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Zoellner, Don

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Theorising the status of VET from the institutional logics perspective

Don Zoellner

Northern Institute, Charles Darwin University, Alice Springs, Northern Territory, Australia

ABSTRACT

This article explores the historically contingent and normative descriptions of vocational education and training (VET) as a low-status alternative in Australia’s socio-economic process of skill and knowledge development. Rather than repeating well-rehearsed shibboleths, this retheorisation of how status works applies an institutional logics perspective as a novel addition to existing research in the sector. Historical reports and contemporary discourses sourced from submissions to a parliamentary inquiry into VET’s status are used to determine which logics are used in the sector. They demonstrate that the sector’s dominant institutional logics derive from the state, market and professional orders of society. These three share an emphasis upon the use of status to determine how organisations and individuals allocate limited and valuable attention to their operating environments. The institutional logics perspective provides a meta-theoretical challenge to traditional depictions of what status represents and, in turn, suggests how public policy can be re-imagined, thus improving the sector’s standing and consequent value propositions.

Introduction

Virtually every aspect of Australia’s complex vocational education and training (VET) sector is disputed. Hurley and Pilcher (2023, 70) believe that no area of Australian public policy is more contested or more reformed than the VET system which Lambert (2018) attributes to losing the previous shared vision for VET and the collective understanding of skill needs. In striking contrast, the apparent universal acceptance and reiteration of VET’s low status is a rare exception to the inherent controversies. In his broad scoping study of the status of VET, Pilz (2019, 401–402) observes that analytic methods have come from different sources including economics, individual views, company/industry standpoints, determinations of market value, cultural studies and professional...
occupations; regardless the perceived status of VET is persistently represented to be a problem for governments and ‘the concept of status is particularly influenced by sociological approaches’ (Pilz 2019, 404). Following Pilz’s guidance towards the influence of sociology on the construction of status, this analysis seeks to determine if the problematisation of status performs any work other than being an unsophisticated comparator of the sector with universities.

Given the ubiquitous concern with the status of VET, it appears that traditional research methodologies and theories have yet to identify ways for public policy to resolve problems attributed to the low esteem held by VET. Examining the status of VET is a significant genre of the sector’s research effort. For example, the Journal of Vocational Education and Training dedicated a special issue that elaborated the sources of low standing of vocational education and training and the occupations it serves (Billett 2020, 162). An article in the first edition of this journal argued that society should better recognise employees in the building crafts ‘in the form of raised status and financial recognition of this value’ (Macqueen 1948, 71). This proposition that status derives from occupational and economic standing is accepted as the basis for the following policy analysis.

Billett (2014, 2) observes that VET is increasingly experiencing low status and negative societal sentiments globally. Even in the German-speaking countries that have traditionally accorded the sector elevated status, ‘the opportunities available to and the high aspirations of young people are seeing apprenticeships becoming a less preferred option’ (Billett 2020, 163). Winch (2013, 92) also identifies cultural variability in the attractiveness of VET, noting that its relative unattractiveness remains remarkably pervasive and has ancient roots which he attributes, as does Billett, to the classical Greek philosophers. The philosophical distinction between lower status artisans who work with their hands and socially superior professionals who utilise knowledge in novel ways, and accordingly the provisions for their education, remains in the contemporary discourse (Billett 2014, 4). For example, ‘a priority for Australia in meeting its skills challenges of the future is to raise the status of skills relative to knowledge, and VET relative to higher education, through raising the value of the application of skills and knowledge, contextualised to the workplace’ (Jobs and Skills Australia 2023b, 20). This desire for parity of esteem exemplifies an imported English political vernacular about some future desired state of equality (James Relly 2021, 513) regardless of the limited chances of success in the social setting where families and students know that declaring everything equal is ‘nonsense’ (Wolf 2011, 8).

Drawing from 33 UNESCO international case studies on youth educational transitions, it was generally found that VET suffers from social stigma and has a low prestige in society (Singh 2017, 11). The world’s two most populous nations, and major home countries for international students studying at Australian universities (Parliamentary Joint
Committee Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2023, 3), exemplify these findings. Despite the Chinese government’s endeavours to improve attractiveness and quality, ‘VET still has a relatively low social status compared to general education’ (Li 2017, 257) and ‘the attractiveness of VET in India is very low’ (Pilz and Ramasamy 2022, 177).

VET’s inferior status appears to be a universal characteristic and Billett (2020, 168) proposes that this social construct is jurisdictionally idiosyncratic and historically contingent. In other words, the result is similar, but it is possible that the means of production are different. Raffe (2008, 277) draws upon a societal analysis of French and German education and training systems (Maurice, Sellier, and Silvestre 1986) to posit that these jurisdictional differences arise due to specific national logics that produce a degree of coherent thought resulting in specific schemes of conceiving of and dealing with educational issues. This concept of national logics provided the basis for expanding the VET research repertoire into the European public policy underpinning of VET status that was further catalysed by Raffe’s (2007) identification of institutional logics and Wheelahan’s (2015) subsequent analytic application of them to Australia’s VET sector. The institutional logics described by Raffe (2007, 496) are an artefact created by the workings of educational institutions determined by their funding, political stewardship and socio-economic contexts which partially represent power relationships. This view of institutional logics is mostly tactical and reflects the operational realities of schools and colleges and their views of the status of VET.

Alternatively, North American meta-theoretical researchers were also developing what has come to be known as the institutional logics perspective (Friedland and Robert 1991; Ocasio, Thornton, and Lounsbury 2017; Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2013). A major distinction between the two forms of institutional logics is that this second version represents a well-researched meta-theory of how society functions. There is no evidence that two approaches to the development and application of institutional logics as an explanatory research technique knew of each other’s existence, e.g. there are no cross references or citations of the other’s work. Zoellner (2020) has previously distinguished the two approaches and made a rare application of the later version to the VET sector, because ‘from an institutional logics perspective, social actors are key to understanding institutional persistence and change’ (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2013, 76) which aligns with the Pilz view of the significance of sociological research methods in this area. The institutional logics perspective have four dimensions that are immediately relevant to VET’s self-defining concern with low status: sources of collective identity, determinants of power and status, systems of social classifications and categorisations and allocators of attention (Ocasio, Thornton, and Lounsbury 2017, 537).
Materials and method

Hawke (1998, 267) concludes that very little of the VET policy development in the 1990s has been based on any existing body of knowledge, rather it confidently considered itself to be a visionary quantum leap which subsequent research would endorse. This situation remains current and is not unique to Australia. The Anglophone countries share the absence of standalone VET theory with its own concepts, boundaries and research methods which, in turn, invites theorising the field from multiple and alternative viewpoints (Esmond and Wedekind 2023, 2). Using an institutional logics perspective accepts this invitation to examine Australian VET to advance the specialist theorisation of the sector. This perspective is a meta-theory that integrates and augments various social science theories allowing better understandings of the effects of cultures and institutions in many substantive domains including a weakening of the professions and the spread of the market logic (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2015, 14). Because this research approach is a meta-perspective, what follows is necessarily a synopsis of the method-in-use to theorise the work done by VET’s low-status discourse. Institutional logics are historically contingent and change over time, but they can also be stable for extended periods (Ocasio, Thornton, and Lounsbury 2017, 537) so taking note of the effects of time when constructing theories is important.

Theories, frames, narratives and practices are not institutional logics; they are their building blocks. To better understand the Australian context, it is important to note that ideologies are not institutional logics either. A frequent criticism of the marketised VET sector (e.g. Forward 2009; Meek 2009; Pincus 2013; Ryan 2011) is that the developers and supporters were ideologically driven. Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2013, 5) distinguish institutional logics that facilitate abstract analysis from ideologies that guide actions taken by a group seeking to gain an advantage through socio-political actions. In particular, the market institutional logic providing the operating principles guiding actual market practices is distinguishable from a market ideology which provides a political justification for mostly unregulated markets (Ocasio, Thornton, and Lounsbury 2017, 542).

Thornton and Ocasio (1999, 803) propose that the logics at the industry level are deeply embedded in the common identity of industry players and constructed from social comparisons and status contests among competing providers and this ranking includes resourcing rivalry. Identity and status also guide organisational members’ cognition, preferences, interpretations as they interact with others. The configuration of attributes within an institutional logic can offer a more accurate and complete understanding of a firm’s actions than simpler explanations like resources and incentives alone or constructs that only focus on individual organisations’ (Pahnke, Katila, and Eisenhardt 2015,
A particular institutional logic provides the lens through which organisational members view reality and justify social actions (Pahnke, Katila, and Eisenhardt 2015, 598) by defining success, developing strategy and garnering resources.

With the institutional logics perspective, ideal types are central and often used as a comparative method. ‘Ideal types are simplified, synthetic, analytical, abstract representations of institutional logics based on empirical observation’ (Ocasio, Thornton, and Lounsbury 2017, 546). They are ontologically distinct with logical differences; their analytical value derives from their uses in theory construction. For this perspective’s comparison processes there are two assemblages of ideal types – institutional orders and elemental categories (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2013, 72). The key cornerstone bodies of society are composed from institutional orders (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2013, 72). They connote the root symbols and metaphors governing aspects of life while infusing individual and organisational perceptions with meaning and value. The seven orders are family; community; religion; state; market; profession; and corporation and each has its own institutional logic.

Each of the institutional orders is composed of the same set of nine elemental categories that describe the cultural symbols and material practices particular to that order (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2013, 72). These elemental categories represent how social actors understand their identity, logics of action and operational vocabulary. The categories include descriptions of a specific institutional order’s root metaphor; sources of legitimacy, authority and identity; the bases of norms, attention and strategy; informal control mechanisms; and economic system. Importantly, these categories are grounded in the major conventional social science research disciplines identified in the metatheorisation process.

The institutional orders and their categorical elements are in social competition for organisational and individual attention. The cultural symbols and practices of the seven institutional orders can be both competitive and complementary and change over time (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2013, 62). Organisations and their staff move from one order to another by adopting the new symbols and practices while shedding older ones; the institutional logic associated with each order provides the foundation for organisational, collective and individual identity formation and how the world is viewed.

**National context**

In order to determine which of the institutional order and elemental orders are used in Australian VET, the next section provides the historical contingencies that demonstrate Raffe’s conceptualisation of a national logic. European research into the attractiveness of vocational education and training found
Anglophone countries use diverse words such as value, status, attractiveness, reputation, recognition, standing, prestige, acceptance and (parity of) esteem (Pilz 2019, 401) which reflects the perspectives of the different social actors in the public policy process.

Australia has embraced status as the preferred comparative descriptor of the two government-sponsored post-school education and training options – VET and higher education. The widespread acceptance of this term is illustrated by the current parliamentary inquiry into the perceptions and status of the VET sector (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 2023). Status represents a social level when compared to general education and it is similar in usage to terms such as reputation, image, prestige (Pilz 2019, 408). Crucially, when the term status is used in this way it facilitates simplistic discussions of equivalence in educational public policy. ‘This is about how vocational training can be made equivalent to general education through recognition, regulations, transitions and certifications’ which distinguish professional occupations (Pilz 2019, 408). Despite VET history’s colonial roots (Whitelock 1974), this brief recounting of the status of non-university, post-school education and training options commences post-World War Two. Prior to then, the national government paid scant attention for constitutional and financial reasons as well as fierce policy boundary marking by the six states and their chronically parochial approaches to VET’s antecedents (Foley and Roger 1995; Ryan 1998; Whitelock 1973, 1974).

Australia’s first national review of apprenticeships identified that the sector’s status suffered because it catered for ‘difficult trades’ with non-traditional employment conditions (e.g. bricklaying and baking) and ‘black trades’ operating in hot, dirty working environments (Commonwealth-State Committee of Inquiry Into Apprenticeship 1954, 36–37). The report repeatedly called for apprenticeships to be given increased attention by governments and employers and mandating licencing and registration of tradesmen (sic) to improve the status of these occupations (Commonwealth-State Committee of Inquiry Into Apprenticeship 1954, 44).

The Murray Report (Committee on Australian Universities 1957) from the first national review of universities heralded the beginning of federal attention to higher education. The conclusions were unequivocal; universities and technical colleges were not equal in status and function. The ideas of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers were also invoked. ‘The ideal is that professional training should be the function of the universities and all forms of non-professional training should be the function of technical colleges’ (Committee on Australian Universities 1957, 78–79). Universities were expected to restrict access to professional knowledge as the guardians of intellectual standards and integrity while avoiding responsibility for groups of students who have not reached matriculation level (Committee on Australian Universities 1957, 34).
The next major review of Australian universities produced the Martin Report (Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia 1964) which described perceived problems with technical colleges including inadequate funding support hampering their potential (127); technical colleges wishing to offer qualifications higher than diplomas to improve their status (152); catering for a different student population than universities (152). ‘This raises an issue of fundamental significance – the need to strengthen the technical college system of education and to emphasise the status of these institutions in the eyes of the community’ (Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia 1964, 165). The latest national inquiry into universities also dedicates a considerable amount of effort to describing these same problems and their impact on the VET sector (Australian Universities Accord Review Panel 2023).

The seminal Kangan Review of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974, 36–37) reported that it had carefully considered the standing of TAFE; ‘status is a relative thing and, in this case, status is determined by a complex of past, present and anticipated community attitudes, and aspirations for, TAFE’. The committee concluded ‘that the proper perspective for technical and further education in the fourth quarter of the twentieth century is for it to be seen as an alternative, neither inferior nor superior, to the other stream of education’ (Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974, 37). In acting on the Kangan Report’s recommendations to establish and financially support state-owned TAFE colleges, the federal government legislatively defined these new educational institutions by what they were not – neither a university nor a school (Commonwealth of Australia 1977). Stevenson (1998, 45–46) argues that this negative construction linked TAFE to other negative connotations such as non-academic, non-theoretical, not concerned with the whole person and not amenable to innovation. One result, despite substantial evidence of the economic value of VET, is that the status of vocational education continues to be low compared to student and parent perceptions of the higher status of university education (Stevenson 1998, 46).

It is evident that the continual attempts to reform VET have not improved its status. According to Winch (2013, 104), governments mostly deem VET attractive at an abstract level and this should be a natural advantage, but he (2013, 112) observes that ‘VET is unlikely to become attractive to employers, individuals and parents if it consists of complex, unstable and ever-changing structures that are difficult to understand’. Field (2023, 1) indicates the scale of this issue; since 1998 there have been 710 changes to Australian VET policy, funding, regulation and programmes; an average of one major change in VET more than once every fortnight, every year, for 24 years.

Australia’s production of VET’s low status is simple, tenacious and historically consistent with experiences observed in the broader Anglosphere. The
institutional logics perspective is well-suited to analysing these types of situations. ‘It emphasises how institutions provide social actors with a highly contingent set of social norms where behaviour is driven not by a logic of consequences but by a logic of appropriateness’ (Thornton 2008, 106). In addition, because the institutional logics perspective was developed by recognising historical contingency, is suits explorations of economic, political, structural and normative forces that impact individuals and organisations (Thornton 2008, 109).

**Results**

In addition to the historical material, contemporary discourses seeking to influence public policy development are drawn from the 100 submissions made to the parliamentary inquiry into the perceived status of VET (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 2023). These two sources have been used to identify which of society’s institutional orders are evident in Australian VET. Obviously, the submissions are self-selecting, but they represent the sector’s major interest groups – employers, industry, training providers, unions, governments, researchers, schools and interested individuals. Each inquiry response presents detailed descriptions of the submitter’s identity, operational practices and justifications as to why their business model or favoured approach is a superior method of contesting the VET sector.

Based on a search for relevant words, a remarkable 61% of submissions made no direct suggestions as to how to improve the status of VET. In this group, the word status was only used to repeat the name of the inquiry and/or the terms of reference before promulgating their preferred institutional order and consequent world view. It also suggests that the writers are seeking to draw attention to themselves. The status-related words esteem, value and attractiveness were also absent. The 39 remaining submissions made specific improvement suggestions by invoking one of the institutional orders as the centrepiece of their evidence. Each submission neglected the four institutional logics associated with family, community, religion or corporation orders; the descriptions of identity, logics of action and norms presented to the inquiry were situated in the institutional orders of market, state and profession.

The submissions also demonstrate which policy options and the things to which they think others, particularly governments, should be paying attention. As theorised by Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2013, 72) the basis of attention in each of the institutional orders of state, market and profession derives from the individual’s or organisation’s assessment of status; i.e. the perceived status of the sector in the institutional logics of the state as a redistribution mechanism, the transactional market and/or the relational network of profession determines the amount and type of attention VET attracts. The next
sections briefly describe the elemental category *basis of attention* followed by VET-related examples found in the three dominant institutional orders.  

According to Ocasio (2011, 1290) fixed amounts of time, resources and energy limit the capacity of institutions and their leaders to pay attention to the operating environment. The response is to focus on specific stimuli that filter noise while signalling which events, entities or processes command consideration. In most industries, a grouping of institutional logics dominate the field and provide the rules of the game that shape the cognition of social actors by setting the filters and directing the attention of decision-makers to a limited set of matters (Thornton and Ocasio 1999, 806). The core of the argument from Ocasio and Thornton’s (2008, 114) empirical studies is that ‘institutional logics focus the attention of decision makers on issues and solutions that are consistent with prevailing logics’. In the case of Australian VET, this is manifested in the interactions of the prevailing institutional orders of state, market and profession. 

Virtually every submission to the parliamentary inquiry repeated familiar tropes reflecting the writer’s preferred institutional logic and what they notice. ‘Automatic attention is based on well-learned behavioural responses and routinised behaviour’ (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2013, 89). Because attention is shaped by social interactions and prior expectations, every social interaction is a negotiation fashioned from competition and cooperation. A fundamental insight from using this sociological perspective is that actors occupy distinctive positions in the social structure and rewards reflect the capacity to negotiate maximum benefit from their ranking.

The perception of status is the basis for being noticed in the state, market and professional orders by other social actors who are endowed with a limited attentional capacity. With the voice of students being the traditional and notable absence, these submissions represent the views of VET’s main social participants who are seeking attention from those to whom they are accountable in pursuit of symbolic and material rewards. These include approval and improved prominence, increased funding and avoiding punishments. Regulatory and normative pressures help shape an actor’s social identity and explain adherence to the goals embedded in institutional logics (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2013, 87). Some characteristics of each of Australian VET’s dominant institutional orders will be described next.

**State**

Billett (2014) explains that industrialisation caused governments to establish national vocational education systems to increase the employability of residents and their capacity to contribute to the state. The systems typically adapted standard bureaucratic and centralised structures and procedures to meet government social and economic imperatives. This approach to creating loyal and productive citizens reinforced existing socially determined occupational
hierarchies. Supplementary to these regulatory actions, the redistributive nature of the state institutional order uses the VET sector to provide resources and/or enable economic equality for priority groups. In an example of self-interested resource seeking, one industry association proposes that with more government-funded placements, [private] registered training organisations can complement the TAFE model and ensure a continuous supply of skills trades people joining the automotive workforce rather than placing an increasing burden on industry to fill the void (Barry 2023). Governments also use publicly funded VET to enhance labour force participation by increasing the skills held by disadvantaged groups to achieve a more equitable society (Jobs and Skills Australia 2023b, 20). The 2023 National Skills Agreement (Commonwealth of Australia 2023) between the state, territory and federal governments describes increased funding commitments to TAFE and reduced competition. By paying more attention to the state order, it marks a transition from extensive reliance on market forces to produce a skilled labour force and a return to the Kangan-inspired state-owned and operated educational institutions that explicitly prioritise state direction and control because ‘the agreement places TAFE at the heart of the VET sector’ (Albanese and O’Connor 2023).

**Market**

The practices and identities of social actors guided by a market logic display fundamentally different characteristics from those based in the logics of state or profession where self-interest and rationality are less pronounced in favour of equity and/or reputation (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2013, 132). The market institutional order has a primary focus on accumulation, codification and the pricing of human behaviour (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2013, 44). Gumport (2000) finds that VET and higher education operating in a competitive marketplace is the dominant legitimising idea that has repositioned post-school education from a social institution to an industry. Public universities and colleges have become quasi-corporate producers of goods and services in a competitive market. The reshaping of institutional purpose ‘entails not only what knowledges are deemed worthy but also who has access to and ownership of them’ (Gumport 2000, 88).

Critics of post-school education’s shift from the state to the market institutional order believe that democratic accountability has declined as a direct consequence of market reform in VET (Anderson 1998, 352). In particular, within the market framework, competition has been adopted as the key principle for reorganising the financing and delivery of VET programmes and service (Robinson 1998, 15). Anderson (1998, 347) more expansively explains that the guiding principles for the restructuring VET financial and regulatory arrangements throughout the 1990s were choice and competition and they produced both ‘intentional and unintentional consequences in social, economic,
educational and political terms’. This range of factors also shape markets because ‘producers occupy socially defined positions in the context of the market’ (Podolny 1993, 829–831); resulting in the producer’s status in the market being linked to the perceived quality of their competitor’s product and acting as a status signal. This status order defines the market (Podolny 1993) and influences consumers’ purchasing decisions and relations with other producers in the market. The Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia’s (2023, 4, 9) advocacy for competitive VET markets based on student choice exemplifies Podolny’s hierarchy status between TAFE and independent providers based upon the latter’s claim of ‘reputation for excellence’ and ‘more flexible training’.

The Australian Government’s recognition of an education and training industry (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2023) describes the market institutional order with VET situated between senior secondary schooling and higher education where it unsuccessfully competes with them for students and funding (O’Connell and Torii 2016). Podolny’s findings regarding status can help explain VET’s place in this broad market conception. By focusing upon the relationship between post-school qualifications and employment opportunities, Karmel (2023, 18) describes another measure of status and notes that ‘the changes in the occupational structure of the labour market have not been kind to those with VET qualifications’. Due to the massive increase in the number of degree graduates, they occupy full-time jobs and push people with VET qualifications into lower paid and lower standing jobs.

**Profession**

This institutional order recognises the practitioner’s personal expertise, reputation and associations with others in the same field. The professions and the state have a symbiotic relationship, oftentimes mediated through universities. The professions produce knowledge structures that allow public policy to be conceived while the state creates the legal apparatus to enforce those conceptions (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2013, 63). In return for access to expert knowledge, the state uses its power to produce legal mandates for professional licencing, registration and other mechanisms to increase status by restricting entry into a given profession, often based on qualifications (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2013, 22).

The institutional logic of profession impacts VET in two ways. Firstly, as described in the historical context, the occupations catered for by the sector are generally considered to be lower status and non-professional. There appears to be little appetite to change that perception: ‘one of the major functions of higher education is to produce the skills required for the professions’ (Australian Universities Accord Review Panel 2023, 45). The elemental categories that comprise the institutional orders express symbolic and the material aspects
that assign value to a sector such as VET. For example, many commentators attribute the persistent view that VET/TAFE is for people who are unable to get into university, and consequently the sector’s low status, to the symbolism of VET qualifications occupying the bottom of the hierarchical national qualifications framework (e.g. Rea 2023, 25). Others focus upon the material attributes where VET qualified workers experience poor remuneration, difficult working conditions and the absence of clear career pathways (Jobs and Skills Australia 2023b, 16). Rational choice theorists would also use material aspects to rank VET. For example, in the Australian labour market from 1979 to 2020, graduates with a bachelor degree or above always had lower unemployment than VET completers and experienced a 23% weekly median income premium (Aungles, Hodgson, and Parbery 2021, 5–6).

Second the professional institutional order pays attention to those who deliver vocational education and training. The very foundation of Australia’s contemporary VET sector was built in the 1980’s by proponents advancing unevented arguments that TAFE institutions had failed to develop a skilled and flexible workforce. Unions and employer groups fervently promoted their belief that this failure resulted from the vocational system being controlled by ‘educators who had little or no experience of the real world’ (Hawke 1998, 267). The political solution was to transfer control of VET to the workplace (i.e. from the profession to the market) in the belief that skills and knowledge could only be properly acquired on the job. Repositioning VET into the market institutional order appears to have the ignored historical contingencies of the links between workplaces and lower status.

Smith (2023, 2–4) succinctly notes that this transition ensured that the VET teaching occupation has become progressively less professionalised and that ‘VET teachers are undervalued, perhaps as a result of the low status of VET itself, or perhaps as a result of the strong industry voice in the formation of competency-based training’. Unsurprisingly, inquiry submissions from the two unions that represent independent VET instructors and public educators support these claims. The non-government trainers and assessors (Independent Education Union Queensland and Northern Territory Branch 2023, 4) are concerned that their precarious employment conditions devalue the quality of education and training experienced by students and the remedy will be the provision of professional pay and conditions.

Similarly, the Australian Education Union (2023, 23) contends that ‘along with the sector itself, vocational teaching has become professionally devalued’ primarily caused by a market-based VET system. In the elemental category of the basis for attention, the teachers, trainers and assessors apparently cannot command the attention of relevant policy decision-makers and the leaders of the industry-led VET sector who have developed an automatic sorting response to the detriment of the espoused professional claims of these social actors and their perceived attachment to the world of work.
Discussion

Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2013, 159) theorise that ‘vocabularies of practice provide members of social groups with their sense of collective identity’, in VET’s circumstance, an identity of low status linked to the occupational qualifications delivered (Wheelahan 2018, 140–141). The historical documents and contemporary submissions suggest that students, qualifications, delivery staff, providers, funding, workplace remuneration, employers and the occupations served all share and apparently accept VET’s low-status characterisation. Despite these alleged deficiencies, VET annually enrolls about 25% of Australian 15–64-year-olds (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2023b, 1) and attracts $A10.7 billion in government funding (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2023a, 1).

These levels of enrolments and funding suggest that the shared identity of low status is doing something more than acting as a simple, binary comparator. Following Esmond and Wedekind’s (2023, 17) suggestion to fill the void in theorisation with ‘new studies, concepts and theories that can illuminate the future of VET’, this analysis has employed Friedland and Robert’s (1991) seminal institutional logics perspective to explore the work being done by the perceptions of VET’s low status. ‘By focusing on the institutional orders of society as a starting point for analysis, the institutional logics perspective provides a systematic macro-foundation for understanding human behaviour, offering a viable alternative to rational choice approaches’ (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2013, 173).

VET’s social and economic standing is important. In Australia, low status has been represented as such a generic problem that all VET stakeholders can easily accept the characterisation in the, clearly forlorn, hope that someone else will do something more than simply agree with the assertion. Introducing this unique research technique invites analysis to move beyond repetitious recounting of the symptoms of low status to theorise the mechanics of how status works. Applying the institutional logics perspective identified that VET operates across three of society’s seven institutional orders (state, market and profession) and over time their relative influence has waxed and waned. In common with much of society, there has been a general shift from the profession and state to the market order. More recently, repositioning TAFE to the system’s heart represents a market to state rebalancing. As posited by Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2013, 72), these three orders share the use of status as the basis for attention, but status means different things in each order.

The identification of the role played by status as the gateway to attention suggests that while low esteem is problematic, it is the deficit of attention from other crucial social actors based upon their view of the sector’s status that negatively impacts the VET sector. Jobs and Skills Australia (2023b, 20) crystallises this significance; ‘the VET sector in
general, and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) in particular, have been significantly challenged relative to the higher education sector in the attention paid to their resourcing in recent decades’. The intellectually easy parroting of the low status mantra triggers a well-documented filtering mechanism used by political, policy and funding bodies that ensures that they do not pay attention to the well-rehearsed arguments that describe low status. Acknowledging the work being done by status as a basis for attracting the attention of important organisations and individuals operating in the three institutional orders, rather than a comparative label, presents a chance to explore how actors might improve the sector’s status.

Attracting the attention of significant others and facilitating their understanding of VET’s strategic and operational benefits must be accomplished by presenting VET in ways that align with their preferred institutional order. This recasting can cause attention to be paid to VET’s identity, symbolism and material benefits. It is important to note that all three institutional orders successfully operate in some part of the expansive VET sector; they are seldom mutually exclusive. Gaining the attention of relevant, influential social actors, requires a determination of the institutional order(s) and logic(s) framing their world view.

Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2013, 72) have described how status is viewed in each order and its consequent basis for attention. For those social actors that frame the world from the state institutional order, the amount of attention allocated depends on the ranking given to the social actors and their perceived interests. Disadvantaged groups are historically singled out for attention in VET policy as are workers in economically important industries, e.g. clean energy (Jobs and Skills Australia 2023a). In the market institutional order, the basis for attention is the rank given to the quality of the product or service compared to others (Podolny 1993); principally this will apply to VET providers and the levels of qualifications, but perceptions of quality are also important when governments and industries use consultants and researchers to undertake scoping studies or explore skills policy options. Finally, those seeking the attention of social actors operating in the professional institutional order will use status in ways that recognise where organisations and individuals are ranked in their chosen profession. Greater attention is likely to be given to actors that recognise the significance of relationship networks, meeting professional standards, the appropriateness of qualifications held and who delivered them.

**Conclusion**

By using the institutional logics perspective to address the intellectual in-curiosity concerning Australian VET’s low status, the findings suggest that while status is important, it is the lack of attention from crucial social actors that devalues the
sector. A more nuanced understanding of how status is the basis for the attraction of attention in the institutional orders of state, market and profession offers a way to improve VET’s standing rather than repeatedly citing the symptoms of the historically contingent situation which are rapidly filtered out of consideration by the limited amount of attention available to policy contributors and makers.

VET assumes a fundamentally different character depending on whether relevant social actors view the world from their place the market, state or professional institutional orders. Using the institutional logics perspective and its associated ideal types leads to a theoretical possibility concerning the work status is doing in addition to being a dualistic comparator to higher education. If improving VET’s status continues to rely upon public policy to direct students into VET, the sector’s perceived value proposition is not being accepted by society requiring different theories of action if there is a genuine desire to alter its low-status identity. This policy analysis suggests that by understanding status to be a mechanism (i.e. the basis for attention) rather than a destination (relatively higher), specific actions and words can be used to facilitate improved status by attracting more and better-quality attention from the other social actors that impact the VET sector.

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ORCID

Don Zoellner http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8065-6728

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