no doubt that VET continues to be perceived as making significant contributions to social and economic goals, addressing issues associated with migration and citizenship as well as informing policies concerned with youth, ageing populations and reforms in schools.

Many of the factors driving these policy formulations are common (for example, globalisation, increasing competition, and growth of the knowledge economy). While the European Union countries and Australia have different structures in place for the various sectors of education, there is convergence around the imperative to 'modernise' vocational education and training systems and a significant amount of common thinking in relation to a number of issues. This is not totally surprising, as a number of ideas from European Union countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom have influenced policy directions in Australia. However, from the evidence compiled in this report, a number of issues are indeed worthy of closer consideration by VET policy-makers and practitioners in the Australian context.

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Appendix 1

Emergent themes in recent European literature

One fruitful source for identifying directions in European VET is the Agora topics of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), the major centre for VET across the EU. It produces the *European Journal of Vocational Training*, which fosters debate on VET in Europe by publishing good-quality articles on research, practice, policies and innovation, and is published in five languages. Since June 1997, there have been 25 Agoras on 'hot topics' in European VET. These serve as a barometer of the significant issues facing EU members. For example, the last four have been on VET and higher education, promoting lifelong learning for older workers, new challenges for teachers and trainers in VET, and innovation in enterprises through VET. We analysed these topics, and one of the authors was invited to speak at the 25th Agora on VET and higher education.

Another source is academic research journals. We examined the contents of three from January 2006 (*Journal of VET*, *HRD International* and *Research in Post-compulsory Education*), and found numerous articles of relevance on such themes as apprenticeship (Ireland, Britain), state control (England), further education attrition (Germany), recognition of prior learning, teacher educators in the VET sector, research-policy/practice relationships, VET learning preferences/styles, gender (Greece, Germany), concept of competence (in EU member states), quality of teaching, web-based learning, concept of professionalism within the further education sector, work-based learning, transferring from VET to university, teacher national standards (England), impact of market fundamentalism, learning careers, training and development fund (Netherlands), workforce development, change management, on-the-job learning, power relations, leadership competence, and future trends of human resource development (Finland).

A third source is the plethora of European reports on such websites as: European Training Village (Cedefop), Eurydice, European Training Foundation and the Adult Learning Information Centre (ALICE). We identified as many of the recent reports (in the last five years) as possible in order to gauge what was important (and published in English) in European VET.

A fourth source was to ask those who are closely connected in the European VET fabric and in positions which give them a wide and informed (and objective) understandings of recent initiatives. We communicated with 30 such individuals, and received responses from 87% of them.

The first reading of the European literature generated a broad list of key themes in VET reform in the European Union. These are summarised in table 4.

Table 4 Summary of key themes in the European literature

Promoting labour market and social integration through VET, in particular for low-skilled and people marginalised/at a disadvantage in the labour market	Qualifications and professional development for VET teachers and trainers
VET policies for social and labour market integration of immigrants and their descendants	Accessibility of VET
Promoting concept of lifelong learning	Affordability of VET
Image and attractiveness of VET	Equity and equal opportunity in education and society
VET links/transitions to higher education	Measuring outcomes/evaluating progress/collecting accurate and appropriate data
VET links/transitions to upper secondary education	Equity and transparency of processes
Participation in VET and adult education	Accountability of institutions
Recognition of prior learning	Investment from public and private sectors
Capacity of VET (unmet demand)	Private–public partnerships
Investing in VET – state and federal/commission level	Quality assurance
Financing of initial and continuing VET	European Qualifications Framework (EQF)
Emphasising equity and efficiency in VET	E-learning
Demographic perspectives of VET	Access to ICT
Training VET teachers and trainers	Adult literacy levels
Attracting VET teachers and trainers	Need to invest more in human capital
	International education data comparison

With such a broad range of issues and given the huge range of literature uncovered, the task was then to define boundaries to keep the project manageable. Three key criteria used for delimiting the number of themes were the following:

- ✧ those referred to most frequently by European informants (obtained via the survey)
- ✧ those not tackled recently by other Australian researchers, thus excluding such topics as VET provision (Misko 2006), adult literacy (McKenna & Fitzpatrick 2004), knowledge development (Kearns 2004), innovation (Curtain 2004) and quality indicators (Blom & Myers 2003)
- ✧ those for which an argument could be mounted for most relevance to issues that are problematic/debateable in Australian VET (given that the third research question refers to lessons that can be learned).

Emergent themes in the responses from European informants

The first criterion required a detailed analysis of the responses from 17 European informants. These informants were identified as a result of the participation by one or other of the researchers in four international forums in 2007:

- ✧ Agora XXV, Higher Education and VET Conference, Cedefop (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training), Thessaloniki, Greece, 22–23 February
- ✧ 7th International Conference of the Journal of VET (JVET), Oxford University, Oxford, 6–8 July
- ✧ 37th Annual Conference of the Standing Committee for University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA), Queen’s University, Belfast, Northern Ireland, 3–5 July
- ✧ 14th Annual Conference of the European VET and Culture Network, University of Konstanz, Germany, 30 August–1 September.

There are at least three limitations to acknowledge in the categorisation of these responses. First, many responses overlap across themes. Secondly, our clustering of the brief responses may not hold the same interpretation as each informant intended. And thirdly, the majority of responses

clearly related to national developments and some to EU developments, while in other cases, it was difficult to judge whether they were national or supranational.

Nevertheless, the themes gleaned from the survey data are relatively consistent with those from the European literature distilled into table 4; moreover, there is a degree of commonality in responses across the countries, perhaps not unexpected given the level of activity at EU level. The eight most frequent themes are summarised in table 5.

Table 5 Summary of most frequent themes from the survey of European informants

Higher education and VET pathways	<p>Clearly defined levels of learning for VET on the national framework of qualifications to distinguish VET from higher education (Ireland)</p> <p>Identification and development of progression routes for VET qualification holders on the basis of certificated learning and work-based experiential learning (Ireland)</p> <p>Linking VET with higher education system (Lithuania)</p> <p>The creation of a vocational pathway to tertiary education, including the implementation of polytechnics with a specialised vocational entrance degree (<i>Berufsmaturität</i>) that consists of regular vocational training (3–4 years) plus additional general education, and could be made parallel to the regular vocational training or afterwards (Switzerland)</p> <p>Establishing a pathway for polytechnics/higher vocational education and training (Switzerland)</p> <p>Blurring of the boundaries between 'vocational' and 'general' provision at higher education level (England)</p> <p>Bridging VET and higher education (Slovenia)</p>
Competence-based qualifications, national standards	<p>Use of national standards for all occupations/vocational/trade areas where there may have been a 'time served' basis in the past (Ireland)</p> <p>Responsiveness to the needs of the economy and the data produced by Forfas, the agency for analysis of employment and economic trends (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs) (Ireland)</p> <p>Learning outcomes-based VET curriculum design and implementation, based on developed occupational standards (Lithuania)</p> <p>Development of curricular standards (competency standards) in terms of modules for more flexibility (Germany)</p> <p>Focusing on learning outcomes as a common feature of VET within Europe (EU)</p> <p>New efforts to integrate vocational education standards in relation to the development and needs of labour power in relation to the European Union market economy (Norway)</p> <p>Validation of VET qualifications and competences in order to make school programs more relevant to the world of work (Poland)</p>
Qualifications frameworks (either national or the EQF)	<p>Placement of all vocational awards on the National Framework of Qualifications and creation of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) (Ireland)</p> <p>For the EU: the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and European Credit Transfer System for Vocational Education (ECVET) as a meta-level to which the national systems could be linked in order to make national qualifications more transparent and comparable (Switzerland)</p> <p>Modularisation and graduation (stepwise completion of 3–4 year VET), (EQF-related fragmentation of educational programs) (Denmark)</p> <p>German National Qualifications Framework (Germany)</p> <p>Implementation of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and ECVET (Germany)</p> <p>Qualifications frameworks (EU)</p> <p>Implementing EQF and the developing National Qualifications Frameworks and credit transfer systems (Slovenia)</p> <p>EQF and the National Qualification Framework (Poland)</p>

Validation of non-formal and informal learning	<p>Non-formal and informal assessment of VET teachers' professional development (Lithuania)</p> <p>The validation of informal qualifications and recognition of prior learning as part of the regular qualification process for vocational degrees (Switzerland)</p> <p>Assessment and recognition for all VET students of their prior learning acquired through non-formal and informal learning (Denmark)</p> <p>Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning as part of the lifelong learning strategy, development of learning pathways (EU)</p> <p>Lifelong learning validation and recognition (Slovenia)</p> <p>Accreditation of prior experience (called 'VAE' <i>validation des acquis d'expérience</i>) since the Law of Social Modernization from 2004. Before was the Law of 1971, which introduced continuing vocational training in France, the situation has been as follows: firms are obliged to spend certain amounts on continuing vocational training, in proportion to their wage costs (minimum legal: 1.5%). Paradoxically, companies used to give above this legal amount until the new reform. Some information about the Social Law of 2004 on VET: The French reform bill passed in 2004. At the end of 2003, the social partners signed the 'national inter-professional agreement on employees' access to lifelong vocational training'. The principles on which this agreement was based were subsequently incorporated into French Law no. 2004-391 of 4 May 2004 on lifelong vocational training and social dialogue. These principles include individuals' right to vocational training (DIF), the new procedures introduced in the framework of companies' CVT plans, and 'professionalizing periods' (France)</p>
Access, inclusiveness, learner engagement	<p>Different initiatives to smooth school-to-work-transition, especially for disadvantaged young people (Switzerland)</p> <p>Establishing access to VET programs for young people with handicaps (Switzerland)</p> <p>Initiatives to make the VET system more 'inclusive' to both weak and strong learners. For weaker learners: more and earlier vocational training in the school-based learning, stronger social support. For stronger learners: opportunities for additional courses and higher levels in each subject in order to gain access to higher education (Denmark)</p> <p>Individualisation: personal/individual educational plans for all VET students and weakening of the social learning environments in VET (Denmark)</p> <p>'New concept' in vocational preparation schemes (Germany)</p> <p>Development of training modules in the vocational preparation schemes (for people failing in the training market) (Germany)</p> <p>Increase of opportunities for students from lower social backgrounds to get a vocational qualification outside the dual system, including preparatory programs before entering the dual system (Germany)</p> <p>A re-positioning of VET at lower levels as a (pre-)vocational option for people who underachieve (England)</p> <p>Foundation skills on literacy and numeracy (Scotland)</p> <p>Engaging school leavers who are not in education, work or training (Scotland)</p> <p>A move away from a system where everybody was expected to complete schooling that kept the door open to higher education (Sweden)</p>
Development of VET teachers	<p>Designing of VET teachers' occupational standard linked with their career ladders (Lithuania)</p> <p>Non-formal and informal assessment of VET teachers' professional development (Lithuania)</p> <p>Establishing a new Institute for VET Teacher Training (Switzerland)</p> <p>Strengthening innovation and creativity of VET providers and teachers (Slovenia)</p>
Adult education/continuing education	<p>Better cooperation between the dual system, as initial vocational training, and adult education: lifelong learning (Germany)</p> <p>Focusing on lifelong learning strategies (Slovenia)</p> <p>Older workers' re-entry into the labour market (Scotland)</p> <p>Recent reform of the continuing VET system (DIF). In 2004, the French continuing vocational training (CVT) system underwent major reforms. The measures adopted, which focused for example on individuals' right to vocational training and 'professionalising periods', have transformed relationships between learning and working (France)</p> <p>Lifelong learning and engaging the older worker in the job market (Poland)</p>

Vocational education in the school years	<p>Vocational education provision in the compulsory school years (Scotland)</p> <p>Retention initiatives: close supervision of students by schools and of schools by Department of Education. Improved guidance services for students. Overall aim is that 95% of a youth cohort by 2015 should complete a youth education programme; today the figure is 85% (Denmark)</p> <p>A return to a 'technical high school' where young people (many of them boys) can gain a trade qualification by 18 (Sweden)</p> <p>Reform 94 has received this name because the reform was initiated in 1994. The main aim of Reform 94 was to further integrate vocational and academic subjects in upper secondary education (16 to 19-year-olds). The pattern was to be: two years in school, followed by two years in apprenticeship before getting a craft certificate (Norway)</p> <p>Changes in full-time vocational schools outside the dual system due to the reform of the Vocational Training Act: efforts are undertaken for a parity in esteem between the dual system and other vocational tracks and for better cooperation between off-the-job training and on-the-job training (Germany)</p> <p>Restoring VET within and outside secondary education (Poland)</p>
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Other themes mentioned less frequently included: apprenticeships (England, Norway), responsiveness to industry (Ireland), retention (Denmark), quality assurance (Lithuania), funding (England, Sweden), VET research (Switzerland), assessment burden (Scotland), general education content in VET curriculum (England), promotion of VET (France) and expansion of VET into new areas (Norway, Switzerland). Other responses specifically referred to national legislation—such as the Law of Social Modernization (2004) in France, the Vocational Training Act (2005) and the Ten Guidelines for the Reform of the German VET System (2007) in Germany, and Reform 2004 in Norway, while yet others mentioned particular EU processes—such as the Open Method of Coordination and the Copenhagen Process.

With the remaining two criteria (outlined earlier) in mind, the lists from both the European VET literature and the European informants were then pared to enable further analysis. Considering the third criterion in particular (namely, relevance to Australian VET), the three themes relating to competence-based qualifications and standards, qualification frameworks and vocational education in schools were omitted, the judgement made that these themes offered less significant lessons for Australian VET. Conversely, the judgement was made to add themes on retention/guidance services, the role of social partners, key competencies for lifelong learning and higher-level apprenticeships, on the basis that these were more likely to yield new and interesting information to inform debates currently taking place in Australian VET in these areas.



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